

Drawing on the Write Side of the Brain

BY LINDA ELOVITZ MARSHALL

WORDS. THE MOST basic units in our writers' toolkits. It's amazing what we can do with words! We even use words to create images, pictures.

But words sometimes fail. For me, that often happens when I want to create an accurate picture, to really see and describe how something looks. Words fail when I need to understand what that something feels like, how much space it takes, how it impacts its surroundings. I realized that, to understand and see in a way that will help me write more accurately, I need to learn to draw.

Yikes! I can barely pick up a crayon or even paste a paper scrap into a collage. PTSD from a fifth-grade teacher's comment that I always start things strong, but mess up the end? Perhaps. Okay, I'm exaggerating. Still, it's not good. But . . . it's real. Or, more accurately, it was real.

Then I heard that drawing involves skills that can be taught. Drawing is a teachable skill? Hmmm...I love learning new skills, especially skills in which I have zero prior knowledge. The learning curve is great.

Next, I discovered that our local art center offers a drawing course for beginners. Its title: Drawing for the Terrified.

I enrolled. Terrified. I didn't even know what to wear.

Nine other students came, several with art backgrounds. One, an accomplished air landscape painter. Others had taken art courses in college. I fear I am the most terrified of the Terrified.

We are introduced to the materials: large sheets of paper—the kind I once called newsprint; pencils in varying degrees of hardness, described in code I find indecipherable (Am I not paying attention? Am I too engrossed in Fear to focus?).

Our first assignment: to draw our non-dominant hand.

The instructor demonstrates, studying and drawing his own hand.

Next, we draw.

I study my hand. I focus. I draw what I hadn't before noticed. I pencil in short, horizontal lines—tiny roadways—around my knuckles; on the back of my hand, I create hills and ridges where veins protrude; dark, blue valleys beneath those hills. I treat my hand to an all-over faint, diamond-shaped webbing. I work in silence, intense, unaware of others. As I draw the landscape of my hand, my fear recedes.

This intense work is JUST what I wanted to do/what I needed to help me form/find words for things I want to describe.

After we draw hands, we are given another drawing assignment: a hat.

I observe the hat, its contours, peaks and valleys. I follow them with my eye, drawing what I see. When I look at my paper, I see . . . a recognizable hat. Yippee! I have a picture of a hat.

More importantly, I now have another tool to help me craft my stories. I am learning to draw on the write side of my brain.

Anthropologist and early childhood educator, Linda Elovitz Marshall's tenth—and most recent—picture book is Mommy, Baby, and Me (illustrated by Ged Adamson; Peter Pauper Press, November 2017). Visit www.lindamarshall.com.



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