

Art and spirit

by Joanne Dickson

I have always been visually minded. My first memory of drawing was at age three. I drew on napkins, paper bags, anything I could get my hands or my Crayolas on. Books of family trips were liberally illustrated with my experiences. As a child I would rather draw than play with dolls or other toys. I was encouraged by my mother and by teachers. In graduate school (Art History) we were told, “The map is not the territory.” There is no way to recreate an internal experience by attempting to draw what we see.

My life was transformed first by societal woulds and shoulds, and then by something far more insidious. MS has now numbed the fingers on my right hand and I can no longer paint or draw. Doing art is a lifelong practice, but I have chosen not to avail myself of advice to paint in a different way. It is my feeling that if I could paint in a different way I would be a different person. This is true for me; many have made different choices.

When I was a kid I would go to the beach and paint. I would paint Long Island Sound, or rather my feelings about the Sound, the sand, the gently lapping waves, the smell of salt water and seaweed. Inevitably a stranger would stop and look at the canvas and say: “You forgot to put the bird in.” What did the stranger know of my experience? The map is not the territory!

However, we like maps. They help us get from one place to another. We fear getting lost. Maps are comfortable and they help us feel safe, but the map

Joanne Dickson meditates on how thinking like an artist continues to support her, even though MS has made it impossible for her to paint or draw.

conveys little about our inner experience.

With MS we run entirely off the map into the frightening realm of the unknown. Early on, I awoke every morning wondering if I would be able to walk. I had been

told that 85% of spouses leave a partner with MS.* I arranged for counseling for Jim and me at a nearby Center for Independent Living. Our counselors were Hal and Megan. Hal had been diagnosed with MS when he was just 17. Every week I would walk behind Hal. For some reason I felt reassured; if he was walking just fine, then I would continue to walk. Magical thinking, yes, but it allayed my fears.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped worrying. Now I can no longer walk. The relationship between me and Jim foundered and I have been alone for years now. Incrementally I made the difficult adjustments. Remember, it is the mind that

matters. What does my mind see? What is my inner experience? I have MS, and as far as I know MS is a chance occurrence. But I can choose what to do with my remaining function, with my life.

Choice and chance are huge elements in the making of art. An example I love is the work of the kinetic sculptor, George Rickey. In his elegant work, pieces move, and patterns form and re-form through time. They are not predetermined. The movement of the various elements is based on chance; wind is the energizing factor. Mr. Rickey made all his choices before reaching this point.

* The divorce rate for people with MS is around 19%, slightly higher than the general population, but not strikingly so. The information Ms. Dickson was given simply wasn't accurate.



ART © THE ESTATE OF GEORGE RICKEY/LICENCED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

Triple N IV by George Rickey, 1988

The parallel for me is I have MS. Within that frame what is possible? I'll try something and if it doesn't work, I'll try something else until I find a way that works for me. We always have choices. We always have goals. Sometimes the goals will be realized and other times we get lost. At times our path is blocked and no amount of perseverance will take us to our end point.

But if we have the habit of thinking creatively or mindfully another opportunity will suggest itself. Every choice suggests another choice. I have come to see the world in this way. My diagnosis did not change me into a different person or erase my significance. But clearly as my symptoms increased, changes had to be made.

There is little support in our culture for taking the time and space to reflect on what might change in our lives. This is particularly confusing with MS because it is rarely linear. When I am ill, there is

go away. How can I restructure my life? It is hard to admit that the accomplishments of my former, healthy self are not an appropriate measure of my achievements today. It is the sincerity of my effort



that is important. Therefore I feel that I have made some great choices in my life.

Joanne Dickson lives in California. She wrote about her employment experiences for **InsideMS** in 2006.



FROM THE COLLECTION OF GRETCHEN O'BRIEN

Insidious (watercolor) 28 1/2" x 21 1/2"
by Joanne Dickson

one type of adjustment to be made; when I am in remission there are other issues. I ask myself, can I resume my previous lifestyle? Will this, my current condition, be permanent? How can I plan? What goals are realistic?

One thing I know for sure is that one never stops dealing with loss, grief, anger, fear, and, yes, humiliation. The human need for privacy and dignity don't