

perpetual
conflict

A JOURNEY OF ART AND REDEMPTION

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Perpetual Conflict: A Journey of Art and Redemption

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BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Personal Memoirs

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To my three favorite males.



Thank you for loving me.

In loving memory of
Sherman Wolf
2008-2021





wilson

SPRING IS NATURE'S SEASON for great restoration, transition, and growth. For me, the spring of 2013 echoed nature's annual process to a T. I was leaving a twenty-five-year marriage and dating a man who now is the love of my life. We were in the beginnings of discovery of each other, and there was no certainty we would achieve the depth that our relationship reflects today. He was in the middle of a divorce as well, and from what we had heard from friends, articles, and social media, such a situation rarely ends well.

The warm spring night *Wilson* was born, I had plans with two friends, The Chef and The Princess. Although we usually had fun together, when we went out that night, I did not want to go with them to the sip-and-paint event The Princess had arranged; instead, I longed to spend the entire evening with My Person. Nothing but him mattered to me, and I could not get enough of him and his gorgeous smiling eyes. (I still feel the same way seven years later.)

The Chef and The Princess were my closest friends at the time—not best friends, but friends I could get together with to have a good time. For most of my life, I never achieved “good friend” status with anyone and didn't have what most would call a best friend. I have longed to have a best friend all my life, and I completely own my part in that failure. My fears of abandonment, born originally from my adoption and later



reinforced by childhood, caused me to build a thick, nearly impermeable wall around my heart. My fears have stymied my ability to create emotional connections to others, and the result has been my refusal to make the emotional commitment needed for a close friendship. For me to have a true best friend would mean I act in an emotionally vulnerable way toward another human being. It also would demand I trust that person, and my wall and my past have made that a difficult, if not impossible, task. Fearing eventual abandonment and pain has kept me best-friend-less my whole life. I feel I have missed out on an essential life experience, but to this day, I have lacked the intestinal fortitude to go down the dark, scary path of facing my fears of vulnerability when it comes to anyone other than My Person.

On this particular night, I was not thinking of these deeper insights. I usually had fun with The Chef and The Princess, and I really liked them—and that was supposed to be the purpose of our night out. They usually filled a deep void I had in my life, but on this spring night, because I didn't have any void that needed filling, I had made plans to meet up with My Person later that evening. I wanted the friend part to be over quickly so I could get to the good part of my night. Since that is where my head and heart seemed to be, I probably gave off an air of not being too engaged with The Chef and The Princess. I own that and am not proud of it, but it was my reality that night. I could have canceled, but not wanting to disappoint anyone, I went anyway.

The Princess was just starting to get into painting, and she wanted to share an evening where we all created art together. Group art projects, group therapy, group anything were not on my agenda. But wine was involved, so that made it more tolerable. I still *really* did not want to be there, though. *Have I emphasized that enough?*



Before we headed over to the “painting-drinking-group-art-therapy-should-be-fun-they-say event,” we stopped for a couple of drinks at a bar near where the event was being held. Drinking made things better back then. It still does, but not to the same degree. When I drank wine, whiskey, gin, or any adult beverage, I felt intensely alive, free, and infinitely closer to expressing who I was as a person. I was not concerned with others’ opinions of me. I just wanted to have adventures, meet people, and experience life. I wanted to live, not just survive.

By the time the three of us arrived at the sip-and-paint event, I was already nicely buzzed and feeling very alive. And in that heightened state, I may have been just a tinge excited to drink some more and paint too. My first task was to locate the sip part of the experience and make sure I was all set. After grabbing a glass of white wine, the host sat at the table where we would create our painted masterpieces.

Each of us had a six-by-six canvas to work with and could choose from several acrylic paint colors. Since The Princess was the only one of us who had painting experience, she quickly took control, and knowing we were both novices, gave us instructions she felt we needed to “succeed” at this endeavor. To me, her directions were borderline condescending, but at that point, I could have been just a *wee bit* sensitive. She then told The Chef and me to paint whatever we wanted, and it did not matter how well it turned out.

The host of the event encouraged us to experiment and not be afraid of any judgment. It was a judgment-free zone, or at least they had that as their goal. Group activities of any kind, in my mind, are not judgment-free zones. As humans, flawed humans especially, we always seem to have the need to make ourselves feel better, and



many times we do that by putting down others. We need to feel we measure up, are on the same footing, and, most importantly, we are not less than.

I had always felt less than, so of course I wanted to do an excellent job to prove to myself and others that I was worthy, good enough, and not less than anyone else in the building. It truly may have been a judgment-free event, but that surely was not mirrored in my head. Judgment is at the center of all my brain activity, always. For years before that evening, I had been working to correct that flawed way of seeing myself. It is a journey, they say, and indeed it was. But that evening, I was not very far along in my journey to the non-judgment zone. I was only inches from the start.

The six-by-six canvas lying on the table in front of me was becoming a symbol for everything I'd hated about myself and every failure or misjudgment I'd made over the last forty-six years. I had to be the best, most creative, most clever, most intelligent, most everything at every single moment in my life, or I would be worthless. So, what I would choose to paint on that canvas, at that moment, in my slightly buzzed and excessively skewed mind, would define my entire existence. If only I would have said to myself, "Geez woman, it's just a canvas, chill, and have some fun." I did not have that rational, positive conversation with myself, but instead chose to pressure myself to create a masterpiece on thirty-six square inches. My fragile self-esteem depended on it.

As I drank my second glass of white wine since arriving, I found myself less worried about what I would paint and how it would be received. I was still terrified that I would paint something horrid and everyone would laugh at me, but I was starting to feel more confident and less frightened.

We all started to work on our paintings, and I saw The Princess utilize her signa-



ture abstract splatter style using her favorite palette of colors: purple and pink. I really thought she would paint a different type of image than what she usually painted, especially since she instructed The Chef and me to be creative and step outside the box. In the end, The Princess was probably just as scared to disappoint as I was, and there was no way she would reveal that fact. She painted what she knew and eliminated the possibility her painting would be unattractive or unappealing. Basically, she punted. I get it. We all care, on some level, what others think.

The Chef was working with yellow paint, and I had no idea what her vision for her canvas was going to produce. She was having fun, and given the big smile on her face, I believed she honestly did not care about the outcome. Of the three of us, she was the only one who seemed to embrace the exercise and did not appear to be concerned about possible judgment. I wanted to be more like her at that moment.

The pressure was on. I had to decide to paint ... or did I? Typically, in the past, when I did not want to do something, I would revert to three-year-old-child mode and pout, stomp, and have a small hissy fit until the adults in the room said, “Fine, don’t do it then, just stop complaining and acting like a child.” Yeah, I could have gone to that dark place, especially when I was feeling so vulnerable in a group setting. But I did not. I chose to move forward in my growth and expose myself to the gut-wrenching feeling of being vulnerable, not only in front of the strangers in the room but also my two friends whose opinions really did seem to matter.

When all else fails, go with what you know, right? I know what I look like, sort of, so I decided to do a self-portrait. Not the “Wow, it looks just like you!” self-portrait but rather the complete opposite.

I started by putting down as many colors as I could in both long and short strokes as I covered the canvas. Blue, red, and yellow all mixed, with some of the colors standing out more prominently. As I put the yellow strokes over the blue strokes, to my amazement, I achieved green strokes. *Wow, that was cool!* I thought. And then I quickly remembered *I have been a graphic designer for a very long time and should know that yellow and blue make green.* My self-criticizing brain was on high alert and ready for action. Not remembering that color concept gave me a reason to ridicule myself, which, insanelly, made me feel less horrible about my painting. Go figure.

Over the background of colorful strokes, I painted my face in bright yellow. The yellow was transparent to some degree, and the colorful strokes showed through from below. Determined not to have a breakdown and ruin the entire event for everyone, I told myself it was okay and “part of my vision” to see the underlying colors. I painted my eyes black instead of white and my irises white instead of a color, entirely unlike any eyes known to exist in the human race. And why stop there with the black? Yes, I painted my lips black as well. Nose, what nose? *We don't need no stinking nose!* Well, it was not supposed to be realistic, was it?

Now for my hair. I love my long red hair. It defines me and makes me feel unique. It was the part of the painting I loved the most. For some reason, I circled my entire yellow, oval head with my hair using red, yellow, orange, and brown paints. To me, the strokes I used showed movement and some interest.

Whew, I'm done. I made it through in one piece. Or so I thought.

Now that all three of us had completed our paintings, we presented them to each other, one by one. The Chef had painted a wine bottle on a yellow background. She said



it looked like a hand grenade, and The Princess concurred. Yes, it did look like what I thought a grenade would look like, but I could not be sure since I'd never actually seen a hand grenade in person. Upon further reflection, yes, indeed, it resembled a hand grenade. I told The Chef it was wonderful, and I meant it. I was proud of her for painting and not caring about the outcome.

The Princess's purple abstract paint splatter painting was pretty, and I told her so. There was no need to lie; I *did* like it.

The Chef thought my self-portrait was colorful, happy, and cool. She acted as if she really liked it. When it was The Princess's turn to comment, she laughed out loud and exclaimed, "It looks like Wilson, from the movie *Castaway*." Then she continued to laugh. She tried to get The Chef to join in on the fun, but The Chef was not having any of it.

Although I had no illusions my painting was anywhere close to good, I was proud of my accomplishment and was happy it looked like something. The ridicule The Princess showered upon me was hurtful and seared deeply into my soul. It confirmed my fears about doing activities in a group, and it added fuel to my self-critic voice. At that moment, I wanted to slap her and scream at the top of my lungs, "You fucking condescending bitch," but I didn't. I was less than an hour from meeting up with My Person, so I held onto the joy I'd felt in the experience, said my goodbyes, and left. I took *Wilson* with me to show to My Person. As soon as he saw it, he loved it. Now you know why I call him My Person.

I had wanted to start painting "for real" ever since I painted *Wilson*. Although it was painful to endure the criticism from someone I called a friend, I felt extraordi-



nary when I painted *Wilson*, and I wanted more of that sensation. But life got in the way, and I did not put paint to canvas for a long time afterward. I did, however, hang *Wilson* on a wall.

Wilson has been on display in my home since the day I painted her. She signifies my fears, my hopes, my dreams, and especially my unwavering desire to push myself forward into growth when every fiber of my being is telling me to stay put. *Wilson* is a statement to myself, reaffirming my intention to be who I am and not allow myself to be overtaken by others' opinions. I am proud of *Wilson*, and she will never leave my possession.

I've come to know that *I am Wilson*. I am fierce, strong, and capable, and just a bit off, in a good way. Every day, she guides me on my painting journey and reminds me to be free of judgment, embrace the unknown and the uncertain, and continue expressing who I am, regardless of how others may interpret my expression.

I look at *Wilson* today and hope that as I continue on my painting journey, I find my way to paint as I painted her: open, free, and uncaring of convention and conformity. I had no idea I was in such a significant place when I created *Wilson*. At the time, I wanted nothing more than to conform and avoid ridicule. I set out to create a conformist piece, but instead, my brain and my heart led me to where I needed to go. Deep inside me, in places I can't connect with easily, I knew she knew exactly what we were doing, and why.