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Artist

I GREW UP IN Tucuman, Argentina, in the 1970s and 80s, a bustling and densely populated university town nestled between the flatlands and mountain peaks in Northwestern Argentina. My parents were teenagers when they had me and not settled in their own lives, so I went to live with my paternal grandmother until I was six.

She was a wonderful woman, but her generation had immigrated to Argentina from Europe after the Second World War and had brought along with them a pack of prescriptive dogmas and censored truths about themselves that they unthinkingly passed on to future generations.

Even as a young child, I loved art. The best present you could give me was a set of markers. One day I was sitting with my grandmother, happily drawing a nighttime scene complete with stars in the sky, which I styled as opposing triangles, like Jewish Stars of David. When my grandmother saw my drawing, she grabbed the paper from the table and tore it into tiny pieces. Her voice was fierce and admonishing.

“Don’t you ever, ever draw that symbol again,” she said vehemently.

I never did, but the incident stuck with me. What reason did my grandmother have for reacting so fiercely to a child’s innocent drawing? In later years it occurred to me that we were, possibly, secret Jews who, along with many former Nazis, had immigrated to Argentina after the war. Therefore, the danger of exposing our true identity still lurked, a secret to be buried. Of course, this is just a hypothesis, but a deeper concept worked its way into my still-forming brain: It might be beneficial to deny who you really are.

Perhaps that is why I ignored my desire to be an artist. Instead, I went along with the directives of the adults in my life that such pursuits were frivolous hobbies that one dabbles in on the side. A real profession meant being a doctor or a lawyer or some elevated position in society. In my case, it was decided that that path was to be medicine. I do recall that two teachers told me I should be an artist when I was in school. The first was my third-grade teacher, and the second was my biology teacher.

“What do you want to do?” My biology teacher asked as I sketched the morphing cell I observed under the microscope.

“Be a doctor,” I replied dutifully.

“No,” she said. “You should be an artist.”

Naturally, I ignored them both. My parents’ wills were stronger. But I still remember their words.

After my grandmother’s death, I went to live with my parents, who proceeded to have three more children. My father was a philanderer, and my mother was very strict with us, so home life was a bit stormy. School and nightlife were my escapes.

In Argentina, school days lasted until 7:30 PM. After that, the morning was physical fitness, followed by lunch and then academics. When I got older, I worked at modeling and enjoyed the nightlife, but I always pursued art in one way or another, using different materials like wires or mud to create sculptures. I just remember being out of the house a lot. I always felt the need to escape.

During high school, I got an opportunity to come to New York City as an exchange student. I was hosted by a family in Brooklyn on Fourth Street near Seventh Avenue and went to St. Anne’s School. I fell in love with New York. This was in the mid-90s when the city was really in its heyday. I especially loved the street art; it’s color and cheekiness. You don’t get that in Argentina. The artists in New York follow their hearts. Even today, as an artist who works on commission for corporate clients, I sometimes miss creating art that I want to make.

After my time in New York, I returned to Argentina, finished high school, and entered medical school, as is the custom there. (We combine our professional and general studies.) What did I hate about medical school? What did I *like* about medical school? I hated going to the morgue, the blood, everything! It wasn’t for me, but I kept listening to others and not that voice inside myself.

It’s funny how life comes together sometimes. When medical school ended, and we had to begin our internships—actually treating patients—I realized I couldn’t do it. I felt trapped, and I had to escape, and to me, that meant returning to New York.

I couldn't have been more fortunate. The father of the family I had stayed with when I was in high school had a medical malpractice law firm, so I was perfectly positioned to work for him, combining my knowledge of medicine and my penchant for art.

Being Spanish speaking was also an asset. I acted as a translator; designed medical exhibits for trials; and created graphic art diagrams for people to use to understand the medical issue being deliberated. It was a perfect fit, and through that job, I was able to get my working papers and study part-time at the Art Students' League, where I worked on my craft.

One of my mentors there was Larry Pooce, famous for his "dots on canvas." I loved Larry. One of the greatest compliments he gave me was when he said, "Diego, you make black look like a color." I learned so much from him, but eventually, he told me that if I wanted to pursue art as a profession seriously, I had to quit my job and get out of school.

This was very difficult to do. I hated telling the kind man who had taken me in personally and professionally that I had to quit, but I did it. I went to work for a firm that creates exhibitions for fine art. That job taught me how to envision a collection; to see the big picture. Then, one day, an architect I knew called me up and said they needed work for a project. It was the first time I'd worked with corporate clients, and I liked it. After that, I set up a practice where I designed art collections for hotels or restaurants.

There's something liberating about creating art collections that you know are ultimately temporary. It frees you up, somehow. Now I'm working on outsourcing the actual artwork, so I can design the collection for big corporate clients. I know I have a vision about how things should look that most people don't quite see, so this is the right path for me, but I'm taking a little break right now. I used to travel all over the world to set up exhibits, but two things happened to bring that to a halt. The first was that eight months ago, I was diagnosed with an auto-immune disease but was fortunate enough to find a kidney donor. The second thing that happened around the same time was that my husband John and I had a child through a volunteer surrogate.

Sometimes I think about that, and I can't believe how lucky I am. I needed a kidney, and someone came forward. We wanted a child, and someone volunteered to be a surrogate. I don't know if everyone has been this lucky, but to me, it feels like there's a giant magnet out there. It pulls you towards your destined path, no matter how hard you

try and turn away. And it attracts others to you whom you need to live and be alive, in every sense of the word.

I guess that's the biggest lesson I've learned in life: Listen to your inner voice, and everything will work out. Do what your heart tells you. It will be okay.

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