

## **Faith's Story**

I'm a visual artist and have had a passion for art all of my life. I'm also a 'life-long learner' and have combined my love of making art with being an educator.

### **Acquiring a disability and connecting with art**

I've always had a passion for making art but didn't appreciate how important it was in my life until I was in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) of a hospital in Adelaide following brain tumour surgery in 1990. The surgery lasted eight hours and I had a very sore neck. I was lying on a barouche (hospital bed) in and had tubes coming out of every orifice. With many of my faculties shut down, and unable to speak, communication was very difficult. I wanted to be able to adjust the headrest of the barouche to relieve my discomfort. There was a pen and paper on the table next to me and, being an artist, the thought came to do a drawing to show a passer-by how I wanted the bed to be changed. Amazingly, somebody saw my drawing and altered the bed! When this happened I remember saying to myself, "Thank you God. I can still DRAW!" That meant I was able to contact and reconnect with the outside world. Looking back drawing the barouche and getting help was a major transforming moment in my recovery.

On reflection, my resilience started there; I had begun adapting to my new situation and was able to overcome the crisis and move through the pain I was feeling, by using art. After that, I came to see art as a real art; it was a way that I could communicate with others and therefore change my situation.

I also realised art was a medium through which I could create the kind of future that I wanted. So I created artwork in whatever medium that was appropriate to my subject and used my art and my imagination to transform the negative experiences of my rehabilitation into ones that were life affirming and empowering.

I live by myself in Adelaide and have some great friends. I also have a dog, a Shetland Island sheep dog named Robbie. He's the sweetest little thing. I had my brain surgery in my late thirties and had already bought a house and had some assets. This was fortunate, as a couple of years after the operation my marriage broke up and, dissuaded by some well-meaning friends to apply

for a disability pension because of the stigma, life was a struggle for me financially for the following six years. Thankfully, my life took a turn for the better after making a new friend, in the late 90s; a former rehabilitation consultant who encouraged me to apply for a pension and I was accepted immediately.

I now have a couple of hours of support every couple of months to help with housework. However, because my main disability is related to coordination, balance and fatigue I am seen to be managing. So, I've resolved to myself to be vigilant, to listen to my body and make sure not to overdo it; not to overspend my "energy budget".

After my brain surgery I changed my name to Faith because I was convinced God had helped me through and I felt I needed something like a name change to remind me of this and keep me focussed. I remember before my operation, sitting on the bed in the hospital, and saying, "God, what's this adventure about? Why is this all happening?" My belief in God goes back to my earliest recollection when I was about six.

### **University and a Ph.D.**

I am currently studying art with education. I'm doing this in my Ph.D where I'm seeking to understand the ways my art has helped me throughout my rehabilitation. In the last couple of years I've come to realise that it has been the art making *process* that has been a chief support mechanism. For example, through the creation of images that portray community my art making has helped me to overcome the sense of isolation and exclusion I felt during recovery.

### **Resilience**

In hindsight, I have gained a sense of belonging and built my capacity for resilience during my rehabilitation through art making – in many ways, my art saved me! A recent exhibition showcasing many of these artworks along with the art (jewellery and woodwork) of two other artists, whose creativity helped them overcome adversity, was titled Resilience. Informed by my own lived experience of rehabilitation and after reviewing the literature on building capacity and wellbeing, I now see there are three contributing factors to building resilience:

1. Having a sense of ***belonging***; an underlying theme in many of my paintings.
2. ***Understanding*** or having a sense of purpose in life. Again, I've used the art making process to problem-solve and work out what future directions to take. My solutions are then portrayed as "stories in paint" which give my life meaning and strategy to further build my capacity to resist and adapt to life challenges and realise my goals.
3. To build resilience requires 'doing'; being proactive, getting on with projects, and 'doing' to help others. Resilience is about nurturing empathy, seeing life from another's perspective and being aware of one's place in the world.

The outcome of my rehabilitation and studies has been the shaping of a new identity. I've come to recognise I'm not the person I was before my surgery - I'm a very different person now. I am much more informed, aware and caring. I have the potential to be the best I can for myself, and the best I can for others. Now I want to help others who experience exclusion and see themselves as 'voiceless', and speak as their advocate supported by the knowledge I've gained through my PhD.

### **A strategy for coping with obstacles**

When I come up against obstacles, I look at adapting, and in tandem with the notion of *adapting* I look at *priorities*. It's all about asking myself "What is my ultimate goal, what do I want to achieve?" When I choose to *adapt*, it's after reflecting on the learning presented by the obstacle. Sometimes, rather than fighting it, I've had to find ways to work with the challenges of the obstacle while at the same time striving to achieve the goal. These days, whenever there's an obstacle, I embrace an art-based strategy I developed, soon after my surgery. I now refer to this creative process as NECTAR™. NECTAR™, now a trademarked process, is an acronym that stands for the following in regard to an experience of concern:

- ***Name it, Explain it***
- ***Create*** an artwork of it
- ***Transform*** it (a second artwork)
- ***Appraise the*** artworks (insights and benefits)

- *Revisit, reflect, reward and report.*

## **Employment**

Before the surgery I was a graphic designer who specialised in corporate identity. This gave me a great opportunity to work closely with people at all kinds of enterprises, to create an image they wanted to project to the world. It was also a great learning experience. Before that I taught junior primary children, and then I had a fascinating position designing audio visual materials teachers could use in schools. I've also had many enjoyable experiences working as a voice-talent in radio, on television and in videos.

I think I have been able to persevere in the face of acquired brain injury because when things get difficult, I am proactive and persist to find a solution. I am also even-tempered and have stability. I think having a positive, cheerful disposition has also enabled me to move forward. The most important thing for me is having a rich inner world, and a guiding spirituality, which is expressed in my belief in a being that I experience as God.

## **My spirituality**

I recall having a visual experience of a being I call Jesus. The being was in a well with his hands outstretched, saying "help me! Help me!" As a child of about six years of age when it happened, I did not understand what that was about. It's only been in the last couple of years, as I reflect on my life journey, that I've come to understand that by assisting others I serve the being I experience as God.

## **Contribution to others**

Teaching, graphic design, art therapy and art have been apt vocations for me. I have found immense satisfaction helping others realise their potential. It is gratifying to know I have contributed to peoples' lives. Being a mentor has been really important to me. It's what inspiration is about - identifying with someone's experiences to assist them to grow and fulfil their potential.

## **Hope as a driver**

I consciously approach my life the way I do because of my commitment to the being I experience as God, *to assist other people*. On an unconscious level, I feel I'm continually rewarded by having a positive, a forward-moving

disposition, looking for the best in situations; being optimistic and using *hope as my driver*.

When I talk about *hope*, it's not wishful thinking. For me, *hope* is about setting a goal, and wanting to make *hope happen*. I've put this into a painting. As I created it, I asked the questions, "What is my goal? What are the obstacles I might meet that could affect or stop me from achieving my goal? What are my resources? How am I going to get the support and the resources needed to achieve my goal?" And, very importantly, underlying it all, what is my motivation ... why do I want to achieve this, *hope this*, make this *hope happen*? Underpinning this, for me, is my commitment to God and how achieving my goal will strengthen me to assist others. Then, at a more conscious level, I realise my motivation to achieve a particular goal may present in all sorts of ways.

### **We are all interconnected**

The thing of most importance to me is being able to contribute to others again as I did, before my surgery. I've come to see disability as a peripheral experience and one that is chiefly "socially constructed" (Wendell 1997) . What is paramount, I believe, is the contribution an individual makes to others. Contributing to others gives a sense of *community* and of *being present* in the world. On a philosophical note, connection through mutual contribution and collaboration will enable people to continue as a presence in this world, not just as a species, but as a presence in relation to all other beings in this, and any other, world. What I am talking about is the notion of being *alive*, as opposed to *not living*.

I think we all have strengths, and part of life's journey is to identify our strengths and weaknesses. Once identified, we can then learn from our weaknesses and they too can become strengths. We will then be able to contribute and collaborate with others who have strengths in another area. So, together we will weave more of life's beautiful tapestry!

What shines from within counts, whether we have disabilities or not. It is everyone using their particular gifts, to help themselves and one another to overcome frailty or weakness; to do whatever is required to build resilience, nurture wellbeing and enhance quality of life.

Every person makes a difference to everybody else. It's like rain on a river ... or onto a pond ... all those little drops ... droplets onto the water. It's the realisation that every man is rich when he has friends. We don't realise how much of a difference we make to other people, so it is important to keep focussed on the light, the joy of it all, why we are here and why we are doing what we're doing.

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