

OPTIONS

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Standing prominently in our living room is a plaster statue of Louis Armstrong. Years ago in New Orleans, we saw him in a store window, beckoning us with his big-toothed grin, his shiny trumpet grasped firmly against his chest, ready to blow. In New Orleans this statue was as common as pralines in tourists' tummies, but none-the-less he accompanied us home and assumed his place of pride overlooking the Steinway grand. Louis smiles at my husband Eli when he tucks into the blues with his stride left hand, and urges on my grandson Noah as he labors over the Train Song.

Louis Armstrong is a muse in my household, and a legend in jazz. He was a gift to the world, and an inspiration to children born poor and Black. In fact, Louis Armstrong inspires anyone that loves music, originality, brilliance, and verve. But if truth be told, Louis Armstrong was only a gunshot away from becoming none of those things.

Louis Armstrong was born a poor child in "the Battlefield," a dangerous neighborhood of New Orleans known for its street fights with knives and guns. His father abandoned the family soon after his birth and his mother was a part-time prostitute. His was not a childhood of options and explorations, but rather one of desperate survival. Louis Armstrong's story as a jazz musician began when he was twelve years old with a gunshot, fired by him, at another child from his grandmother's boyfriend's pistol. Fortunately, the shot missed, but it landed Louis Armstrong in the Colored Waif's Home, where he served his sentence for two years. The Colored Waif's Home had a band of brass and drums, which played for money to feed its charges and pay its staff.

The bandmaster handed Louis a tambourine, then a bass drum, then an alto horn, and finally a trumpet, and so his career began. In the Colored Waif's Home Louis found an option to street corner singing and tough-guy survival, or rather, the option found him. This was a boy that could take that option and run with it, but without the option, wherever that formidable talent resided in his body or soul, it would likely have had no way to emerge.

Louis Armstrong's story is a sober one. It makes us wonder how many children sleeping in the doorways of Sao Paolo or Calcutta, or on cots in Roxbury or South Central Los Angeles could be the great artists, writers, musicians, and philosophers of their generation, if only someone handed each child his or her version of Louis' trumpet.

At the opposite end of the options spectrum lies my childhood. My parents, emerging newly middle-class from their immigrant origins, were determined to give their children the opportunities they never had. Our duty as children was to select where our talent lay from among the choices before us. I remember a painful tap dance class when I was

about six, repeatedly swinging my right foot forward and back in imitation of the teacher's shuffle. That career appeared over as soon as it began. I refused to go back. How ironic that fifty years later I discovered the bright blue door of the Leon Collins Dance studio in Brookline, entered, and began an enthusiastic excursion into tap dance.

Piano lessons went a bit further. My parents believed that every child's education should include music and that a musical education begins with piano lessons. Our neighborhood boasted a blue-haired teacher that gave lessons in her home. She had placed a rod over the keyboard over which I was required to curl my fingers. Her living room was dark; my fingers ached. My version of the Train Song was labored, but I doggedly progressed. It was not until later that the spark of music lit my soul. My brother, Gordon, preceded me in the piano-to-instrument sequence. When I was about eleven, it was my turn to inherit Gordon's nickel-plated clarinet after he graduated to an elegant ebony Selmer. I erroneously though successfully argued that clarinets were for boys and flutes were for girls. In possession of what I chose for myself rather than what was chosen for me, I practiced diligently the day before each weekly lesson and, undeservedly, excelled.

I also excelled as an artist, but that hardly counted because it came so naturally. Art just flowed out of me. If I had a history assignment, I hurried through my research, slapped together a report, and spent hours laboring joyously over the cover to the report. The covers earned my grades. I still serve tea on a faded tray that started life as a seventh grade science project. This project was nothing more than an excuse to paint a picture of the Goddess Diana in a flowing tunic surrounded by a circlet of Roman Numerals. This had nothing to do with science. I got an A. What was the teacher thinking?

Both music and art brought rewards. I played first chair in the high school orchestra, studied with Bernie Goldberg, first flutist with the Pittsburgh Symphony and one of the finest flutists in the country, earned a scholarship to a city-wide art program and in my senior year of high school won first prize in that program.

Unlike Louis Armstrong, I grew up in a world of privilege with options there for the choosing. My difficulty was which to choose. (Let's put aside for the moment the issue of talent!) As I went off to college, my task, I believed, was to choose whether I would become an artist or a musician. I made that decision early and definitively in my freshman year at Sarah Lawrence. A minimalist painter of large black canvases with dark olive and ochre stripes taught my first and last art class there. He gave his students rigorous assignments exploring formal properties of color and composition. I had come from painting bursting bubbles and pink roses with titles like, "Joy" and "Spring Beauty." Unable to contend with the assignments, I concluded that I had a facile hand, but lacked an artist's mind. My teacher agreed, offering faint praise in my evaluation for having the courage to realize that I had no talent. I laid down my pencil and brush.

Life went on. I played my flute, struggled through music theory, fell in love, married the boy I fell in love with, graduated, went on to graduate school and a "real" career, raised a child, and became a grandmother. The flute assumed a beloved but decidedly second

place. When I play, the spark of music still lights my soul. When I don't play, which can be for extended periods of time, my soul seems to survive without it. This past summer, I received a call from my friend, Suzanne Tarlov. "Carolyn," she asked, "Would you like to come to watercolor camp?" Watercolor camp. Suzanne had persuaded a brilliant painter, Jane Goldman, to teach a weeklong workshop in watercolor painting to a group of her friends. My first reaction was, "Oh no. I know I'm not an artist. I'll be upset because I'll be so terrible." My second reaction was, "Why not? At least I'll enjoy the other women."

Jane had purchased our supplies. The first morning, I lay two brushes beside the watercolor pad, filled my jar with clear water, and opened a small brown cardboard box. Eight tubes of paint with exotic names nestled within. I began to squeeze the colors from their tubes into my white plastic palette's small round cavities. The colors emerged: Hansa yellow, new gamboge, vermilion, carmine red, phthalo blue, French ultramarine, burnt sienna, ivory black. Each color brought an emotional response. I could hardly breathe. Following Jane's instructions, I dipped my brush in water, then paint, and drew squiggles, dots and letters on the bright white paper. The paper came alive with forms and colors.

Over the course of the week, Jane taught us about positive and negative space, tonal value, color mixing, washes, glazing, and painting what we see and not what we think is there. With each lesson, I became more assured. I began seeing in a new way. Driving to Suzanne's house through the rain, I saw the reflections of telephone poles in the wet pavement. I started to notice how chimneys joined roofs, the play of shadows over house fronts, how clouds billowed in the sky, that hills grew bluer and paler as they receded into the distance. By the end of the week I knew that I had to paint. Forty-four years after abandoning art altogether, I realized that I am an artist after all.

Since this summer I paint nearly every day. Our class has continued to meet twice a month. An unfinished painting always sits on my studio table. I feel an urgency about painting that I've never felt about anything else. I have so much to learn. I've signed up for classes in drawing at the Massachusetts College of Art, in painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, and in wet-on-wet watercolor technique in Brookline. I surf the Web for artists that give workshops I can attend and for local artists with whom I might study.

With each painting I am doing something that I have never done before. I paint with books open beside me. If I need to paint a dark background, I open the chapter on darks in Making Colors Sing by Jeanne Dobie. On scraps of paper I test the colors until I think I've got it right. Then, fearfully, I apply that paint to my precious image. This is all so new, that I have little faith that I can mess up and just try again. Maybe I'll ruin it and never be able to capture this image again. I feel as though each painting is pulled from some innermost place, speaking a language that can be spoken no other way. The other evening, I glimpsed my bright yellow kitchen through a darkened pantry and had to capture the sense of beckoning warmth that image conveyed. My love for my small granddaughter is encoded in every brushstroke of a painting of her poised for a

moment in our garden. With water and pigment, I take a blank sheet of paper and create life.

I have thought deeply about my choice as a girl to abandon the visual arts. Unlike Louis Armstrong, I believed that I had to narrow my options, rather than to expand upon the options I had. Was I mistaken about the need to narrow, or in narrowing, did I choose the wrong art? I don't know. What I do know is that at age 62 I accidentally recovered the only language that came to me naturally as a child, a language that I am now driven to speak the way a parched person is driven to drink.

Perhaps I will ultimately be a deeper artist than I would have become if I had made different choices as a girl. What I lacked as an eighteen year old that I now possess is a sense of being on a journey and the preciousness of each adventure along the way. I no longer need to fulfill someone else's definition of an artist. I am an artist and my journey is to create art. I know it's good. It may become great. Whatever the outcome, the journey will be worth the price of passage.

This afternoon I looked out my kitchen window and saw Noah and his dad leave on their bikes for a few hours at the playground. On the back of his bike, my son-in-law carries a net sack containing a baseball bat and ball, two tennis racquets and tennis balls, a basketball, a golf club with a golf ball, and a soccer ball. He and Noah will play with them all. In the living room, Louis stands guard, blessing my family.