

The Overview

This is a true story, about an artist finding peace.

About a woman with many different fractured layers of body and mind, finding the courage to unearth a new, strong, whole self. A story about learning from previous choices and finding ways to make better ones.

It's *my* story, of trying to find my true identity and where I fit in; of anxiety and insecurity; of trying to please everyone while neglecting myself; of ego and over-confidence; of perfectionism and illusion; of comparison and fear.

It's also my story of hope and optimism; of acceptance and awareness; of magic and hard work; learning to trust and forgive; learning to accept love and to care for myself; learning the importance of experiences over *stuff*; learning to say no and to take responsibility.

The story is focussed around a ten-year period, when I realised my art practice was revealing an uncomfortable personal story that my voice didn't yet have the courage to tell. The paintings illustrate the transformation process and are vital as a result: colouring the tale with additional layers of meaning and visual clues.

I may ramble at times and be repetitive, for which I don't apologise: I chose to write in the way I know best, which is conversational in tone, and I chose not to downplay the feeling of being on a merry-go-round, nor the complexity and confusion of emotional development.

As you follow my journey, you'll find there are trials and tribulations along the way, bits you might want to fast-forward and bits that you put on pause, and bits that you look at through your fingers shouting, 'la-la-la'.

This is the story of how I found the courage to look at myself and my choices with absolute honesty and worked out how to choose a better path. Now I hardly recognise the person I wrote about in the book: the change is *real*.

By the Way...

... I'm not a scientist, an academic (of any sort) or a qualified therapist, nor have I been to therapy.

I've read a stack of books over the years, that helped to give me new phrases and frames of reference for some of the ways I was feeling, but ultimately this is a distillation of decades of thinking, journaling, talking to people, trying to work things out for myself and filtering out the gems - the stuff which made sense *to me* - from everything I read and heard.

It's the culmination of thousands of hours of talking with friends, colleagues, family members: finding connections; trying to understand differences; discovering areas of empathy, sympathy, shared fears, and frustrations.

It's the best way I've found to explain the journey and transformational process, to myself as well as to others.

It's certainly not an academic research paper - this is just my anecdotal experience - and I'm prone to sweeping statements and hyperbole and a fair few generalisations.

Think of it as a (very long!) chat over a cuppa with a piece of cake: I'm passing on a chunk of my personal experience and life lessons. Occasionally I have listed specific dates that chronicle the speed at which things did (or didn't) unfold, and are there for me as a reminder, as well as putting into perspective the long months/years of grind and tumble, when I felt like I was going nowhere.

I've been fortunate enough to have family members and friends around me whom I could talk to, which was a vital part of being able to figure things out and make changes.

If you are not in this position - and the content of this book brings up some personal issues that you need help with - be reassured there is a vast network of excellent professional voices out there.

All you need to do is reach out to one of the many organisations or trained individuals who can give you the specific kind of support and guidance that you require.

Oh! Another thing.

From the time I went to university at nineteen, my parents' financial situation improved a great deal, and they were always there for me as a backstop when things got tough (and they did). I am enormously grateful for their trust and generosity and am (painfully?) aware that that resource made a dramatic difference to some of my choices. It was also a source of guilt and embarrassment for me and made my financial and business failings harder to bear, but ultimately, I always knew that if I was in dire straits, they would help.

Clearly, that kind of buffer is not available to everyone, and colours the backdrop considerably.



I AM Listening (2018) acrylic on canvas, 102 x 102cm, Private Collection

The Beginning: Connection

About halfway through 2020, I realised that I was feeling more calm, more contented, and happier than I could ever remember feeling. My art business was in the best shape it had ever been, income flowed, my health was good, and my relationship with my partner had reached its most positive plateau yet, after twelve years together. Considering the backdrop of the Covid-19 global pandemic, those revelations could be regarded as rather... well, *unexpected*?

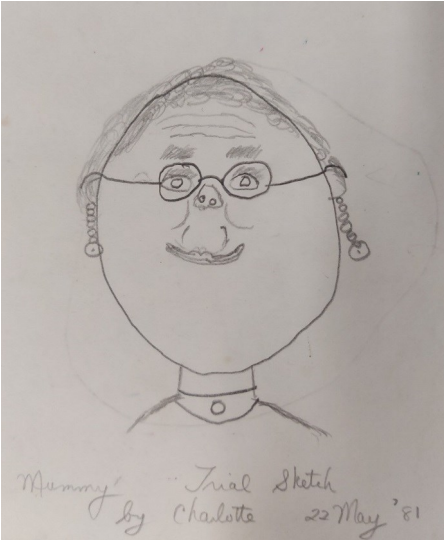
The thing is, I hadn't felt like that at the start of 2020, and I certainly hadn't felt like that a year or two earlier... so what had changed? And why had I arrived at such a positive place when there was so much fear, suffering, and general anxiety around the world?

I give occasional public talks about my personal development - as told through my *painting* development - and when I realised in mid-2020 that I'd reached such a significant emotional milestone, it warranted serious pause-for-thought and a review of my path.

I spent a considerable chunk of time writing the whole (massive!) story, 'getting it all out of me' and capturing the stages of change that had unfolded over the previous decade, to work out what the pivotal moments had been, and to learn as much as I could from them. I'd written extensively in a journal over that time (as I have all my life) and rediscovered invaluable reference material for recalling how I felt at specific moments.

I also realised that my art practice was key to my personal evolution: as a way of expressing my concerns when words weren't adequate; as a way of connecting with others when words weren't appropriate; but chiefly as a tool to help me step back and see myself more honestly, with a new perspective.

Considering that I now know how crucial my art practice has been to my personal evolution, I am enormously grateful *something* pulled me in an artistic direction, because it actually wasn't my first choice of career.



Mummy, trial sketch (1981, age six)



a battle collage (1982)

So how did I get to the point where, in 2020, I was living in a completely different country to the one I grew up in, and earning a living as a full-time artist?

I can understand my attraction to art, because Mum had a high level of artistic skill and organised drawing, painting, and craft projects at the kitchen table, to keep me and my older brother occupied from an early age. Mum undoubtedly taught me an enormous amount about drawing and colour, although specifics are lost in the fog. I wish I could remember a clear, ‘a-ha!’ moment that explains the development of my artistic eye, but nope.

In fact, my clearest creative memories as a child are of the stories I made up for my brother on our long holiday

walks, and the intensely vivid imaginary worlds I occupied a great deal of the time. For a number of years, I really believed I was a (male) Roman centurion and in my imaginary worlds I lived out that role, telling my brother stories of my adventures. A few years later, my avatar morphed into a female warrior in a science-fiction universe, which has remained my go-to alternative reality for over thirty years. As a child, I fell in love with Dr. Seuss books, then Asterix and Tintin, and dreamed of being able to bring my own imaginary worlds to life in words and pictures.

I'm sure that my parents' focus on reading, creative play, music, and conversation ignited my imagination and fuelled my

extensive capacity for daydreaming, but I also discovered independently as a child that I had an infinite source of energy and light within me. Sometimes it needed a trigger to be activated - slipping into one of my alternative worlds always helped - and then I could release a powerful glowing ball of positivity that started in my belly and flowed right through me, filling me with happiness. Years later, I called my inner source of joy my Wellspring, but as a child I didn't have a name for it and I couldn't see that anyone else had one, so I felt a bit guilty and rather strange.

I decided it must be my superpower gift, and it was my duty to spread my inner sunshine as far as possible, to find those who needed assistance and lift them up out of their darkness.

It's not a surprise that I retreated into imaginary worlds a lot, because I soon discovered at school, from age five onwards, that not only was I a bit 'different', but my family unit was too.



Girl singing on a donkey (1979, age four)

I grew up near Liverpool in the North-West of England, in the early eighties (although I also spent two separate years in the United States), and my parents' chosen lifestyle was the antithesis of everything the eighties stood for: we were vegetarian and grew a fair amount of our own food; we didn't have a car; we didn't have a TV; we went for walking holidays in the United Kingdom; we ate our healthy, balanced meals as a family around the table, talking together; Mum was a skilled seamstress and made a lot of our clothes; we went to art galleries, plays and classical concerts.

In my late teens, I began to recognise how lucky I was, how special and privileged my upbringing was, but as a child trying to find where I belonged and wanting to *blend in*, our lifestyle did not help. I can remember one day at primary school when I was seven: a girl asked if I'd seen the latest episode of the most popular soap

opera. I hadn't seen it (no TV), everyone in the group rolled their eyes, scoffed in disgust, and turned away to discuss the plot amongst themselves. I felt isolated and afraid of outright rejection. And so, I went to another group of children, asked if *they'd* seen the soap, rolled my eyes and scoffed at the one who hadn't, then discussed the plot with the others. I'd learned enough from the first conversation to be able to convincingly pull the wool over their eyes: I learned to lie with confidence and gusto, really quickly, to fit in, to hide my difference and insecurity.

It didn't take me long to create a number of different versions of myself. The pain, anger, and sadness that I saw everywhere seemed to overwhelm any prolonged sense of joy in others, and I discovered quickly that my natural tendency towards happiness was regarded with suspicion. It *can't* be natural, it must be fake, it must be medication; you're trying too hard; you're exhausting... And because I desperately wanted to fit in and be 'normal', I created a version of myself who had problems like everyone else, and soon manifested those problems into reality.

I was most comfortable in my imaginary worlds, where no one thought I was strange, and I didn't have to defend the honour of my 'poor family' or protect my parents from my classmates' jokes and criticism. I dreamed about being a writer or English teacher and I excelled at creative writing, where my imagination felt unencumbered, accepted, and celebrated. I'd been inspired by my mum and gran, both of whom were English literature graduates and gave encouragement and constructive criticism, and I was an avid reader: I understood the power of books. I thought I had a gift and my path seemed clear, and then one year, a girl moved into my class who truly did have a gift for writing (and she went on to study literature and lecture at a university), and all of a sudden, I wasn't getting the top marks anymore and I wasn't the darling of the English department. I was fourteen at the time and very jealous (and she had incredible hair). I felt a crushing sensation of *not being good enough*, and chose to remove myself from any competition, set adrift on a sea of 'what should I do now?'

In my early teenage years, I was terribly sensitive and already an analytical over-thinker. My need to shield and assist

those who didn't have an inner Wellspring was strong, and by reading the paper, listening to the news, and having parents interested in global affairs, I became acutely aware of *why* there was so much pain, anger, and sadness around. I had a lot of work to do if I was going to save anyone: the task felt impossible. I felt overwhelmed by the seriousness of global problems; by the greed of humanity; by the fear of environmental catastrophe; by the power of corporate corruption; by the poverty and homelessness and depravity of so many lives; by the enormity of all of the world's problems. I felt absolutely helpless, fearful, and sad, and often thought, 'what's the point?', hoping for a global event to wipe humanity off the planet, to give the Earth a chance to start over.

Those internal conversations and conflicts happened years before it was possible to carry a smartphone in my pocket, with instant access to the rest of the world, and so I'd dreamed of creating books with a positive message that might help others feel connected, encouraged, and supported, but the devastating realisation that I wasn't nearly as good at writing as I thought I was had destroyed the dream. Losing that sense of purpose, that mission of 'telling stories to connect with others' compounded my anxiety and increased my fear of what the future looked like.

My head started to win the battle over my Wellspring: anxious thoughts had more power than my inner glow. As a form of self-preservation, I had to develop other ways to counteract the acid-sickness of worry at night: I pictured myself striding down the street with a placard in hand, chanting messages of hope and positivity, surrounded by like-minded people. I imagined the drum-like unison of our feet on the ground and that beat inside slowly helped to calm me, along with the repetitive phrases I taught myself to say. I gently rubbed my belly in circular motions which helped to calm me, and I focussed on my breathing.

Some of those techniques were explained to me by Mum - who also suffered from anxiety - and others I just 'knew'. I understand now that I'd been practising a kind of meditation and repetition of positive affirmations, which I didn't know how to describe to others at the time. I had to develop ways to calm myself, because I discovered no matter what other (older) people said to comfort me,

I still worried; I still felt the enormity of the world's problems, as if I was the only one who cared. I desperately wanted to elicit change but didn't know how.

But I *couldn't* be the only one, right? I believed in a connect-
edness between all of us, even if we were first connected by our
shared fears. I reasoned that if I was lying in bed absolutely
terrified about the possibility of nuclear war, then there was a
good chance someone else was also worried about it, too.

And if someone else was, then maybe there was a huge
network... and if enough of us were concerned about creating
change, then maybe it could happen if we worked together?!

Those threads of thought and the trust of connection increas-
ingly helped me to counteract the sense of helplessness, and soon a
new series of thoughts emerged. If I could hang onto positive ideas
and retain hope in humanity, if I could 'send out' those thoughts,
might someone else hear them and be encouraged? I used the
term, "grass roots change" (which I now know is a common
phrase), as a way of picturing small steps and I enthusiastically
explained to my friends that positivity could ripple out in the grass
and billow across a field from my feet, catching others' toes in its
wake. There was something inside helping me to find a way
forward, but I continually had to *choose* to turn my mind towards
the light, towards thoughts of connection and potential for positive
change, and it wasn't always easy: drawing projects like these
simple card designs for Mum (below), expressing unity and care,



helped to give me a sense of positive purpose on a small scale.

Most of the terrible scenarios I imagined were out of my control, which is why they were so terrifying.

That sense of helplessness paralysed me with fear, and it was a slow process, focussing on the blades of grass at my feet that I could infuse with light and positivity. But I understood that was in my control.

Even if it was the *only thing* in my control, it was worth focussing on: it gave me a sense of usefulness, of ‘doing my bit’ of saving the world, albeit it on a small scale!

Visiting art galleries with Mum and Dad, I noticed how exhibiting artists were admired and celebrated for being ‘different’. It had an enormous impact on me, because I also started seeing art as a powerful alternative answer to my dreams of connecting with others: there was a platform where large numbers of people would look *and* listen!

I saw art as a way of lifting myself out of harm’s way, above those who had made me feel insecure and abnormal; I saw it as a way I could be celebrated and applauded; I saw it as a way to demonstrate (or show off) technical skill to a wide audience and a way to ‘speak out’ about important emotional, political, and cultural issues.

I suddenly saw how powerful images could be!

I started creating t-shirts with ‘warning’ messages of protest, hoping to connect with anyone I encountered...

... and in high school art class, my sculptures took on a surrealist (and alarmist) look.

Our Time is Running Out
t-shirt design (1990, age fifteen)





Battery Chicken, 40 x 65 x 30cm approx.,
mixed media

Battery Chicken was a protest against cruelty to animals, complete with science-experiment human hands grafted on instead of wings, a circuit board stuck in its head, and a trowel stabbing its back (I wasn't allowed to use a knife)...

... and with each sculpture, the symbolism got more convoluted, as I worked through

my own fears about global issues that had complexities beyond my understanding. *Hey World, Need a Hand?* shows long fingernails curling back to skewer their own hand: everything being done by us to the world was also hurting us, killing us slowly.



Hey World, Need a Hand? 35 x 20 x 20cm approx., mixed media

Those early artistic cries were forms of teenage therapy, giving me the feeling I was doing something, even if I was just trying to communicate my own fear and connect to a positive network of like-minded people.

I felt like I was developing powerful storytelling tools to reach a wide audience, and yet, from my extensive visits to art galleries and listening to many conversations about art, I knew that to impress the largest number of people, I had to be very good at drawing and painting things as realistically as possible. I'd seen how the public ooh-ed and aah-ed at artwork that looked like a photograph, and that set me on a new determined path.

I was inspired to get better at drawing, so my messages of connection and hope could reach the widest audience possible.

And so, I practiced.



Above: the dining room side-board with a mutilated, caged Care Bear sculpture, split in two, illustrating the surface image of perfection versus the 'real story' of pain and fear; *Battery Chicken* and *Hey World, Need a Hand?*