



an absorbing errand

HOW ARTISTS
and
CRAFTSMEN MAKE THEIR WAY
to
MASTERY

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*For Jack Beinashowitz, Alfred Margulies,
Humphrey Morris, and Stephen Sternbach,
stalwart readers and fellow travelers.*

Les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus.
(The true paradises are those which we have lost.)

—MARCEL PROUST

CHAPTER 1

an absorbing errand

I

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW, EDITH Smith, was an even-tempered woman, except in late winter when cabin fever sometimes undid her and her quiet good nature would become quietly irritable. She was hardly alone among New Englanders who become blah in February; but unlike many others, her cure required neither travel to southern climes nor Prozac (though I mistakenly suggested the latter more than once). As soon as the March sun pried the worst of the snow crust off her garden, and the ground gave quarter to a shovel blade, she was cured. She would grab any old jacket and gloves, and out she'd go—hauling fallen branches, raking away mucky leaves, uncovering flower beds in time to reveal the first white snowdrops and the yellow winter

aconite poking up from the icy ground. A monarch reunited with her realm, she felt palpable relief at resuming her proper duties. Though their unworldly green had yet to emerge from the clogged mud, she knew where her subjects resided, and she'd plan: how best to impede the poppies, when to separate the irises, and whether, finally, to trim back the aging, overgrown purple lilacs or simply let them sprawl. (She tended to indulge the lilacs.) The winter's apathy was vanquished.

Completely revitalized, she returned to herself. At ninety, over her daughter's ever-louder protests, she mowed her lawn in the summer heat or bent on her padded "kneeler" to yank weeds from among her flowers, conceding only to a hat against the steamy sun. Each time we visited, she'd modestly lead us among the beds. We might see primroses, crocuses, coral bells, peonies, tulips, and narcissus in spring; then coreopsis, bee balm, day lilies, daisies, and hollyhocks in midsummer; and finally, in early autumn, clumps of asters, sedum, chrysanthemums, and the last of the deep pink cone flowers. She encouraged our attention toward whatever bloomed and then protested our kudos. Our appreciation simultaneously confirmed her and yet reminded her of the next permutation already in mind, the way her worldly acre had further distance to travel before it might approach her ideal. Meanwhile, she'd offer us pots in which to carry away phlox, or black-eyed Susan, or whatever we'd admired. When, not long after she died, my husband and I moved to a new home, he dug up a clump of Solomon's seal she'd given us years before. It was

his way of keeping her with him. Now, each April, he stands over the plant's dried, clipped autumn stalks, rake in hand, worrying new life out of the ground, relieved only when the shoots, exotic nematodes from the deep, poke up for another season.

THE GOOD LIFE is lived best by those with gardens—a truth that was already a gnarled old vine in ancient Rome, but a sturdy one that still bears fruit. I don't mean one must garden qua garden (I am myself desultory in that regard, gung ho in May but disinclined in sticky summer. When serious gardeners don their straw hats, I retreat to our dark, cool library). I mean rather the moral equivalent of a garden—the virtual garden. I posit that life is better when you possess a sustaining practice that holds your desire, demands your attention, and requires effort; a plot of ground that gratifies the wish to labor and create—and, by so doing, to rule over an imagined world of your own.

I grew up surrounded by writers, painters, potters, musicians—artists of all sorts. But it wasn't until I observed Edie in and out of her garden that the penny dropped, and I recognized the shared psychological patterns of all I had long witnessed. As with the literal act of gardening, pursuing any practice seriously is a generative, hardy way to live in the world. You are in charge (as much as we can ever pretend to be—sometimes like a sea captain hugging the rail in a hurricane); you plan; you design; you labor; you struggle. And your reward is that in some seasons you create a gratifying bounty.

Can gardening be talked about in the same breath with Art? I imagine a spectrum of creative artistic effort that stretches from serious craft to the most abstract, accomplished art. Arguably, its common elements include the wish to express oneself, and to move people deeply. I know that's a claim that stirs up more than it settles. Do Picasso's *Demoiselles* or Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* really belong in the same sentence with the effect of grape hyacinth planted next to yellow species tulips? To make the comparison fairer, shouldn't Olmsted's Central Park be construed as an artistic creation on a par with many a great painting or sculpture? Or must the park await that label until after Christo and Jeanne-Claude have hung their orange curtains across its acreage? Yes, craft is more about utility and continuity. Miriam Leonardi, a chef at Zibello in Italy, explains, "I am not creative . . . That's not what I do. What I do is what has been handed down to me. For ten generations, maybe longer."¹ And art is more about originality, provocation, and comment; yet they often merge into each other, and they certainly share common elements.

My wish here is not to argue definitions (high art/low art/craft, etc.) but rather to suggest that for a range of diverse "artistic" undertakings there exist *common* mental processes of mastery. One must work hard to learn technique and form, and equally hard to learn how to bear the angst of creativity itself. Furthermore, and also in common, the effort brings with it a whole herd of psychological obstacles—rather like a woolly mass of obdurate sheep settled on the road blocking your car. For you

to move forward, these creatures must be outwitted, dispersed, befriended, or herded, their impeding genius somehow overcome or co-opted. Otherwise the would-be art-maker gives up on the outing without accruing enough skill, without staying with the effort long enough, to build a body of work and/or gain her own or a public's esteem. These sheep are my subject.

Perhaps you want to work at creating something challenging (something that may require a commitment of years for you to become technically adept, and that may often seem dreadfully difficult) like poems, ceramics, sculptures, photographs, paintings, performance art, or woven tapestries. But you find yourself putting off the attempt, or quitting as soon as you start, or midway through deciding you are talentless and it's useless to try, or if you are actually working, feeling intermittently too discouraged and too alone. What is happening? Well, you may be asking the wrong questions or placing mistaken expectations on yourself. Particularly, you may be unaware of how the necessary struggles of your own unconscious mind, if misunderstood, will bruise your heart, arrest your efforts prematurely, and prevent your staying absorbed in your errand. Yet, the same struggles, appreciated, will enable your creativity and the larger processes of mastery.

II

EDIE WAS HAPPY in her garden. Not inevitably, not always, but mostly. And I have declared that the labor of mastery may be a

route to happiness. In truth, my own experience has been that writing also makes me dyspeptic and dispirited. The desired words do not come. In their place descends a damp malaise. I resist sitting still. I bemoan my incompetence. Any other endeavor feels more attractive than concentrating: unloading the dishwasher, plucking dead leaves off houseplants, deleting emails. Many people have told me about losing all sense of time as they focus on their work, settling into the task then “coming to” several hours later, unaware that the sun has crossed the yardarm. I envy them; I simply do not concentrate that deeply. (I call my sorry state “mother’s mind”—always aware of my surroundings, tuned to a toddler’s murmur, though my sons are grown, and my husband reminds me I was like this before they were born.) Moment by moment, for me, writing cannot predictably be conceived of as bliss.

So what’s my claim? Well, if I mostly stay in my chair for half the morning, or several half mornings in a row, or many; if I resist enough of the temptations meant to distract me from the anxiety of the effort, then I often find my way through the soul’s dreary sleet into something better. Like a recalcitrant mule that’s resigned itself to haul a plow, my brain and body settle into the work. Better words rise, a richer soil from beneath the dull surface. (Years ago a poet friend entitled a collection *Listeners at the Breathing Place*—referring to an Eskimo lithograph of a hunter poised beside a hole in the ice where seals surface to breathe. A seal hunter waits, sometimes from before dawn until evening; he must settle within himself enough to survive the cold, and yet

he must listen; he must remain alert, poised to throw a spear, to seize the fleeting opportunity—the brief surfacing flash of a needed word, or image, or musical note.)²

On such days, I end the morning's work feeling purposeful, grounded, even confirmed in some inchoate sense that, although I will suffer my portion of disappointment, grief, ill health, busy-work, and commuter traffic, I am indeed living the life I want to live. My days feel meaning-filled and vivid. I am not just the woman inching the car forward; I am the seal hunter. This slight recasting of self is an essential aspect of our liberty. We control little, but through our choices of where we put our effort, we can inflect our idea of ourselves in small but crucial ways.

Lots of moments in any week, many of them random and hilarious, please me—especially when people dear to me are present. Yet, when they go well, each of the crafts I have attempted to master—writing, photography, and also psychotherapy—leaves me with a deep private sense of satisfaction. I feel stimulated, warm, slightly elated, or otherwise moved; content; purposeful. Though I don't think about it consciously, I sense I'm comfortably aligned with my ideal of myself. But there's more to it. Whether by design or by accident, many of us seem to find enduring gratification in struggling to master and then repeatedly applying some difficult skill that allows us at once to realize and express ourselves.

Even when separated from art-making, such work—in this case the sustained, and sustaining, *organic* relationship of person

to process—captures our attention and our effort; it creates for us a particular privacy and with it an unforeseen and contradictory freedom. There’s an evocative description at the beginning of Edward Jones’s novel *The Known World*, of Moses, the enslaved overseer of slaves, tasting the plantation’s dirt:

*He ate it not only to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the field, but because the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life . . . This was July, and July dirt tasted even more like sweetened metal than the dirt of June or May.*³

THE FREEDOM THAT slavery cannot entirely strip away is Moses’s pleasure in his own knowledge, his sense of authority and the ensuing satisfaction—of having long studied the soil and, therefore, knowing its intimate mix of elements, what it can best grow, its readiness to be plowed or planted. The knowledge, like most knowledge, has public consequence, but its initial locus is private, and much of its pleasure remains private. The feelings and purposes around art-making, too, ricochet among private, public, and communal places, but the creative process often demands seclusion to germinate its seed.

By “organic” work I mean something close to *Merriam-Webster’s* “developing in the manner of a living animal.” No machine blades sheer off minute from minute. No PowerPoint slide dictates the task at hand. The work grows as our minds

(conscious and unconscious) and our bodies would have it grow. Technique may require discipline and set the order of things, apprenticeships may demand periods of subordination, but the imaginative acts that propel the effort are themselves serendipitous. In your garden you may set out to clip the roses, but you notice a weed you want to pull from among the coreopsis, except that first there is a rogue branch to be snipped from the holly shrub—and on and on until dark finally settles, ending your day. An occasional task has to be done just now and just so. But mostly, you delight in meandering, allowing the work to command your attention variously—with its method inscribed by the way you encounter your plants.

Such work guards a quality of timelessness within an ever-more-time-bound world. When Moses tastes the dirt, the action takes an instant, and yet it takes as much time as sensation requires. Time emerges from the activity rather than being imposed by the clock. As I write, there's the clock on my computer, the watch on my wrist, the clock on my desk, the clock on my telephone, the clock on my fax . . . each declaring the passing of a slightly different moment. Yet even I, who track the hours closely, understand that one pleasure of art-making is its resolute inefficiency. It resists the sweep of the second hand; it is opposite to my daily muster of punch lists, telephone calls, day job requirements, family life, and errands. The necessary thought may come today or next week. Yet it's not the same as leisure. The struggle toward that next thought is rigorous, held within an isometric

tension. The poet Richard Wilbur writes about laundry drying on the line, “moving and staying like white water.”⁴ Moving and staying. Such water, familiar to anyone who has watched a brook rush over rocks, captures the way a creative practice insists you bear time. You must hold still and wait, and yet you must push forward.

And while one can complete a particular project, the labor itself is never finished, the mastery never final. I suspect its incompleteness, by turns fetching and vexing, is its consummate quality, its essence. I remember reading years ago that it takes about a decade to master a craft. Since then, many numbers have been bandied about, and the idea seems overdiscussed and a little silly. Still, ten years rings true to my own experience. Half a decade to begin to set your foot firmly. Yet even mastery so described is merely a breather snatched at an overlook on a long hike—a quick snapshot, a sip of water, and a retying of loose laces. But not an arrival. There is always the expanse yet to come—more to traverse, learn, do. There is always another variation to sample. After more than thirty years of practicing psychotherapy, I am still studying techniques and learning new approaches; it’s the same with writing.

I remember an art student in Italy some decades ago describing to me the way the Renaissance fresco painters began their careers with long studio apprenticeships during which they practiced over and over the standard motifs—the receding tiled floor, the draped cloth, the winged angels, the arches and umbrella

pinetrees, the blue hills. When at last the hour came to brush pigment permanently onto wet plaster, not only did they have the outline of the sketch to follow, but also they had been well trained to quickly replicate the much-practiced motifs. The beauty of the particular fresco rested on the portraiture, the colors, and the rearranging of a scene; on the infinite variation made possible by compounding the more familiar details. What's more, new combinations could be pursued as long as there were walls and commissions.

Because the point of arrival is enigmatic, elusive, receding, because it wavers like a mirage on the road, always before us and only briefly with us, devoting oneself to mastering a practice unexpectedly leads through a time warp where past, present, and future commingle. I find the contradictory notion comforting. Contemporary life is all excerpts, fragments, reversals, and interruptions; it offends and delights us with its astounding, noisy discontinuity, but the work of mastery is very much as it was when artists thousands of years ago carved Cycladic figures or cast the Benin gold.

We know reality is constructed and mediated by our senses. But this work of mastery glorifies that labor of transcribing—of transforming perception from the invisible into the material world—so it can then become part of another person's experience. And *that* process leads us toward a singular human communion where proximity is created by continuity, shared emotions, and the resulting moments of recognition.