

# Art in Transition

## By Sue DeSalvatore



Many of the lovely people I have met in various online forums and groups are aware that I am a disabled artist. My story will sound familiar to other artists with chronic pain. Polymer Clay Polyzine and I have joined together to share the positive outcome of my situation, which is our mutual desire to help other artists adapt their art activities so they may enjoy their craft once again.

In the months ahead, we will be sharing adaptive studio layouts, ergonomics, space organization, inspiration, and ways to dig deep when it seems there is no place left to dig. It is the wish of the staff at Polymer Clay Polyzine that this column becomes an interactive resource for support, technical advice and of course, art through polymer clay.

My background and art education has been in textiles and fibers, but I was in the process of exploring polymer clay when my accident occurred. It started while pushing a wheelbarrow full of manure. The shooting pain in my lower back dropped me to my knees, landing me in my compost/horse manure pile. My dog lay with me for over five hours as we waited in the cold October morning for my husband to find us.

The first specialist treated me for Myofascial Pain Syndrome, injecting the painful area with some thirty Xylocaine shots. Next came a course of physical therapy, resulting in a full release to my "normal routine." Still terribly uncomfortable and growing increasingly more frightened, I was referred to another specialist who, after his brief and non-tactile examination, stated, "The symptoms you present to me have more to do with the color of your hair than anything skeletal. Just return to your normal lifestyle and call me in a few weeks." My first and final thought about this man was "Call you WHAT? My mother wouldn't approve of what I would like to call you."

Well, I did as advised and while planting a lily bulb, I again went to the ground in breathtaking pain and disorientation. As we waited for medical assistance, my husband, my dog and I began to reassess our life, with some sort of innate knowledge that things would never quite be the same.

My husband Gary and I were accustomed to a spontaneous life, free to come and go on a whim. Our passports would be filled before they expired. His daughters were through college and on their own. Gary had retired from government service and was a private consultant, and I had a well paying job and a growing quilt and dye business. We lived in a "nearly paid for" split-level home on 20 rugged acres in snow country. The construction on my tree-house fiber studio was complete and we were on our way to the carefree life we had worked so hard to create.

As we lay there on the frozen ground that November, after the infamous "lily bulb" incident, we remembered a joke a charming British boy had told us. Gary and I were in Spain for a friend's wedding. The bride was from Denmark, the maid of honor from India, and the guests represented countless countries and cultures. Remarkably, this young Brit told a joke that everyone understood, regardless of their background or religious beliefs. The joke went like this:

A. How do you make God laugh? A. Tell Him your plans.

Tell Him your plans. It was a sobering memory, although this time it wasn't quite so amusing. The end of the "past" (also known as the "beginning of the present") manifested itself in my being bedridden for ten of fifteen months and enduring four surgeries at seven surgical sites. I need six different narcotics throughout the day. My passport expired a year ago, and in its place is my handicapped bumper sticker. My skis have been replaced by my walker, and my treetop studio sits empty, waiting my return. Snuggling with Gary during long winter nights has been replaced with a twin sized hospital bed in the living room.

The diagnosis? Degenerative disc disease and failed ruptured disc repair. In laymen's terms, my spine consists of bone-on-bone cookies with titanium filling in the middle. The prognosis? My surgeons hope to see a "fifty percent reduction in pain, fifty percent of the time."

People often say, "How can you stand it? I'd go crazy being in bed that long". My simple and sincere response is "Because that's the way it is". Yes, there are times when I feel I am going to perish if I don't have a change of scenery, so during those times, my husband packs me into the car and we go for a short drive. But for the most part, this type of activity results in a full 24 hours of bed rest the next day.

On good days, I can tolerate about an hour up, either strolling the hallway with my walker, or sitting outside, watching the deer. If I don't set the timer, I tend to go more than an hour and the results are less than desirable.

At first, I was convinced that my life was over. We wondered how we'd convert a split-level house on a hill into a wheelchair accessible home. We wondered if we'd have to move. We felt completely abandoned and without any control over our futures. As my husband carried me to the bathroom for the tenth straight day, I asked him, "Aren't you glad I had that hysterectomy?" Acknowledging that, if nothing else, we still had our sense of humor, we decided that we had reached the end our self-pity and the beginning of our daily climb to our return to "normalcy".

The first step was to find a competent medical specialist who would listen to me, determine a definitive diagnosis, and develop a comprehensive medical plan of action. Then I bought a laptop and went online so I could keep in touch with the world outside my living room window. Soon it was time to find a way for me to continue my artwork from a hospital bed in the living room. And that is where we'll start our discussion, next month!

