Corky Canvas

by Barbara Loos

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From the Editor: Sometimes we are asked to go way beyond our limits, risking that what we are asked to do may be impossible. In this article Barbara Loos is urged to take on a recreation activity and accepts the challenge. Here is her story:

I think it is safe to say that all of us have scars from childhood wounds that can continue to affect our lives, sometimes festering into adulthood. When one of these wounds is reopened, we have a fresh opportunity to clean it out and offset its negative impact. We can, of course, choose either to accept or to reject that opportunity. In the National Federation of the Blind we encourage one another to take advantage of such chances.

On December 12, 2012, (I remember the date partly because I like dates with patterns like 12/12/12) I was sitting on the couch at my friend Barb's home at a meeting of Symphony Circle, a church women's group to which I belong. Angie, a new member, suggested in response to an inquiry about possible fun ideas for us to consider, "How about Corky Canvas?"

After her brief explanation that we would go and all paint the same picture by watching the instructor and following directions, I blurted, "That probably counts me out, since that sounds like a pretty visual experience to me."

It felt like the Christmas spirit that had, up to that point, filled the room with laughter and holiday banter, got up and left. Angie's deflated, rapid fire, "Oh. I'm sorry. I hadn't thought of that. I didn't mean to be inconsiderate. Maybe that's not such a good idea for Circle, but I'd like to try it sometime, and they want groups ..."

As her sentence was trailing off, other voices were examining, smoothing out, and ultimately folding up the plan for further consideration in the new year. I apologized for my hasty comments, Angie offered to call to see what accommodations might be available, and the conversation soon regained its festive flavor. But I continued to feel a nagging regret.

The friend with whom I rode home said she was sure we would work something out that we could all enjoy. I appreciated her optimism, but didn't feel good about what I had done. It wasn't right to smear Angie with the residue of the scar tissue I had accumulated over the years from uncomfortable attempts at inclusion in society.

This thing reminded me of the milk-carton aluminum-pie-tin birdfeeder incident that happened over half a century ago in Girl Scouts. I was admonished by the troop leader for reaching for the materials, and Elizabeth Miller was asked to make two of them. Afterward, the leader said in front of everyone what a good job I had done. Feeling both embarrassed and incensed, I said the good work was Elizabeth's, and she should get the credit. I wanted to defend my ability to have done it myself if someone had shown me how, but I wasn't altogether sure I could, and the authority with which the leader had dismissed my initial attempt dashed what little confidence I had brought to the table. Would this Corky Canvas thing help me to offset that kind of experience, or would it just lead to yet another scar?

Once in a while during the holidays and beyond, I considered contacting Angie. But, knowing that we weren't meeting in January, I kept putting it off. I wasn't really sure what to say, and part of me just wanted the whole thing to go away.

On February 4, 2013, I received an email message from her that added a jolt of shame to the regret I had felt that December night. How had I let my own scars and insecurities keep me from at least reaching out to her?

In part, she said, "... I just wanted to apologize if I hurt your feelings over Corky Canvas. It was never my intention, and I clearly wasn't thinking when I suggested it as an idea. Afterwards I felt really bad about it. I did however contact them to see if they could accommodate you. They said they would be happy to if we could help you paint. I am not sure how you feel about that. I would be happy to help in any way I can if you think you want to give it a try. If not, I understand. Anyways, I don't want you to have any bad feelings towards me, so I hope you will accept my sincere apology."

On February 6, I responded, "Angie, I'm sorry you spent as much as a second worrying about having hurt my feelings. Actually, I like the fact that you took initiative in suggesting an idea for something fun for Circle to do. I came away from that discussion hoping that I hadn't done anything to cause you to feel shot down for bringing it up.

“The reason I spoke up so quickly is that, since assertiveness often feels unnatural to me, if I don't speak up right away, I'll talk myself out of doing so and often regret it later. The trade-off is that now sometimes I think I say something when waiting would be better. I hope I live long enough to strike a balance someday.

“The Corky Canvas definitely takes me out of my comfort zone, but that's not altogether a bad thing. It's good for me to go there sometimes. I don't, however, want either to have accommodating me become the focus of attention or to have my sitting on the sidelines while others participate become the solution, since the activity really is pretty much a visual thing.

“For me, a movie, however well described, has not yet trumped a book for experiencing something solo. Camaraderie is worth a lot, though, so I'll go to movies sometimes for that. My husband, who is also blind, does enjoy movies, either by himself or with others, which just goes to show that not all blind folks are any more alike than all sighted folks are.

“I appreciate your writing and your offer of assistance, and I very much like spending time with Symphony Circle, so I haven't made up my mind about this yet. I know I'll learn something if I go, because, if I decide to do it, I'll be intentional about that. Whether or not I can let myself lighten up and really enjoy it is still up for grabs.

“Again, I want to emphasize that I'm glad you brought up this idea. I prefer that people be who they are around me and allow me to be me, which includes deciding what to do when things like this arise.

“Thank you for writing. I look forward to seeing you next week at Circle."

On April 26, Trish, a long-time friend from Circle, emailed, "Angie said you were signed up for painting at Corky Canvas next Wednesday, so I'm writing to see if you want me to pick you up. I love it that you are going to try painting. It should be fun. It starts at 6:30, so I'll be by to get you about 6:10 or so. Have a great weekend. See you Wednesday."

I responded, "Thank you, Trish. I really appreciate the ride. I have no idea how this is going to turn out, but I seem to be into trying quite a few things—once, anyway.

“I look forward to seeing you on Wednesday. I hope you have a good weekend. It looks like the weather is finally going to be like spring."

As it turned out, May 1, the evening in question, was anything but spring-like. Not only was it cold, but also there was what is often referred to here as a "wintery mix" falling from the sky. My twinges of hope that the event might be called off faded into nothingness when Trish, cheerful as always, arrived at my home.

Others, both from Symphony Circle and elsewhere, were hurrying from their cars and gathering just inside the door when we got there. The woman in charge welcomed us and invited us to pick up a palate (in the form of a paper plate) and arrange dollops of paint of specified colors around the edges. I had a sinking feeling as Trish handed me hers and filled mine. Not only would I not know which color was which, but also there were no separate compartments for the dollops.

After Trish introduced me to a friend of hers she was surprised to see there, we sat down beside each other at our group’s assigned table. There I found a canvas balanced on an easel in an almost vertical position. I figured out immediately that moving it forward even a little caused it to come into contact with that of Penny, the person across the narrow table from me. Trish's abutted Angie's, and Michelle's was on its own beside hers. No one else from Circle was available to paint that evening. Beside each of us on the table were three brushes, a small cup of water, and a couple paper towels.

Soon our instructor's voice cut into the blare of the overhead music to give us a preview of the evening's activities. After reminding us that we could, if we chose, paint whatever we pleased, she said she would be providing instructions for the group picture, a vase of flowers. We were invited to accompany our painting with wines, which she listed. Then she said she was going to give us formal definitions for the kinds of brushes each of us had at our places. "There's the large one, called the big brush; the middle-sized one, called the medium brush; and the small one, called the little brush."

After the laughter subsided, she asked us to gauge the center of our canvases and use black paint to draw the outline of a squatty vase, leaving an inch or so at the bottom, and allowing for plenty of room at the top for a border and some flowers.

Although I had considered calling ahead to see if there might be something I could bring to make this project more doable, I decided not to do that. I thought I might either be talked out of coming or talk myself out of it. Deciding to wing it was very out of character for me, but here I was. I accepted Trish's offer of assistance, thinking that perhaps a Braille ruler and a bendable material with which to make a template to paint within could have put me more in control of this part of the painting.

Once the vase outline was completed, we were told to put a small amount of black paint into our red, mix them together, and cover the entire rest of the canvas, including all four edges, with that color. That would create a brick red background.

After Trish helped me mix the colors, I did as directed, asking to be informed about any spots I missed, if I was coming too close to the outline of the vase, and when I needed to refill my brush. At that point the bartender, Kylie, who is an art instructor and said she wasn't all that busy at the bar, offered to guide my hand around the vase. At first I felt somewhat self-conscious about that; but, having no ready alternatives to suggest, I willed myself to relax and embrace the moment.

The next step was to fill in the vase with black paint. Again, Kylie guided my hand for the edges, and I did some freehand in the center with prompting for spots I missed, and intermittent brush refills.

Next we used white with a little pink and yellow mixed in to paint flowers using the medium brush. I again allowed Kylie to guide my hand, making six-petaled flowers at various levels above the vase.

When the instructions were given for stems, the woman said something like, "Just do a little here, then a little there, and be sure to pick up your brush as you go." Imagining little pieces of stem strewn about the canvas, I wondered how that could possibly make a painting that would be appealing to anyone. I figured that some kind of optical illusion was afoot.

When Kylie took my hand, which was already holding the little brush as instructed, and dabbed the green paint, I let the question hang in my mind as she began. "Oh," I inwardly said as she gently stroked down, raised the brush, moved down a bit, continued the trajectory, and performed the same kinds of strokes.

"Are you raising the brush so that it will look like the stem goes behind the flower that is lower than the one on top?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "And we'll do the same thing to complete the other stems."

There it was again—that pesky perspective thing, in which things that are behind one another are accounted for visually by disappearing part of the one in back. I was relieved that the concept wasn't any more abstract than that.

By the time we got to the point of putting white polka dots on the vase, I had become comfortable enough with Kylie to talk about possible ways of creating boundaries for what was being painted. I mentioned stencils that could be painted within or a shape to be painted around. She created a stencil made of construction paper with a circle to be painted within. Although construction paper creates a very shallow border and is both porous and prone to disintegrating when dampened, I was pleased that she understood what I was suggesting and was willing to act upon it. Because she only made one "dot," it needed to be moved to various locations to create the desired effect. After doing several whole circles, she guided my brush to put partial ones at the edge of the vase to suggest roundness.

After putting the finishing touches on our paintings by using a tapping motion with the little brush to put five black dots in the center of each flower, adding small white polka dots just below the rim and just above the bottom of the vase, and scattering a few loose petals beside the vase, we were instructed to let our canvases dry for a bit before gathering for group photos.

As Angie and I stood at the sink washing the remains of paint from our hands during this interim, she leaned in and quietly confided, "I'm so glad you came. I was hoping you would, and," lowering her voice almost to a whisper, "I even prayed about it."

"I did, too," I confessed. "And I'm glad I came, too. Thank you for making it happen for us."

Photos completed, coats donned, and paintings loosely wrapped, we stepped out into the fizz of crystalline snow blanketing the world in tiny, sleet-like beads. The crunch of its accumulation underfoot and its relentless pelting from above caused scurrying to vehicles, remaining mindful of the need to protect our masterpieces against the moisture, while, at the same time, guarding against smudging spots not yet altogether dry. By then, though, I felt like, whatever happened to my canvas, the memory of this night would find itself on the plus side of changing what it meant to be blind in a positive way, not only for me, but also for those with whom I had shared it.

"What fun!" Trish exclaimed, once our paintings were safely stowed and she was pulling onto the slushy street. "All the paintings looked great, too! I'm so glad you gave it a try."

"It really was fun," I acknowledged. "And I'm glad I got out of my comfort zone long enough to find that out."

"Would you do it again?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, reflecting on how much assistance I had accepted and how I depended entirely on feedback from others for confirmation of its appeal. "If so, I would want to work on some ways to be more in control of what I was doing. And I would still prefer to work with three-dimensional objects or materials with properties like varying texture that I could experience myself. Would you do it again?" I inquired.

"I would," she said, "but I'd also like to try some of the other painting options in town." There we were, true to form—she already up for the next adventure; I willing to consider, but somewhat hesitant. Over the years we have shared many cherished moments.

As she dropped me off that night, I thanked God for this experience. Among other things, it gave me a chance to reopen the bird feeder wound and allow for some healing. There is, of course, still a scar. But it is no longer festering underneath, and that's worth a lot to me.