

Talent, Skill and Learning

By. A. Michael Shumate

When I was quite young, perhaps eight years old, I liked Mickey Mouse a lot. Early on, I happened to find step-by-step instructions for drawing the face of Mickey Mouse. An oval here, a circle there, connecting lines here, here and here, and--voila!--Mickey Mouse. It was magic.

And I was the magician.

I repeated that process over and over, never tiring of seeing Mickey's face emerge at my command. One day while doing the magic at school, one of my little friends saw it and asked in awe, "Did you do that?" I proudly admitted I had. He called over some more friends and they were all equally impressed. They called me an artist.

And I believed them.

With that kind of encouragement, I sought out the instructions and mastered the drawing of the faces of Donald Duck and Goofy. Now I had a repertoire.

It wasn't long before my teacher saw what I could do and said, "My! What an artist you are!"

And I believed her.

I absolutely loved being the magician who could create something from nothing.

One day I was bragging to my younger sister, Cathy, about what a great artist I was, when my mother overheard me. She had studied at an art school after high school and decided I needed a reality check. So she sat me down with a pad of paper and a pencil, put my sister in front of me and told me to draw Cathy.

I did, and the result looked strangely like George Washington. (Lest you think my sister is some genetic deviant, she never did resemble George Washington.)

That was fine. I was suitably humbled by the experience. But a couple of months later there was a contest in our school to draw a picture of George Washington in honor of the upcoming anniversary of his birth. I submitted the picture of Cathy. And I won first prize. Now the whole school knew that I was an artist.

And I believed them.

A few years later my mother gave me her old oil painting set and I dabbled at that from time to time. One day I had an idea for a painting and squeezed out the paints for it on my pallet. At the last minute I decided I didn't feel like painting, but realized I couldn't leave the paints to waste. So I took the paints and smeared them on an old framed

corkboard in my room. A year or two later Mom suggested I enter that painted corkboard in the five county art contest. I did and I won first prize for my "abstract painting." Now my reputation as an artist was securely established.

Years passed and I began university as a Marine Biology major but the tug of my first love, being the magician, wouldn't leave me. I switched to be an Art major. When I got in my first drawing class I saw the beautiful work others were doing while my clumsy work still reminded me of the George Washington--Cathy picture. I was not the great artist I had thought I was. I was ashamed of my lack of talent. I changed majors to Graphic Design where I wouldn't have to draw, but could still be creative and work with the images of others, not my own.

But I couldn't hide from drawing forever. One of the courses I had to take for my Graphic Design degree was Illustration, and I couldn't avoid it forever. In it, I had to confront my old demon: drawing. An interesting thing happened, though. Even though I wasn't gifted, I recognized that I had returned to my first love, the magic of making images.

Near the end of that course I heard that my illustration teacher was telling his other classes about an unnamed student of his that "couldn't draw a stick figure without a ruler" but still managed to create good images because he could "outsmart what he couldn't do with native ability" and because "he was willing to put in the time until it was right." I was sure he was talking about me.

Somewhat offended, I confronted my teacher and asked if I was the person he had been talking about. He said I was. I asked him what he meant by his statement. He told me, "Michael, there are three qualities that assure success in the arts. They are: 1) talent, 2) an ability to accomplish laterally what you can't do directly, and 3) a passion for the work that compels you to work until it is right. If you only have one of those qualities you just won't make it in the arts--even if that quality is talent!" Then he looked at me seriously and said, "Michael, you have the last two qualities. You just might make it."

I have pondered that counsel many times and believe it to be true. Over the years since then, I have come to believe that talent is not a mystic endowment which is either present or not in a person at birth. I believe talent is merely an understanding or skill already acquired.

In the decades since my reawakening to a passion for creating images, I have learned many skills and grown in knowledge. I have had to struggle to gain each bit of visual knowledge, but have always found the same thrill of being the magician and making an image work.

Of the three qualities mentioned by my teacher, skill, an ability to sidestep your natural deficiencies and a love of the

work, the first two can be increased by diligent study and effort. The only one of them has to be present to begin with is the last one, a love of the work and a willingness to work until it is right. I believe people who have a true passion for their art can grow in abilities. It may be slow, but it will happen.

The most beautiful part is that you can always be learning. You will never know it all, but the learning is precious and the quest for the magic never ends.

And there's nothing better than being the magician.

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