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Frames

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The Master's Work

Cinde Matkin Rawn

I STOOD AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GREAT GREY STAIRS LEADING UP TO THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. My breathing was shallow, as I had hurried past everything to get to this much-anticipated destination. Monet's work was behind those doors, and I could hardly wait to run up the stairs and burst into the exhibit. I decided to act like an adult, even though I felt childlike in my desire and glee; I managed to walk up the stairs with the same external composure of all those around me. Once I entered the exhibit hall the moment I had been waiting for came, almost too quickly. There before me was a Monet; in my memory, it was eight feet long. I stood in awe as I looked at the masterpiece; it is still beyond my ability to describe with words...my vocabulary too limited, or maybe the whole vocabulary of mankind is too limited for the masterwork that was before me. I stood, taking it in. And then, slowly, I was drawn forward. I walked as close as the thick brown velvet rope would allow, wanting to take in the fullness of the work before me. I leaned in, as close as a breath. I was shocked. It was a mass of wild, aggressive, random brush strokes that made no sense to my cognitive mind. The colors: a mass of confusion that looked like a first grader's attempt at mixing color. I leaned back from the rope; surely I was missing something. Nope; nothing there except a confusion of discordant colors. The caustic smear of burnt sienna, the angry jabs of indigo, and the sorrowful strokes of aubergine didn't seem to fit into this tranquil garden scene. I was so disappointed. I backed away, and as I did, the further back I moved, the more the masterwork began to make sense again. Its beauty returned, and with it my understanding of the master painter grew ever deeper. He knew what this budding artist hadn't a clue of; he knew that it took darkness to make the light colors burst forth; it took caustic sienna to cast the shadows for the effervescent orange and blue, indigo and aubergine played off the butter yellow and rich azure. It took all those conflicting colors to make a masterpiece. He, the master, knew that only with the darkest of color spotted here and there could the joyful painting have depth and beauty.

I know another Master, who seems to know ever so much about using the darkest of colors in our lives. Often times I rail at him, questioning how he can allow such darkness in life, how can sienna, indigo and umber be good for us? I shake my fist and question him, "Why won't you fix this dark mess?" After seeing Monet I received an answer to my litany of whys. I understood that I needed to hand over the dark paint filled brushes of my life, and let the Master paint them into this painting of me. As long as I hold onto the dark brushes, shaking them with my insistent impertinence, I stop the Master painter from using them to add depth, texture, and richness into my life story. When I hold onto them in anger or waiting for the Master to fix what is "clearly wrong," I lose the opportunity for these life experiences to enrich the colors of me; I remain flat, achromatic, shallow. So, now, on my good days, I find myself reaching into my hidden places and finding the darkest umbers and inky blacks, ready to turn them over so the Master can paint them into something beautiful.