Encouragement and Perseverance: Lives of Some Working-Class Artists

Susan Gregory
Singer/Teacher/Therapist

Harold sits on the couch in his living room, his gnarled fingers holding a glass of scotch. He gestures to a wall hung with musical instruments, telling me about his years as a classical guitarist. Harold is 102 years old. Lily, his wife, was a sculptor. After she died, he continued living in their condo, driving to the diner every afternoon. At 100 he gave up driving; he takes Meals on Wheels now. These two working-class artists mentored me throughout my childhood. They told me it would be good for me to pursue a musical career, if that's what I wanted.

My father, Robert, worked with Harold in the post office. While Harold and Lily were professional artists, earning money from their art (although not enough to live on), Robert, it turns out, also was an artist, a writer, and art photographer, most of whose production came to light after his death. Robert grew up on New York's Lower East Side, with parents who spoke only Yiddish. His written essays in high school were so good that the teacher failed him for purported plagiarism. I remember his leaning over my homework at the kitchen table and saying, "Suzie girl, when you write a story, if a character bites an apple, make sure your readers taste it." This passing comment was not only craft advice but was also a message that creativity was worth our attention, and that creative activities were worth undertaking.

I interviewed six other artists for this brief essay—sculptor, painter, playwright, essayist, poet, dancer/choreographer—and include myself, a classical singer. Most spoke about the influence of one or more mentors in childhood, who encouraged creativity. Most, though, were also advised to practice their art as a sideline, since their working-class parents could not see how they would support themselves otherwise.

Nick (artists' names have been changed), a playwright, talked about the uncle who lived with his family. "Uncle Paul kept beautiful books of Renaissance art in the room he rented from my father. He often showed me the pictures and talked with me about the beauty of art. I wanted to draw pictures like that, but as a street brawler in my Bronx neighborhood, I only felt safe drawing cartoons. I began to make comic books, which were, as it turns out, plays!"

Sharon, a sculptor, spoke of the encouragement that painter Ruben Tam gave her at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Although she was being groomed by the family to be a violin

prodigy, her mother accepted her change of art form. That was because Sharon's uncle, a gifted artist, had died in the flu epidemic of 1918. Now, it seemed to her mother, Sharon was bringing art back to the home. Ruben Tam's mentoring was thus accepted by the family.

Felicia, a dancer/choreographer, first found a mentor at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater. Felicia's older sister took her to free movement classes there after the two had accidentally come across Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" on television. Felicia remembered asking, "What's that? It's beautiful."

Ron, a painter, took his first art lessons at a settlement house in Philadelphia. The teachers there encouraged him; while his parents did not. "Pop was an immigrant from Italy. He learned his trade as an apprentice to a master tailor. He understood craft, and in his own way was an artist. But in America, he had to do piecework in a factory; he lost his art. My father didn't understand the possibility of making a living with fine arts and so didn't encourage me. I bought books on how to draw and how to paint, and learned everything that was in them. I prepared my portfolio unassisted. The Philadelphia College of Art gave me a scholarship."

By contrast, Karen, a poet, spoke of her mother as her first mentor. "She called me a poet from an early age. My mother read poetry to me at bed time, in a warm, expressive voice. She put her arm around my shoulders and drew me close. These were the only times she touched me."

Lenny, an essayist, preferred not to name any mentors. "Great authors were my mentors," he said.

Six of us are products of urban, working-class homes where public institutions were important in nurturing our artistic development. Three of us studied arts at settlement houses; three of us went to public high schools for the gifted; and four of us were educated through college scholarships, one through the GI bill. All of these were public benefits which existed in our country from 1945-2008, and which are diminishing now.

At one time or another, each of us lived in railroad flat tenements in New York City, where, in those days, rent was cheap, artistic work space affordable, groups of like-minded artists close by, and part-time "survival" jobs plentiful. This was in the mid- and late 20th century, a time when booming prosperity made it possible for children of the working class to pursue and expect to achieve artistic dreams. It was a rare time in human history.

In conducting the interviews, I learned that six of us were from liberal or radical homes,

and that the seventh was the baby of her family. We were all treated with relative kindness and, to varying degrees, encouraged to fulfill ourselves as people, if not always as artists. The way we had been treated at home gave each one of us a sympathetic view of humanity, which also, unfortunately, amplified our "hidden injuries of class." In his book, *The Hidden Injury of Class* (1972), sociologist Richard Sennett writes about the behavioral training of working-class children who are taught to be deferential to authority and not to put self above any other members of their class. These inculcated behaviors make it almost impossible to move oneself toward fame and/or financial success in adulthood. In her interview with me, Karen referred to this unacknowledged holding back as "getting off the track [to success]."

As Karen saw it, she got off the track the summer she refused to take off her clothes and sit on the famous poet's lap. For Nick, it was the trip to India where he encountered millions of starving people. For Lenny, it was the constant, difficult-for-him-to-tolerate round of New York networking parties and book signings, with what to him was "meaningless small talk."

For me, it was the time a renowned opera patron, known for her financial generosity to individual artists, sent word backstage that she would be "very happy" were I to sing the Strauss aria in the Metropolitan Opera competition. I was uncomfortable with her suggestion and sang an Italian work instead. Later, I realized I had offended her, and thus lost her potential support.

I understood what was being hinted at, but it was not spelled out enough for me; I grew up in a home where we were taught to understand things literally. In addition, I believed that my voice sounded best and my acting was strongest in the Italian repertoire. The Strauss was what I least wanted to sing, in part because the character was a virginal, dreamy teenager, a role that I had trouble identifying with. I wanted to show myself to full advantage, to "live" the role and deliver the material in the strongest way I could (that's an artist speaking). In addition, somewhat unconsciously, as a child of a family in which some members perished in the Holocaust, I was hesitant to sing Strauss in that public forum. Further, I felt offended to be told by a rich and powerful person what to sing.

I see now that I had a class reaction, a family history reaction, and a reaction that comes from my very independent personality style. I wanted to be the artist who decided what was her best suite and who would be rewarded for her artistic skill and power. Now I see that was a fantasy. I didn't grasp the fact that the competition was a set of business transactions, not a creative, "express oneself," moment. Needless to say, I did not win the competition. For me,

being an artist was a form of strong independence—a hope for a break from my social class—and I could not see how I could be an artist if I did not assert myself.

Among the seven of us, we have a cornucopia of achievements, including a couple of dozen very fine reviews, published and televised interviews, medals and prizes, museum exhibitions, books published, plays produced, and movies optioned. Yet we have all spent our adult lives having to do other work in order to do art work. Even when I sang at the New York City Opera, I had to teach English to immigrants in order to pay the rent; even when Nick had a well-reviewed play running off-Broadway, he had to drive a cab.

As I see it, there is some way in which the values in the homes we grew up in did not teach us to network in the same ways that those whose parents were in business—even a little candy store—were exposed to. It seems to me that each of us seven was trained to be, in some way, relationally modest. We were encouraged always to work hard, to push a project forward, but never to push ourselves forward. Whether this can be considered a personality weakness or strength is something I will look into for another essay.

All seven of us are still practicing artists. This year Karen had her 79th poem published; Lenny had his 64th essay published; Felicia danced in the St. Mark's Dance Series; Sharon was included in a museum retrospective; Nick won a prize for his film on the similarities between Holocaust survivors and Latin American torture victims; Ron built his tenth classic guitar; and I had my third book chapter published. Yet six of us, at ages 50-83, are still working for a living while working at our art. As Karen said to me, "If you're an artist, you can't *not* do art." Nick said for all of us, including Harold, "Perseverance is my high card."