Scattered Shells and Falling Trees

The purpose of art is not a rarified, intellectual distillate—it is life, intensified, brilliant life.

—Alain Arias-Misson

There was a time in my life when getting to the next day took every ounce of strength I had. I looked forward to the end of each day when I could lay my head down and drift off into a deep sleep, anesthetized to the pain that ripped at my life. During this time, I learned that art and writing were more vital to me than food and water.

Each day was filled with the tension of wondering what would set off his anger, what word or action he would need to correct or criticize, and at the same time I was raising five children, virtually alone; I was empty. There were days when I literally had to pinch myself so I would know that I was alive.

Jan had invited me to get away on an informal retreat at the cabin of a mutual friend. The cabin was located in Grayland, just south of Westport along the coast. Each morning I would wake and head out onto the beach to listen to the waves and walk. This particular morning Jan had left earlier and was walking about 40 yards in front of me. We respected one another’s need for solitude and kept our distance on these early morning walks. The cool spray off the crashing surf chilled my face. It was early October and the air was brisk. Jan had stopped for a moment, so I stopped too, leaving a good 20 yards between us. I watched as she removed her shoes, pants and shirt and then suddenly made a dash for the waves. I watched as she jumped and splashed. My first thought was she must be crazy, it had to be 50 degrees in the air and even colder in the water. I could hear her squeals of joy and excitement over the crashing waves. It occurred to me that while I was there waiting on the beach, she was out there having the time of her life.

Paralyzed, I gasped for air, feeling as if someone had punched a fist in the middle of my chest. This is how I lived my life, on the outside, looking in. Watching as others took the risks, always standing on the sidelines, wondering why the emptiness in my stomach never went away. In the next moment I stripped down to my bra and panties and ran as fast as I could into the surf, the cold air blowing through my hair. As my toes hit the water I continued to run, forcing myself into each rising wave, until the last crashed over my head and my feet went out.
from under me and I was tossed uncontrollably through the water and sand. I struggled to gain a foothold and rose to the surface, screaming and laughing, born again.

How could I keep this moment? How could I make it a permanent part of me? I wanted to document its life changing power. I picked up a pen and wrote... To go or stay or waiting still, imbue/the sand and salt, the bland is swallowed whole.

In his book, On Writing, Stephen King writes, “Life isn’t a support system for art. It’s the other way around.” Over the next five years my writing became a life support, while the circumstances around me began to spin in a chaotic frenzy. For the first time I was following my heart, making choices about who I was and how I would spend my time. The problem was, in my daily environment of control and manipulation, freedom such as I was experiencing was creating havoc with the status quo. It became clear I had to rescue not only myself from this daily hell, but my children were at horrifying risk as well.

Some time after my awakening romp in the surf, during one of my darkest times, I took a walk down the hill from my house and past a stand of trees. It was a quiet early evening. I was alone. From the direction of the trees came a crashing sound of branches breaking, a sound I was familiar with, living in logging country. A tree was falling. As it hit the ground I felt the tremor and knew that this was no small tree. I looked around expecting to see people coming out of their houses. No one did. Cars went by as usual as if nothing had happened. I realized that I was the only witness to the event. Just like the searing pain that was pulsing through my heart as I struck out on my own as a single mom, this experience was unknown to all but me. I wondered, like the philosophers, if no one is in the forest to hear the tree fall, does it make a sound? I sought comfort in my writing... My little ones, we share this hemisphere/of fiery doubt and silent screams that sear/and wound and break; our hearts must surely flee.

Words and images are memory devices. I can’t go by a stand of trees or walk on a beach without remembering these significant moments of my life. The words I have written help me remember who I am and bring understanding to those difficult times. They connect me to the past, present and future. Georgia O’Keefe said, “It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.”

My life is very different now. I sometimes feel like I’ve had two lives. If it weren’t for the written words, tangible upon a page, I might not remember what my life was once like. It is in the remembrance of that pain that I can appreciate the beauty that now surrounds me.
It happened again. The glass container in the bathroom, the one filled with shells, is emptied on the floor. Each time it happens, I carefully grasp each shell and roll it in my hands, admiring the intricate designs and patterns as well as the varying textures. It’s silly, I know, to keep a bottle filled with shells in my bathroom. It inevitably gets knocked over, or some child dumps it, admiring the contents much like I am now. Many of the shells I inherited from my grandma Delsa, whose collection filled her basement. My brothers and sisters and I used to dread going over to Grandma’s, knowing we would be coaxed into making a shell picture or a sand bottle. At the time we thought grandma was weird to have all that stuff in her basement. But now I understand. Each time I hold a shell in my hand I’m reminded of the waves that woke my sleeping spirit and led me to the happiness I now enjoy as well as the hell that I once left.

The phone rings, so I quickly stuff the last shells in the jar and tell myself I will return later to arrange them more artistically. (I know that I won’t.) The person on the other end reminds me of the appointment my son has the next day with the orthodontist; the braces are coming off. Then I remember that I have to schedule dentist appointments for all the boys. Even before I hang up the phone I am putting the dishes away and remembering I have a load of clothes in the washer, a pile of clothes to fold and at least 3 more loads to go. I have entered the endless hallway of domestic reality, the one with the revolving doors that never stop. The difference is I don’t travel this route alone; I have a life partner, a lover, a friend who shares this world with me. We’ll fold the clothes together.

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It’s going to be hot again today. They say it hasn’t been this dry or hot in the Seattle area for more than 40 years. It will be a good day to dry the sand I collected yesterday at ocean. I’ve collected sand from every beach I’ve visited since last summer. It’s fascinating how each beach has its own unique combination of particles, washed and rubbed together, collectively producing an overall hue and texture. Along Maine’s marginal way, in between the large rocky crevices, I found dark gray sand, so fine that when the tidal waters poured in the water became clouded. On the shores of Lake Quinault the particles were black and coarse and reminded me of the volatile geological forces at work beneath us in the Northwest. These physical mementos of times and places in the past ground me in the present. I keep them in small bottles, each one designating where I was and who I enjoyed the moment with. Moments pass too quickly for me now, days turning into years. I want to hold them in my hands and remember.

Words and images work the same way, recording instances of pain and times of joy, as well as horror. Perhaps it is through our selection
of words and images that we strive for meaning and connection to the world. As our lives speed by, it shouldn’t surprise us that there is a desire to capture and hold these passing moments. They could be camera shots of beauty, searches for meaning through words on a page or paint on a canvas, all creating a rich context of meaning, helping us find our place in a chaotic world.