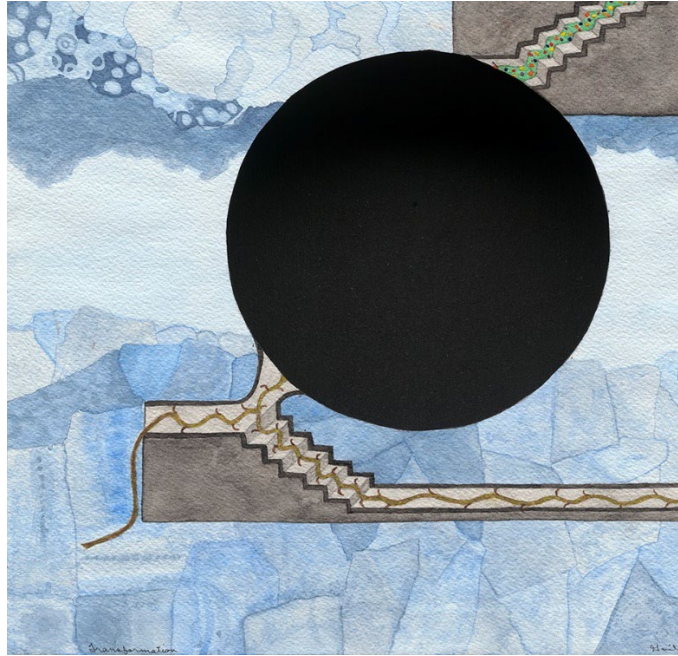




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In and Out of Chaos

By Deborah K Frontiera

Hoarder closed the door on the world's chaos. A narrow path led from the door to her easy chair. She plopped down, grabbed the remote, and escaped into the TV. Piles of unopened boxes, magazines, newspapers, junk mail, some stacked to the ceiling. Narrow paths to the TV, from her chair to the kitchen, the bathroom, and her bedroom. She had slammed her door in the social worker's face many times. A dream one night, walking along a barren path, up a few steps to the edge of a cavern. A voice whispered, "One thing, just toss out one thing." The next morning, she found a trash bag on her doorstep. She picked up one magazine, tossed it in the bag. Every night the dream, the voice ... Each day, one more, and one more, until daylight revealed her mother's old rug with its pattern of vines.

She took the first step. Can You?

PTSD Vet crawled from his tent under the freeway. Time to go to his corner. Would they be generous? Would he eat? Even a bottle of water or a package of peanut butter crackers would help. A woozy fog surrounded him. All he could see was a slate path. He followed it up the barren desert of his soul. A black hole. It couldn't be worse than the night terrors. He entered.

Couldn't see his hand before his face. Bumped into a fellow vet who also lived under the freeway. Soon a third joined. They held hands, so as not to lose each other, and went forward, one step at a time. Until they saw a distant light. Keep moving, hold each other up. People in the garden stood ready to help them find mental health services, housing, jobs ...

He took the first step. Can you?

Terrified child cried, "Pleeeeeeese, don't turn off the light! The monster comes in the dark." He had to have a nightlight, not a little one—twenty-five watts in a table lamp. Next morning, peeking under the bed, seeing a tiny door in the wall, he crawled under. Shaking hand on the knob, seeing a gray path, following it to a dark cave. NOOOOO! But—a tiny light ahead. Breath held. One step, another ... The light grew to reveal ... his bedroom. His monster crying. "Pleeeeeeese, turn the light off! The big two-legged comes when it's light." My monster is afraid of me? "It's okay, Monster. I won't hurt you." Compromise—if Monster could stand a tiny nightlight; he would be okay with that too.

He took the first step. Can you?

Old woman lay helpless, in pain. Meds whenever she clicked the nurse button. Wanting to leave life but dreading death. Family gone, friends deserted. Waiting in darkness. A voice, "Hello, Dear, I'm your hospice chaplain. Would you like to talk?" She turned her head, met a smile. A tear rolled down the old woman's cheek. Yes, to this visitor. Many words later: "Would you like to pray?" Yes. "May I take your hand?" Yes. The dread lifted just a little. "I'll come back again tomorrow." The old woman smiled slightly.

She took the first step. Can you?

New Child looked at the strange teacher. Strange classroom. Strange words coming from their mouths. She stared, stood stiff, still. Her father spoke to the teacher in English, to her in Portuguese. "You'll be okay. They will be new friends. You will learn." The teacher led her to a place at a table, spoke to children sitting there. They smiled, waved hello. Paper and crayons before her. She chose blue, drew the sky. Another teacher took her by the hand for a while. This lady couldn't speak her language either, but she recognized some words. Simple pictures, objects she knew, named in English. Her first spoken word was "restroom." Time, smiles, sunlight. More smiles, more words. This could be home too.

She took the first step. Can you?

Down Syndrome boy in a regular class, not for academics, but for friends. They helped him; he learned bits from each of them, and the teacher too, and he was a good friend. He never knew chaos; he had always lived in the garden filled with flowering vines, his mind free of anxiety. He always smiled, hugged, loved.

He didn't need to take any steps.