

## **The Horse that Almost Got Away or Following your Dreams**

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I'm driving the Chiantigiana, the primary road through the Chianti wine country, something like the road through the Napa Valley in northern California, with vineyards and wineries on both sides. It's narrow--one lane in each direction. The traffic slows through each of a series of small towns and speeds up in between them. I'm on my way home from a successful, though nerve-racking, journey. I've found the place that Marco, my *maestro di ballo*, recommended for buying ballroom dance shoes. It's a hole in the wall really, out by the airport in the fringes of Florence. I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself for having the courage to set out on this quest completely alone in completely unfamiliar territory.

Only after I'm skimming the Chianti hills, patterned with vineyards and olive groves, does it come to me with an energy, almost sexual: *I relish this time alone. I crave it!* I hear myself sing to myself an exultant almost hymn: *My life is my own. My own...all this!*

Suddenly I stab for the brake with my right foot, simultaneously stabbing for the clutch with my left to avoid stalling. A horse, a tall sorrel, is trotting down the highway with saddle, without rider. He's traveling the same direction as I am, but on my left in the opposing lane, heading into potential on-coming traffic. And on my right, in the grassy edge off the road, the rider is running after his horse--a colorful young man in a bright red shirt with a jaunty feather in his Robin Hood style hat. He's running and calling, but his horse shows no sign of heeding. In fact, what was previously a trot has turned into a gentle gallop, as the prankster turns a piebald eye toward his panting owner. The young man is puffing and puffing, galloping himself, then slowing to a walk, only to gallop again. Luckily, no oncoming traffic has made its appearance,

yet; but it can't be long before a feisty Peugeot comes racing around the bend. The traffic in my lane, in accommodation, has slowed to a snail's pace. Still it is moving faster than the young man, though not as fast as his runaway mount, who has vanished around the curve up ahead. I pass the young man. Clearly he isn't going to catch his horse on foot. Heaving, he has been forced to a walk.

This is an extremely dangerous situation. The Italians don't seem to invest themselves in the plight of the horse or of this frantic young man, cheeks red with exertion, black hair, soaked with sweat, creeping out from under his feathered hat. And so, the shy *straniera* in me, with little command of the Italian language, taught never to give a strange man a ride in my own country, surprises herself. In my concern over the plight of the horse and rider, I lose myself, my timid self, and a stronger self emerges, who, without self-conscious forethought, simply acts. I pull over and, as the young man comes up alongside the car, I offer him a ride. He gladly accepts.

“*Muy peligroso*,” my years of Spanish automatically click in.

“Yes, very dangerous,” he concurs, knowing some English, and some Spanish, as many Italians do. We round another bend and there the horse is ahead, galloping toward “his friends,” the young man says, “the horse goes to his friends.” And after a pause, not sure I've understood, he offers in way of explanation, “his friends, the other horses.”

Ahead also are the young man's friends, on horseback, apparently members of the same riding group. One has hold of the bridle of the runaway horse. We drive up and the young man jumps out, in his excitement barely taking time to say, “Thank you.” He grabs hold of the reins. As I leave him behind, I see him in the rear view mirror, one foot raised toward the stirrup, preparing to mount.

Stepping into the unknown takes courage: a kind of courage I rarely muster here in the United States. In Italy I am challenged to call it forth again and again. It's a courage that sets me free, not only to dream but to bring my dreams into reality.

Today I'm talking about traveling and I'm talking about dreaming and how, through traveling, two dreams have interlocked in a magical way: dancing and Tuscany. I'm standing up for dreams and for the endeavor to pull what the land of dreams is made of through to the land of earth. It is a struggle, and it requires the hand of grace to bring a dream into reality. I want to tell you my story and I hope that you will find in it an affirmation of your own dreams, of the desire to bring them into reality, and of the courage to try.

#### Dream One: Dancing With the Stars

Like Jane Seymour, television's *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, I always wanted to be a dancer. Jane, a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars*, said that she had always wanted to dance and now in her fifties she finally had a chance. It's never too late.

My dream goes back to childhood when I was studying ballet. I wanted to be a ballerina like Maria Tallchief. A little later, inspired by old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies, I dreamed of ballroom dancing with a romantic partner. I quit ballet when I was a teen to make room for "boys." And I let go of the dream of "doing everything a man can do, but backward and in high heels," as Ginger was reputed to do, for all the good reasons you can imagine: marriage, divorce, career, the serious stuff. Occasionally I went out social dancing. Then dancing disappeared from my life entirely.

My dream resurfaced in my early forties, when a fellow graduate student at Starr King,

asked me to go along with her to a ballroom dance class followed by a tea dance. She didn't feel comfortable going by herself. The teacher, a bit seedy with unkempt hair and salt and pepper beard, greeted us and told us the class would be in American tango. As the lesson got underway, he called on me, a beginner, to help him demonstrate the basic figures. I was incredibly complimented and a bit scared, but I managed to follow him through the figures. My ballet training helped. Afterwards, he asked me if I had had tango lessons previously. When I answered, "No," he seemed surprised and went on to say that I must be a "natural dancer." Right then, the long-buried seed showed signs of life that later developed into a full-fledged determination to realize my dancing dream, not knowing if I ever could, sufficiently.

#### Dream Two: Tuscany

My passion for dancing coincides with another passion, Italy; and, more particularly, Tuscany. On a Sunday afternoon, I was watching a travel show on PBS. The host was walking the Cinque Terre in Italy, high above the Ligurian sea. The rugged path, the blue of the sea, and the astounding beauty of the five ancient towns, interspersed along the way, rising up from the blue, totally captivated me. "I want to walk the Cinque Terre," I said to myself. The desire to walk the Cinque Terre grew into a determination to go to Italy, something that in the past I would simply have let slip by me, bracketed as unrealistic, too much trouble. Less than a year later, I was spending several weeks in a small Tuscan town that no one had ever heard of, and still hasn't, Brenna, on the River Merce, south of Siena. It was one of the most beautiful periods I have ever spent with my parents, whom I talked into going with me. I've rarely seen my mother so happy. She loved the place: the house, the terrace, the little town with only one street, a tiny cave of a grocery store, and a single, tremendously popular pizzeria that served marvelous

mussels and trout. And, yes, I did see the Cinque Terre. I didn't have the hike I hoped for, but we three took a rocking boat ride from Lerici at the southern point along the coast to Monterosso, the northern most town of the Cinque Terre. I learned I could do it. I could, with intention, fulfill a dream. Only three years later, my mother died, suddenly, of a "massive bleed." The time I had with her and with my father in Tuscany turned out to be a special gift, a fulfillment by the powers-that-be of a very beautiful dream.

I have always been a dreamer, but I haven't always had the courage of my convictions. I have another side, the stronger of the two for most of my life. It is the inner voice that says: *You're selfish*. It's a voice that society has largely adopted. A pragmatic voice that says, *You have to compromise your dreams*. A judgmental voice that says, *Hard work is what it's all about*. A moral voice: *Think about others, not yourself*.

The prevalence and power of the accusing voice that says, *You're selfish*, was brought home to me by my students, a class of working adults, who had enrolled in an interdisciplinary Master's degree program in the humanities at Saint Mary's, where I teach. The introductory course is called, It's About Time. I ask the students to introduce themselves by describing what time means to them or what their experience of time is like. In one group of twenty students, seventeen, including every woman, used the word, *selfish*, in introducing themselves. They felt selfish taking time for themselves; in particular, in enrolling in this course of study, which is oriented toward personal enrichment rather than job enhancement. *I feel selfish because it's for me*, they repeatedly said in one way or another. My mother might have been among this group of women, as I am. I have incorporated the voice that says "You're selfish" and I carry the indictment within me.

The voice of pragmatism sounds like my father: *Jeanne, you have to compromise*. When he was a young man, with a wife and child, he felt he had to compromise his dream of being a fine artist in order to make a living, and so, he focused on commercial art. Hence, his admonition to me: *You have to compromise*. He returned to serious painting only after he retired at the age of seventy. And, no doubt there is truth in the message of compromise. It is certainly a voice that I have incorporated and which has informed much of my life. But I think we're too quick to compromise the values that make life worthwhile for the values of the market place.

Again, my students have made clear to me how much this kind of compromise demoralizes them. Many of them are financially successful; they have accessed the material goods they so much wanted. But in this course, in which they read the autobiographies of persons who have made significant life choices that have impacted society (Gandhi, Wiesel, Dorothy Day, Helen Prejean), an underlying longing often surfaces of what one might call a "spiritual" nature. They often complain that they don't have time for the things that matter: family, leisure, nature, contemplation, the good of society. They complain that, despite the material acquisitions, they still don't feel fulfilled. They want something more. The more is often voiced as a desire to make a difference, to do something for the poor, to write creatively, to "smell the flowers." I believe this is a way of saying that they have compromised their hopes and dreams; and the course provides a context in which their hopes and dreams are reawakened. I am glad that my father returned to painting. But I hope it doesn't have to take us some fifty years to begin to realize our dreams.

The British psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott, whose distinctive contribution to the understanding of human development is based on his work as a pediatrician, validates the

dreamer side of me. In his work *Playing and Reality*, now a classic work of reference, he examines what in a child's early development opens the way to creative living throughout life.

He writes:

It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living. In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.

The voices that say, *You're selfish, You have to compromise*, are the introjected voices of compliance. The voices that say, *Listen to your dreams, Follow your passions, You can make your dreams come true*, are the voices of what Winnicott calls "universal creativity"—the creativity that "belongs to being alive," a creativity that belongs to all of us. It enables us to experience life as satisfying and meaningful rather than bound by the laws of compliance, a life of dissatisfaction, pent up anger and loss of meaning. Creativity is a force over against the power of compliance.

In a world confusing, conflicted, and frightening, I am standing up for dreams, for following your dreams, large or small, for the desire to realize your dreams, and for the courage to try.

It was hard for me to muster the courage to travel, but through travel my two dreams intersected fortuitously—Tuscany and dancing. Less than a month ago I found myself beginning to write these words (which I share with you today), sitting in a stone farmhouse (it used to house the sheep), in a medieval *borgo* above Greve in Chianti, the setting sun turning the pine trees rust gold.

And in Tuscany I found my *maestro di ballo*, Marco, my master of dance, who has awakened in me the technique and the freedom to really dance the way I always imagined I could.

When our dream is slipping away and we're doing everything in our power to recapture it, how foolish we can look to the outside world. Take for instance, that young man puffing on foot down the highway, seeing the distance between him and his horse grow. I don't know the real story behind the horse that almost got away, but I believe that young man was following his dream, much as I am, much as we all are, a dream that almost got away.

