

Nurturing the Creative Spirit

Fe M. Sarmiento

Moving to New Zealand in 2001 was like a template of new beginnings as literally to me it meant new land, new zeal. Little did I know, it would be another journey where I would need all the zeal that I have to deal with frustrations, challenges and difficulties of being a new migrant – the feelings of isolation, periods of unemployment and a mid-life crisis.

When I started work with women's organizations back in the Philippines (thirteen years ago) I was a 'wounded soul'. I was also on my path to healing through creative workshops and feminist spirituality. As I opened my heart and shared my story with the rest of the women in the communities I worked with, circles of women formed. We journeyed together towards healing, transformation and empowerment. It was a journey of tears and laughter, pain and joy. A triumph of kindred spirits.

How does one come to terms with her own shadows and insecurities? Shattered confidence for every rejection letters received after seemingly great job applications and interviews? A lot of 'hows' and 'whys' and unanswered questions. Nevertheless, I let my life unfold, aware that new beginnings carried with it some growth pains.

In my moments of solitude, there was this inner 'prompting' from my soul to go back to that place in my heart where I kept the beautiful memories and experiences I had with the communities I worked with and who I was when I started. I am often reminded that I made it through those difficult times and I will make it again in this foreign land. I started with nurturing my soul, myself.

I sat for hours simply watching the long white clouds around Rangitoto Island and listening to the sounds of the waves at Takapuna Beach. I know that when I watch the sunset, it is sunrise on the

other side of the world. On full moon nights, I walk by the sea and remember the wonderful moon gatherings I had with the Moonsisters and remember our hopes and dreams and our connectedness. I started to write affirmations again and went back to my visual diary and journal.

Then one day I told myself, "Well, I will not wait until I get that 'break'. Either I spend my time feeling sorry for myself and drown in misery or rise up, go out and create." That started my volunteer work with refugee communities in Auckland, attending circle dances and looking out for free workshops dealing with women's mid-life crisis. And, yes, it helped a lot to understand and acknowledge what was going on in my life. I began to take responsibility for my health and my well-being, more consciously this time because there was no family or close friends around. It was not much a change in my life circumstances at that time, the shift came in my feelings and through starting to see things through different eyes.

Even with all these positive steps, I would sometimes find myself crying a bucket of tears. Overcome with a feeling of desperation as I waited, and waited for my 'dream job'. That favourite high school motto of "If at first you don't succeed, try and try again" became a broken forty-five, I mean a broken CD.

Call it faith in God or the Creative Spirit, or Allah, but this is what helped me through the difficult times in this far-away land. I think one's religion or spirituality is a wellspring of hope and inspiration. Most especially if you are alone, do not have family and friends around and lack a social support system.

So I re-visited my childhood faith. Each day, I dream and hope and remember the almost forgotten wisdom I learned from the religious Sisters and my women elders: "Bloom where you are planted". Before I started work in an otherwise stressful job, I make a choice to be happy and peaceful and send these loving thoughts to the people in my team and to the organization.

I still believe in 'miracles' and it happened to me at a time I was feeling happy and peaceful where I was. It was that day I heard the most wonderful words in my ears 'You got the job'. Oh dear, my 'dream job at last'! That is as an Arts Advocate for refugee and new migrant communities of Arts Access Aotearoa. Wow! Wowie!!! Gosh, I gave a silent scream of delight lest the elderly people downstairs where I live would think there was an emergency.

Can you imagine the feeling of a fish taken out of the water or the bird being put in a cage? Can you feel what it is like to be back in an environment where your heart and soul belongs? It was clear for me from the moment I had my transformation working with communities in the Philippines that my life path was with Creativity and Service. I know deep in my heart that if the opportunity was not available here in New Zealand I could create it through my voluntary work. And the good news is there are opportunities out there! Volunteering as work experience was something new for me. My concept of volunteer work back home was more akin to acts of compassion: visiting old people once in awhile or taking food and clothing to poor people in the mountains. This was borne of my religious upbringing of sharing one's time and presence and blessings to the less fortunate.

So, what has changed in me during these challenging times settling here in the Land of the First Light? The challenges helped me to grow deeper into Wisdom and appreciation of Life's journey from darkness to Light. I came to embrace

both my weaknesses and my strengths, widening my understanding and perspectives about relationships. I gained a more realistic view of cultural sensitivity, an appreciation of cultural diversity and have learnt to celebrate our differences.

At Arts Access, I am back to working with the people whose life circumstances I now fully understood. Working with refugee and new migrant communities this time around has far more depth and connection for me. I can look into their eyes and acknowledge the creative spirits within them. I am able to work alongside them, support them and know that we learn from each other. I now recognise that we all have the ability to express and manifest our unique gifts, talents and creativity.

I feel a joy in my heart when I come across people from Africa, Asia or the Pacific and we talk about arts and creativity and all acknowledge that art and creativity is not outside us, it is inside us.

Post Script – Life at Arts Access

Aotearoa

What a blessing to be part of an organisation that shares my dreams and visions of creativity and service. We are like a 'bridge' that brings arts and creativity back to people and communities where it has been lost. This includes people with disabilities, prisoners, youth at risk, the elderly, women and children, refugees and new migrants. I am presently assisting with cultural well-being programs and projects for refugees and new migrants. Arts, creativity and well-being: I think these sum up the direction I love to take in my work and in my life.

Our office is located at the Wellington Arts Centre close to the Cuba Centre, which to me is like a melting pot of interesting people, different eating places and fashion. People here dress up and down and somewhere in between. One thing is sure; it is never boring especially with positively windy days of Wellington.

One sunny day, I passed by the building next to the Wellington Arts Centre and noticed engraved on the wall these beautiful words from Pablo Picasso:

Art washes away the dusts of everyday life.

While ironically, the engraving is covered in dust and cobwebs, I have no doubt, the artists and the people who work in these buildings give Picasso a knowing smile.

The Creative Spirit is always renewing, re-generating and ever changing. I dream of the day, when we no longer need to do advocacy work and all of us have access to the arts. The time has come when everyone can re-discover that Creativity is a way of being.

Fe M. Sarmiento's childhood dream was to be a Nun. Her father's practical wisdom taught her to get a degree that could land a good job and overcame a dread of numbers to take up Accounting , graduating 'cum laude'. A significant twist of fate led Fe to the women's rights movement in the Philippines, where she took up community development. She was awarded a Ford Visitor's Program scholarship on Gender and Global Issues and participated in the Isis International Cross Cultural Exchange Program. In almost 10 years of community development work, Fe was involved in reclaiming women's wisdoms through rituals and creative workshops, formed the Moonsisters circle and co-founded the Yamang-Pagkaling Healing Foundation. She facilitated informal support groups for women survivors of violence, conducts workshops on creative visualizations, sacred space, dream work and sacred mandalas.