

IDENTITY ESSAY

Early this morning I was skating fast along some rail tracks, feeling uplifted with the wind rushing through my hair. It was the first time I had experienced that journey, but felt I knew it well. Approaching my turn, the train I saw ahead looked familiar.

Certain the train was on a different path from me, I turned with confidence onto mine, but then so did the train. Suddenly my uplifted feeling turned into an uplifted reality and after being catapulted into the horizon, I lay crumpled but alive in a dismembered pile.

Awakening, a question and review about the path I am presently on seems vital, and there seems no better place to explore the issue than this identity essay. My life has been a bit of a rollercoaster ride, full of peaks and troughs, lulls and leaps. I have followed many paths, some blindly and a few with eyes wide open, one of my clearest paths being my application to Antioch at the beginning of the summer. My application essay highlighted how perfectly all my previous paths, bad and good, now converged to one perfect point in time where everything made sense, and Antioch was to be the destination that could bring them all together enabling me to live a meaningful life.

Now I am the product of a train wreck, my stuffing has been knocked out, my legs lay twisted above my head, and the path ahead is all fuzzy. An interim faculty advisor

has been appointed to help guide me through a 'messy' first quarter at Antioch. How did I get here?

Brought up in a middle class, uneducated family who consider themselves atheists, at an early age I can remember feeling that this was not all there was and something bigger than us was out there. Leaving school at 16 and not academically inclined, pushed, supported or believed in, I had to fight my parents for two years at Art College. It was a fantastic two years that I wanted to extend. When my desire to continue through to a degree was thwarted financially by my parents, I quickly obtained a job outside art. Jobs came easy, and job after job filled my time, but it never felt like a career. My parents, sister, aunts, cousins etc all 'just got jobs' and worked their way up through the ranks over the years, but the desire to do the same never hit me, I was always searching for more.

One 'job' led to a husband and baby. My husband is a walking encyclopedia, very opinionated and can talk about anything; my every question had an answer. For 4 years, my path was only his as my awe turned to idolism; the only thing I did not follow his lead in was to join the church as it felt to limiting. A sudden and shocking



reality that my husband was human resulted in bits of me returning, a wish for some control over my life and left some questions unanswered. Working full-time with a young son and mildly dyslexic, I stretched 'my everything' and completed 3 years of Open University

Degree in Psychology, only stopping when work/life balance and financial reasons made it impossible to continue. Not coming from an academic background the study

opened my eyes to the joy and desire of learning, changed my negative view of history and gave me a newfound confidence with increased language skills.

A few years later, relationship difficulties made a return to the search for 'me' crucial for survival. The practice of Reiki and embarking on the self-help journey "The Artist's Way" by Julia Cameron gave me the courage to blindly leap and follow my passion, hoping the net would open. I gave up my job to study Fine Art full-time. Art made the world disappear for me and as a mother and wife; I had been unwilling to disappear and had actually 'disappeared' to myself.

A small taste of the power of a spiritual path lead me down the wondrous, passionate one of an artist. My life was rich and fertile, myself and everyone around me flourished. I had found 'me', life long friends, and though the road ahead may not pay well, I had found a sustainable wealth that many envied. I was following Richard Demarco's 'Meikle Seggie' road. The road can only be found by those open to see the signs and is a metaphoric quest for knowledge, for enlightenment and what lies beyond what we know and can imagine, it is neither here nor there, past nor present. I was in pursuit of George Wyllie's question mark, using Louise Bourgeois spirals to control the chaos and leaving Andy Goldsworthy's shadows behind.



Just as my art course finished, a chance to follow my husbands' path to America met with sadness but enthusiasm for a fantastic opportunity.

Knowledge that I would be unable to get a job for 3 years was treated as a relief as I could pursue my path as an artist and not have the burden of

making a living – bliss, what a gift! I could even use the years to finish my Degree. Reality of not only not working, but also not being able to make any money from my art, was initially hard but would prove to be enlightening. The further reality of having to write Home-Maker on the tax forms and get congratulated for it, along with not being able to have a bank account or put my name on a house, pay into a pension over here or UK, finish my OU degree, or go to College unless I sat a GED was crippling.



I was in the land of opportunity and freedom and denied either. Not a defeatist at heart, feeling confident and knowing attitude is important, I changed most of my computer passwords to ‘America here I come’ and then got on a one way flight.

Not being able to ‘paint for sale’, my art took on a highly personal nature and became an insight into my own psyche; I learned to be happy alone and filled any extra time with voluntary work. When 3 years came and went and a green card looked like it may take another 3 years, my mood became blue. I hung onto the idea that if Bush was not re-elected everything would be OK, and then I crashed along with America.



Deciding to enter the New Year of 2005 in a more positive manner, I organized a solo art show for later that year called ‘a life less limited’ as a challenge to the system and myself.

The show was a great success and afterwards I felt like a could do anything, but did not know what I wanted to do. A realization that the usual path of an artist was not what I wanted, but not having a clear alternative path ahead, I stopped painting for a few months. When my son was diagnosed with clinical

depression, I stopped painting for many more months, scared I would not be there for him and not able to paint anything happy. Not painting, I turned once again to some spiritual guidance to get me through each day and the 'Power of Now' helped me deal with seeing my son suffer 24/7. Unable to help him, it enabled me to let go. In fact, living in the 'Now' was such a relief I enthusiastically passed on my secret knowledge to my many wonderful corporate girl friends who inform me it does not work so well in a working environment as you keep forgetting things – be warned!!!!



It was during this latest, spiritual search and openness to signs that I heard a voice saying 'Art Therapy' which in turn, lead me to Antioch and the feeling of clarity, certainty and confidence that I was on the right path, after all, my entire life had led up to that point, right?

At my interview, Antioch knocked me off my tracks. Though counted as pass grades, Antioch was not going to recognize two of my three years of Open University in the United Kingdom due to the evaluating scores. Instead of being elated I had got in, I was close to tears, feeling yet another bit of me had got lost. I had been lost too many times in the past. Though I went into the interview confident, I left devastated. By unexpectedly not recognizing those years I feel Antioch has misled me and belittled my achievement, knocking any last bit of confidence out of me. Their bullying attitude and behavior to justify it, along with the lack of appeal procedures has caused me to question if Antioch's values really are what I thought they were.

They have turned in a very different direction than anticipated, just like the train this morning.

Analyzing my paintings and reactions over these years has given me great inner understanding, so when I unexpectedly got so upset it sent me into a search for what exactly was so important to me. Was it the degree? was the degree important just because I was denied one? was it Antioch had taken away my confidence rather than given me some? was it the classes I could study? was it because what once felt so right now felt so wrong? was it just because I had painters block? was it because I needed another challenge? was it because I cannot do anything else? was it because I had been knocked off my crystal clear shimmering path? How do I even know what I truly want when I do not have the freedom of choice in front of me?

Finally, after great inner turmoil, and a close fleeing to my homeland, I was unable to separate the elements from the whole. For survival reasons I decided to act on what I did know. The narrow and restrictive idea that 'I only wanted to go to Antioch if they gave me back my credits' won. Not good at speaking up or out and unable to sell myself, I picked myself up from the heap, put myself together, took a deep breath to fill up the dead space left by my dissipated stuffing, decided to fight, and managed to get the grades re-evaluated in my favor just before my first week at Antioch. Scarred, fragile, tired but calm, I feel the whole thing is over. However, Antioch has still to



recognize the re-evaluation and may require more. I am just not sure there is any fight left in me, or if I am prepared to keep fighting. My path is not as clear as it feels and there could be

another train wreck ahead – hence the messy first quarter.

I have grown a lot since coming to America 6 years ago and far enough along my spiritual path to be thankful for the personal journey I have been on. I know that I cannot make the wrong choice or go back, and I hopefully have enough tools to keep growing into myself and out into the world, with or without Antioch. Being extremely close to regaining most of my independent rights, things may or may not start to look different. I will still have the internal barriers to conquer, which I am aware are more of a hurdle than the external. However, when the wall comes down, more opportunities to get out of my own way can be pursued. My desire to find some company down my path, develop a mutual relationship with Antioch and find a mirror to help me shine in the world and brighten the lives of others, has started badly. But while I am here, be it one term or twelve, I will attend with effort and enthusiasm and keep my eyes and heart wide open for any signs, just as I have done on my previous paths. Maybe now though, I may question the signs, as they may not be what they appear to be. Maybe that little voice saying 'Art Therapy' was really just telling me to go and get some, and I could have avoided the whole train wreck thing 😊

The book "Tao Te Ching" is unexpectedly sitting in front of me and I started writing this listening to Cat Stevens "why do the children play". "We are all just on a cosmic train, rolling on roads over fresh green grass. We have all come along way, and are changing day-to-day". I guess I will always continue to look for signs and seek new paths that will take me deeper and further on my journey.

Alison Farmer www.rtalison.com 9th October 2007