

PC But Not Too PC

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I am not going to spend a lot of time ranting during this missive. This month's article is all about those who inspired me. There may, of course, be many out there who wish these folks would have never crossed my path. They may be right; still, I am going to attempt to give credit where it is due.

I played around with doodling and the like as a child. I liked crayons and coloring books as much as any kid. But it was in Junior High School that I was given a reason to attempt to create. As part of our grooming for adulthood, we were expected to learn a few of the finer things in life. I dare say that most of us at that age were more interested in cutting up and trying to figure out just why those strange people in the other gym class were all of a sudden so damned interesting. We had options that included choir, band, and art. Art interested me much more than the other two, although I dabbled a little in each.

It was in the 7th grade at Roosevelt Junior High School in the metropolis of *Great Bend, Kansas*, that I walked into Robert Joy's art class. Mr. Joy was a man of great patience. He loved art and loved to share it with his students. I touched my first clay that was not play-doh while in his class. I learned about different pen and ink techniques. I was exposed to etching, printmaking, watercolors, chalk and oil pastels, and many other media.

Mr. Joy did more than simply show us a bunch of techniques and turn us loose, though. He instilled within us a desire to create things, to make what was not into what is and what will be. Not everyone who took his class was so moved. There were some who found their creative spark in other ways, but all were given the opportunity to discover the artist they held inside.

Robert Joy left teaching the summer before my last year at Roosevelt. Driving a delivery truck for the local Coca-Cola bottler paid more, allowing him to better support his wife and new baby. I don't know if any of us really got the chance to thank him for inspiring us. If not, I do so now. Mr. Joy, thank you for introducing me to the idea that art could be more than doodles on a notebook page... in some other class... at some other time.

The Interlude

When Mr. Joy was replaced that last year, I dropped art class in favor of assisting in the library. It was not that his replacement was not replete with the latest ideas and techniques. She seemed to have all that down pat. She really didn't seem to connect with me. She seemed to be quite a bit more interested in technical perfection than heart and soul.

It would be years later before I would take another formal class in the fine arts. The desire to create did not leave me, however. I tried a variety of crafts and kept doodling in those notebooks. Nothing really caught my fancy in those days. Nothing seemed to be on the scale of what I wanted to do. I knew I couldn't draw well enough to do much more than cartoon-y figures, and not very good ones at that. I couldn't play any instruments beyond the most simple of ditties. My artistic endeavors went dormant.

I was getting ready to start my senior year of college when my mom passed away. My dad had gone just about a year before. I entered an extremely lonely time in my life. I was in a new town, with no friends, and now no real place to think of as home. I went to class, I came home, I watched television, I went to bed.

Going to the Land of Happy Trees

One Saturday I was flipping channels on that trusty television. I stopped on the PBS channel. Why in the name of all that is right in the world, would they make a television show of some hippie painting landscapes? I was struck by how odd this seemed. I didn't change the channel until the show was over. I didn't think about it much that whole week. The very next Saturday I thought to tune in again.

The hippie's name was Bob Ross and his show was called *The Joy of Painting*. I spent 30 minutes every weekend for the next couple of months watching Bob Ross make a painting. I was fascinated by how a blank canvas became a beautiful mountain scene, or a brook running through a meadow. Bob talked about making fluffy clouds using "two hairs and some air." He would show how he made "happy trees with places for the squirrels to live."

I was sufficiently impressed with his belief that anyone could learn to paint with the proper instruction and the proper tools. I bought a starter set and a couple of cheap pre-stretched canvases. I got out my brushes, paints, and palette knife. I boldly stepped up to the canvas, and I made the most peculiar color of mud in human history. I scraped that mud off that canvas and tried again. I guess it was the third time through this exercise that I could recognize the things on that canvas as being similar to mountains and trees. Months later I would prove to myself that Bob Ross was right.

I owe my rediscovery of the desire to make art to the dearly loved and sadly departed Bob Ross. Were it not for watching his show and studying his books, I doubt I would be doing much in the way of art these days. (Some would say I still don't do much in the way of art.)

Are you ready for the short rant in this episode? You knew I couldn't resist. There are those who call Bob Ross a hack, a motel artist, the Burger King of oil painting. To those people I have to say that you are free to critique. But think on this: Bob Ross brought the joy of creating simple things of beauty to thousands of ordinary people. He gave the power to try to people who would have never picked up a brush. Were it not for his constant and gentle encouragement, there are many among us who would not know the joy of painting, the joy of making art. So detract if you must, but I say God Bless Bob Ross. May he even now truly be living in a land of happy trees, mighty mountains, and clouds that look as though they were created with two hairs and some air.

The Upshot

I don't paint anymore. Not on canvas at least. It was merely a doorway for me to realize that I could indeed do art. Whether that art ever pleases anyone but myself, I don't honestly care. Sure I would like for others to appreciate my work. But it doesn't hurt me if they don't. I will continue to make it just for me, because I can. Robert Joy and Bob Ross were the ones who showed me that.

Since I found Polymer Clay there are way too many people to thank who have encouraged or taught me things. I owe a debt to each of you and appreciate all you have done. I hope you know who you are.

Be sure to join me again next time. I promise that I will be back to being my old grumpy, testy, and generally outraged self. 'Til then, it's time for bed here among the happy trees of the Pacific Northwest.

