

Unexpected Falling in Love

Pick up a stone to hold while you read.

Twelve years ago, I turned 50 and gave myself the gift of going back to school. The three year program I chose was called Biography and Social Art. It offered a way to explore life through the objectivity of a scientist and the soulfulness of an artist.

We were to find a tree nearby and daily, weekly, or as we could, go out and introduce ourselves to this tree as though you would a new friend. After pleasantries, we were to observe and record observations we made through artistic practices. This was to take place for a year.

After arriving home from the two-week summer session, I chose a young ornamental cherry tree. She was much taller than I. Her toes were firmly planted in the earth. She reached up to the sky with branches full of green leaves. She was a beauty, yet I wondered how I could keep interested for a year or even a month. I took up the task of observing by remembering how I could watch an anthill for hours as a child. Lying down on the earth with my head propped up by my hands; my eyes followed the trails of worker ants.

Taking out my pencil and sketchbook and making the decision “I can draw”, I set out to sketch her whole figure. A gesture appeared. Reaching. Her story unfolded. I followed each branch. All so different. The texture of her bark circling around the trunk, with dots here and there. The next thing I knew two hours had passed. She had shared so much of her story with me and I captured bits of it on my paper. But, really what more did she have to tell me? A year’s worth? It felt like I had finished the assignment in the two hours.

For our next meeting, I brought watercolors, unopened for years. It was an assignment and I would do my best. We met with a bit of recognition this time and she had no doubt of my ability to capture her essence on paper. I decided to examine her bark. The more I looked the more she opened up to me. So many colors, so many textures. Her trunk was not brown! I used reds and blues, yellows, blending them to bring a bit of her to my paper. I was pleased and she stood as a witness, so welcoming with no judgment.

Our relationship deepened, I was interested in her. As the seasons changed I noticed subtle and obvious differences.

This required assignment became one I looked forward to. We greeted each other daily, sometimes just in passing, other times I lingered and captured a gesture, a leaf, a branch on paper.

As I sat with my friend, people walking by would stop to see what I was doing. A conversation would ensue and they, too, looked at this tree with new eyes as though meeting her for the first time. I loved introducing my friend to others and sharing my discoveries about her.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. She was my muse, my friend. Through her I was able to witness miracle upon miracle as the seasons brought changes to her appearance. Her gift of witness with no judgment allowed me to inspect and examine and capture what I could. I was a witness to her. Streaming love and appreciation to her at each meeting, she did the same for me. Looking at the book of drawings warms my heart, still. I love these drawings, rough though they may be, because I love her, a cherry tree.

How are you doing with the stone? How does it feel in your hands?

Through this yearlong activity I learned the lesson my teachers never voiced. This lesson of love through attention. By experiencing this, it lives inside my bones, my heart, not just in the intellect.

I now take this learning into the world in my work. Inviting a parent or teacher to witness a child by drawing them, holding them in their mind's eye with open curiosity. And then doing it again. Holding back judgment and seeing what is there. How many colors are in their hair? Their eyes? How does their knee bend when they walk? Another exercise I offer is to notice five new things about someone they know. Through openness and curiosity, offering attention, interest is awakened; this leads to love. A gift you could even give yourself. Can you be objective and see yourself as your friends do? Being a witness, being curious and eliminating judgment, who are you? I invite you to fall in love, even with the unexpected.

How do you feel about this stone? Say goodbye and listen for a response.

Kathleen Bowen

kb@kathleenbowen.com

413 320 1723