

When my family was young we lived in San Diego on a little a cul-de-sac, full of young families like ourselves. Laurie, Debbie, Mary and I were fairly young mothers and wives, all around the same age. Among us we shared eight children in various stages of development, all under ten. We, and the kids, saw each other every day. It was like a neighborhood of old, or the village Hilary Clinton spoke of. We all played together and watched out for each other and our children. The kids were like siblings, or best friends anyway. Three of us, Debbie, Mary and I were stay at home moms, Laurie worked from home, so we had constant supervision of the kids and our lives.

One exhausting Christmas, when all the kids were young and things were crazy as usual for each of us, we decided to treat ourselves. We planned a holiday lunch, with gifts. But instead of adding an additional burden of shopping for three more 'perfect' gifts for each other, we decided to bring one for ourselves. The gift could be anything, as long as it was something the person truly wanted. It had to be wrapped as well and opened at the luncheon.

At lunch that year, we had a wonderful time. It was a festive respite from the craziness of the season. When it came time to open our gifts there was a tremendous sense of anticipation, all wondered what our friends had bought for themselves, each excited by their own present. Each gift was festively wrapped, each had a card with either a funny or touching sentiment, each receiver exclaiming, "this is just what I wanted", and it was.

The day was such a success we continued on for the next few years, sometimes for lunch, sometimes dinner. Due to the holiday crunch we couldn't always have it at the holiday and twice extended it into the new year. The only rule we had was that you couldn't come if it was just another holiday chore, you had to want to be there, we were all always there.

A few years later, I moved north 40 miles and we saw a lot less of each other. That year Laurie was diagnosed with extensive, infiltrating breast cancer. The therapy made her quite sick and she was down a lot between sessions. Right before her chemotherapies, when Laurie was feeling her best and could enjoy the meal, the four of us would get together for lunch or dinner. Sometimes I would come down to San Diego, sometimes they would come up to Orange county. Once they all took the train and we met in San Juan Capistrano. Laurie always felt her best at these meetings. Though we talked about her condition and treatments and lent comfort and support, these times were for fun.... and we had it.

That next Christmas, Laurie was in remission. She was out of treatment, her hair was growing back and she glowed. We scheduled our Christmas party for dinner at a fancy restaurant in Del Mar. We came with our requisite gifts for ourselves, or so we thought. Dinner that year was even more festive, Laurie's remission was a cause for celebration, added to the glitter and excitement of a healthy happy holiday we were all elated.

When it came time for Laurie to open her gift, she surprised us with three packages. Telling us that her gift was our friendship, she proceeded to hand each of us a gift from her. I don't remember what the other two got, I was so overwhelmed with my own gift. To me, Laurie gave a set of watercolors and a brushes. I had only painted one picture in the past twenty years, instead channeling my creative endeavors to raising children. Laurie had seen that picture. In giving me the gift she said, "I don't believe in too many sins, but not using a God given talent like yours, is one. Paint." And I did.

The first thing I painted was forty five hearts for Laurie's upcoming birthday. I had asked her which were good years, special years, not so great years and painted them accordingly. I mounted this on one paper, had it framed and gave it Laurie. After that I bought canvases, paper, more paints and brushes and started to paint.

Laurie's birthday was in January. That year turned out to be a hard one. My husband and I separated and filed for divorce from an eighteen year marriage that year. My step father died, my father in law had died the previous year and my uncle died, all were father figures to me, who had lost my own father when I was eight. An aunt and another uncle died about that time as well and the culmination of pain and loss came about with the death the next February of Laurie. Her cancer had came back that year with a vengeance.

These losses culminated in my being thrust into a horrible bout of post traumatic stress syndrome from my childhood. To fight it I painted and wrote. And painted and wrote. And painted....and wrote.

I started taking long walks on the beach, collecting beach rocks, ones with cracks and crevices and pits. I would paint hearts on these. Friends asked for them and their friends asked and eventually they landed in a local coffee shop and art fair. At the fair a woman asked if I could paint one on her floor tile. I said I could, she loved it as did I. I started to paint hearts on tiles that had artificial seams, cracks and texture. From there I progressed to stone tiles, breaking them, mosaic fashion, giving me more diversity and surface area to color and allowing me to break and smash stones and yet still have them come together with a beautiful heart... just like most people. I wrote the hearts of stone poem and included it with the hearts. I took them to art fairs where I listening to people's stories. It was like being an art therapist, people would look at the work, read the poetry and tell me what they thought it was about. I had people start to cry. I would cry. One woman said she had lost her two sons in an accident, another asked if it was about alcoholism another about divorce on the flip side I was asked if it was about love and relationships and marriage, I answered them all the same, it was about life. The person who maybe best understood this asked if the poem could be included in a 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion address. The answer was yes, it most certainly could because the meaning is included there and anywhere in life where we have let our hearts and souls lead us. I wrote more poetry and short stories, painted paintings, hearts and ultimately contemporary frescoes. Anything creative I could do to release and make concrete all the feelings that had erupted in my life. And as I wrote and painted, I healed and learned to not only interpret but to see the beauty in all of it. I knew I had really progressed when I started to make mended hearts, hearts that are wired together and write more poetry about mending and healing. Though the message is the same in the broken and mended, life. Life is all those things, love, laughter, tears.

Today I still paint and write from the heart, though my life has been less tumultuous than that first year, the need still persists to set it to stone. Life and all it's heart songs and heart breaks, is still residing hidden in the cracks and crevices of my life.

(You can view the "hearts of stone poem" and others on my website under poetry and in the hearts of stone section [www.dgoth.net](http://www.dgoth.net))