

Introduction: The REAL Masterpiece

I was with some friends, walking through the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, when I was given some amazing insights about life's experiences. We were casually making our way, admiring each masterpiece, when I overheard some comments that left me with some food for thought. While we were admiring the Picassos, surrounded by people who appreciated Picasso for how he could transform a blank canvas into a treasure of art, I heard someone wonder aloud how anyone in his right mind could consider this art — much less a masterpiece. I have to admit, this situation made me feel rather uneasy. Even though a genuine Picasso doesn't appeal to all people, it doesn't mean that it should be excluded from the honored category of being considered a genuine masterpiece. It's not so much what's painted on the canvas as much as it is the lens in which it is viewed. And so it is with how we view our life experiences.

Perspective matters! The lens in which we view ourselves is ultimately the same lens others will use to view us. After all, unless we can see our innate value, who else can? As with any great Masterpiece, its creator has the obligation to first see the beauty in it before expecting others to do likewise.

When we are brought into this world, we are each figuratively accessorized with a blank canvas, a set of paints and a brush. Just as Picasso went about painting one-of-a-kind works of art, so is it our purpose to create one-of-a-kind lives.

Our most valued works of art are not hanging on a wall in a museum, but are manifested daily in the way we embrace the art of living. We are each the artist with the opportunity to masterfully shape our reality and absolutely no one is excluded from this dynamic process. Our unique creations are the lives we are living at this very moment. We need to know, with every fiber of our being, that we are works-in-progress, striving to evolve into something more. We engage in the masterful art of true living when we become conscious of the brush strokes we make against our canvases. If we are the artists, then we must be willing to transform our vision from seeing only random splashes of paint to seeing a creation of panoramic proportions. We must make the often difficult, and at times, painstaking effort to discover the well-hidden patterns made by each brush-stroke that come from our souls.

Picasso's paintings are worth millions to fine art connoisseurs — because they recognize that he was willing to share his art, even though others did not appreciate or even understand their intrinsic beauty. Not everyone walking through the museum of fine art is going to see beauty in every single painting and sculpture. Some, as I've mentioned, may even scoff when looking. But what matters most is that we, like Picasso, adopt the courage and vision to be the first to see the one-of-a-kind patterns that create purpose in our lives. We stunt this process when we don't allow our personal best to unfold as it was intended.

We can be the harshest critics of our own masterpieces to the point that we no longer have the ability to view them as such. If enough skilled artisans adopt this confining perspective, they will be unable to see

the worth of their creations, as well as the creations of others. Unfortunately this has already happened in our society.

Many aspiring artists have taken a sabbatical, seeing their canvas as having little purpose. They leave it blank to avoid making any errors that would possibly label them as being less than perfect. Their paints and brushes are seen as insufficient to even start the creative process — much less complete their task. And so this epidemic starts to take its toll as we feel we not only lack the ability to become skilled artisans, but believe those with whom we share our world lack the skills as well. It is then that the human species hits an all-time low and our individual and collective sense of worth becomes extinct.

I have been in that place, feeling as if my own canvas had only imperfect blotches on it with no real pattern or purpose. Not only did I perceive my painting supplies left much to be desired, but I saw a big hole in my canvas that made it appear as if it was impossible to create anything that mattered. Creating a masterpiece was out of the question — or so it first appeared. Little did I realize at this low point of feeling like the victim that my life circumstances presented me with all the opportunities to put myself back in the ranks of the skilled artisans.

I was born breathless. As a result, I was without oxygen for four minutes. In our day-to-day lives, four minutes doesn't seem to be a significant amount of time; but, in my case, this insignificant time lapse had an impact not only on me — but also for all those who would love and include me in their lives.

For the rest of my life, I would live with the physical disability known as Cerebral Palsy, a neurological disorder that affects the part of the brain that controls the physical body functions. I not only look different, but I have difficulty using my hands in performing tasks like eating and writing. My feet turn inward when I walk and sometimes I fall. My speech is slurred and labored. These challenges would have a profound impact on not only how I was able to perform physical tasks, but on how I would relate to the world around me. It would ultimately impact all aspects of my life. But more importantly, it would bring me insights that are uniquely my own, as I have learned how to allow life's adversities make me stronger.

The big insight and treasure I have received in living in a physically disabled body is that it can be limiting and even a tragedy if I perceive it from that vantage point. The hole in my canvas was present because I chose to perceive its existence.

A truth that has become crystal clear to me through the years of living with adversity is that it's not what happens to us that impairs our ability to truly live; it's what we are willing to learn about ourselves and each other that will ultimately strengthen us along the way. Such a gem has been of insurmountable value. I wouldn't trade my life with that of anyone else.

The perceived holes in our lives can be the very learning experiences, that if seen differently, allow for considerable personal growth and the realization of our potential. Treasures of any immense worth are often difficult to find, but once they finally are, we will have to admit it was well worth our effort.

The stories in this book are not meant to stir heartache or sympathy, but rather to connect us to that innermost part of our being — the human spirit that we all innately possess. It is the human spirit, our inner Picasso, which can only see a canvas with a picture painted upon it with beauty, purpose, and unending potential.

We all are represented by the individual fine works of art that are deserving of our admiration, not for being exactly the same as the next, but for so eloquently demonstrating our uniqueness. The only difference is that we're not yet a finished work hanging on a wall, collecting dust in a museum, but a dynamic, living work-in-progress.

We must NEVER neglect to look through the lens of the skilled artisan, knowing that we already have all the tools we need to continue working to create more than a blank canvas — a canvas with a true masterpiece drawn upon it. It is through this lens that I write this book. May we all discover our GEMS of great worth!

Freeing Our “Perfect” Vision

Life's adversity and challenges can in one instance bring us down yet in the very next instance, we can become empowered with a heightened confidence, knowing that having struggles doesn't mean we have to give up on what we've set out to do. This sudden shift in perspective happens with a willingness to creatively adapt in order to bring into our reality whatever we have set our sights upon. In other words, we hold our vision as real and attainable, and above all, worthwhile. The most difficult part is having the positive self-talk and patience to be able to hold the vision steady in the forefront of our minds — while bridling the temptation to give up. While the latter may be easier, the former is almost certain to bring successful results. The ability to hold on to our vision and then have the ability to manifest it reverberates outward as examples of the incredible power of inner and outer perseverance.

Many of us discount our own visions because we think what we want is insignificant and not worthy of being important. We hold our individual visions hostage to our perception that it must either be big and grandiose to be worthy of our consideration or it is too big and beyond our capability to even manifest itself. So instead of holding onto our visions, as discussed in chapter four, we drop them altogether and achieve absolutely nothing! But like the word “perfect,” the word “vision” is relative. It is not a one-size-fits-all proposition! If you're favorite snack food is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and you happen to get an extreme craving at 1a.m. and can't get to sleep without having one, then for that moment in time, that becomes your “perfect vision.” And yes, it's okay to start manifesting our vision, even if it turns out to look more like a dough ball rather than a sandwich!

The “Perfect” Dough Ball

It was about 1 a.m.; I was lying in bed trying to get to sleep when a sudden craving for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich rushed over me like a tidal wave. All I could think about was that sandwich and how delicious it would taste with an ice-cold glass of milk.

I was living alone at the time and had never before made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; I initially gave up the idea of satisfying my craving — at least for that particular night. But lying there, looking up at the ceiling, I only got hungrier! This gave me the determination to go to the kitchen and at least make an attempt to satisfy my hunger. As I visualized my perfect sandwich, I got the ingredients out of the cupboard: white Wonder Bread and two jars, one containing peanut butter and the other jelly. At that point, my kitchen was perfectly clean. I took a butter knife out of the drawer and stuck it right in the middle of the jar of peanut butter. As I attempted to spread it ever so evenly on the bread, I was unable to get the peanut butter off the knife and onto the bread. Before I knew it, there were pieces of bread scattered across the once-clean counter top. Tiny globs of peanut butter were on each piece of mutilated bread, but most of it went on the ceiling and the walls as my tight, flying, uncoordinated arms involuntarily put them there. Currents of discouragement started overcoming me, feeling sorry for myself, because after all, I couldn't even make my own peanut butter and jelly sandwich. How pathetic!

I decided to throw the entire mess in the trash and go to bed. But Wait! I still had the craving and I wanted that sandwich no matter what it looked like. I started to get enough courage to tackle the jelly. The butter knife went in the jelly and I couldn't keep it on the knife long enough to get it over to the bread, or what was left of it. My arms started flying again and so did the jelly. I finally managed to get the jelly on the little pieces of bread and I now had PB&J wallpaper — but nothing closely resembling the sandwich I had envisioned and wanted.

I was so exhausted and frustrated that I headed for the trash once again, but this time it was for real. I was done with the whole mess. But wait! I still had the craving and by now, I wanted it so bad that I could taste it. Going to bed hungry was no longer an option! After surveying the mess that had been created, I took the pieces with little globs of peanut butter and jelly on each and stuck them all together into a peanut butter and jelly dough-ball. I poured myself a glass of milk, half of which went on the floor. I put the dough-ball on a clean plate and ended up eating the whole thing. And you know what? It was worth every ounce of effort because even though it may not have looked like the sandwich I had originally intended, it tasted as good as I imagined. For me, the peanut butter and jelly dough-ball had been transformed from a nightmarish experience to my “perfect vision.”