Autobiography

At school I had no aptitude for the Arts and even now I still draw with the technical proficiency of a five year old. At 14 I chose my path which was the path of science and gave up all of what were seen as creative options. Perhaps, it is only now that I realise that the somewhat surreal word play games that I played with my Mum, and the imaginary stories that we made up together as we walked together through the woods and fields of my early childhood were both, in fact, an expression of our need to be creative.

I studied Chemistry at Imperial College, London which back then was a rather austere environment in which only science and engineering was studied, the American equivalent being MIT I am led to believe. I struggled, massively at first, with the realisation that I was no longer one of the brightest and the best but was, in fact, just simply one of the crowd, albeit a crowd of very smart and largely serious young people. England, however, was an exciting place to be in at the end of the Nineteen Seventies as it was the era of Punk and Post Punk and perhaps in reaction to a devastating emotional break up and perhaps in reaction to no longer being the shiniest apple on the tree or perhaps, simply, because the music expressed in a visceral way how I felt, I decided to shed my chrysalis and reveal a different Tim. So, under my lab coat I would wear very tight trousers in a variety of gaudy colours, shirts with zips in and an oversized dinner jacket and cravat that I had bought in a jumble sale. I began to read novels obsessively and discovered a whole new world that again articulated how I felt. For me, and I know I am not alone here, the greatest lesson that that musical era taught me, was that you didn’t have to become hugely proficient first before you were allowed to be creative. That you could use relatively simple building blocks to express what you felt, the important thing being that you actually had something you wanted to express and that you felt that with an absolutely burning intensity.

One of the first creative acts of the freshly emerged Tim was to pass the RCA test. The RCA (Royal College of the Arts) was just across the road from Imperial and its canteen was way better than ours so a lot of Imperial students ate there but not being from the College itself we were charged more. The women who worked behind the till would seldom ask to check where you were from as a simple glance up and down was enough to distinguish one Colleges’ students from the other. Now if asked I was always scrupulously honest but if I wasn’t asked, which was, most of the time in fact, I paid RCA prices. I had shed my Imperial skin of jeans and a sweatshirt and become something quite different.

From reading this, you might assume that from then on that I looked down on science but nothing could be further from the truth. I love my subject, I love it for its honesty and integrity and for the extraordinary universe that it has revealed, it’s just that to be creative in science you have to be far, far smarter than I am. So perhaps the chrysalis metaphor only goes so far and I am, in fact, a chimera made up from an uneasy hybrid of CP Snow’s ‘Two Cultures’?

After I graduated I became a Science Teacher and with my first pay cheque bought a copy of a Fender Telecaster, which was the punk guitar and the one that Tom Verlaine from Television played. I made up my own music, refused to learn anyone else’s and got quite good at it but I could never express how I felt through music or express how music made me feel either. It was frustrating; to not be able to articulate the voices within my own head, perhaps I hadn’t found the right tool yet?

My brother bought me my first camera for my 21st Birthday. It was an Olympus Trip with a flash gun and I loved it. At first, I just took pictures of friends and holidays and found that I was rather good at it. My brother again showed me how to process and print black and white film but apart from that I was largely self-taught. I replaced the Trip with my first SLR which was a Zenith Soviet camera that was as robust as a T34 tank and came complete with the Leningrad light meter! I began to experiment and play and loved the way that I could change what was in front of my eyes by simply playing with the exposure or by trying out different viewpoints and, of course, I could fail and my failures would only be observed by me which after an initial sulk would just encourage me in my playfulness. The Zenith went, to be replaced by my first Olympus SLR and it was with that that I had my first photographs published. These were taken as part of a collaboration between the pupils of the school that I taught in and a Poet in Residence Bhanushanker Odhavji Vyas who as well as being a most delightful gentleman encouraged me to produce images to illustrate the children’s work and they accompanied their writing in a book that was eventually published. It was the first time that I had been asked to be creative in response to other people’s work and I really enjoyed it.

The defining moment for my love of photography and my desire to express myself through it was simply moving to Cornwall. It felt as if I had come home at last and in that homecoming I had found my subject. For not only did I love the landscape, the remote beaches only accessible by scrambling, the granite tors that stood like ancient sentinels on the hilltops and the antiquities, not ‘red rose’ but surely still half as old as time but also it felt as if I could express my feelings through them in a way that I hadn’t been able to do elsewhere.

I continued to teach but sold images to the Cornish Tourist Board and magazines like ‘Country Walking’ while retaining a stubborn refusal to study the market. I wanted to take the photographs that I wanted to take and if they were wanted then that was fine but if they wanted something else then they could just go hang. It is only in the last few years that I feel that I have begun to really do my subject justice and certainly part of the credit for this must go to Sue my therapist who I see for ongoing anxiety and depression. Through discussions with her I have learned about how vital being creative and playful is to me. That the time spent on the seashore seemingly in a daydream, wandering from rock pool to rock pool is not evidence of a life that was wasted but instead is evidence of a life fulfilled.