

DANIEL MERRIAM

New England towns echo the images of early American architecture. Gingerbread, Colonial, and Victorian houses built by ships' carpenters speckle the jagged landscape. I was born there on February 1, 1963 in York Harbor, a small village on the coast of Maine, where I grew up as the middle child in a family of two girls and five boys.

Creativity filled the air. Our house was full of a variety of musical instruments. Two pianos played constantly as seven siblings practiced daily. My mother would throw open the windows and sing while playing hymns, serenading the neighborhood. We often sat around the kitchen table and sketched on paper bags until they were covered inside and out with pictures of anything we could imagine. Hours were spent in my father's woodworking shop carving toy boats and other fun things to play with.

My family spent summers at a little cottage on Mousam Lake. I remember neighborhood games, row boating, fishing, building sand castles, and making campfires on the beach at night. We ran about the woods barefoot playing hide-and-seek, and didn't put on a pair of shoes until school began in the fall. Our cellar was filled with aquariums and buckets filled with pollywogs, sea monkeys and turtles collected from a nearby cranberry bog.

My favorite escape was climbing trees. I'd search for the tallest tree I could find, pull myself up into its branches, and begin to climb. I pushed upward from limb to limb until the voices of children playing below faded into the rustling of leaves. I ventured higher and higher, testing my faith as the branches grew progressively thinner. Once near the top, I perched precariously on a limb, braced against the trunk as it swayed in the wind. This was my own world, and from here I could see forever.

When I wasn't playing I'd follow my father, Fremont, around while he worked and ask him question after question, watching his every move -- so methodical and efficient. I remember the smell of fresh-cut lumber and the sound of his voice as he explained his craft. He was a structural engineer and worked very hard starting his own construction company. My father was delighted that I took such interest in his work and soon had me working right alongside him. He gave me carpenter's tools as gifts for birthdays and Christmas. I learned to saw wood without it splintering, and to swing a hammer with the rhythm of a drummer. While in his den at night, I would watch as he drew the plans for the houses he was to build. These were his dreams, and I witnessed the magic of his making them a reality.

At the age of twelve, I was working in the woods with my father, building log cabins -- hewing logs with an axe, draw blade, and chain saw. Our family moved to a new home in the heart of the Sebago Lakes region. Majestic cathedral pines towered over the large Dutch Colonial house that faced northwest over eleven miles of lake, with a view of Mount Washington in the distance. This lonesome house had no foundation and no septic system, and it was not insulated for the long Maine winters. We dug the foundation by hand, crawling on our hands and knees, chipping bedrock from narrow trenches. My father had grown up on a farm and believed in the virtues of good, hard work. I continued to work for him in my early teens, but I found myself spending more and more time in the sanctuary of my bedroom.



It was there at my little oak desk next to the window that I began to pass blissful hours drawing and painting. With a pencil and a fresh stack of locally milled paper given to me by a friend, I had soon drawn enough fanciful images to wallpaper my entire room. I remember occasionally looking down to see my father hard at work in the yard. Though I knew he wanted my help, I prayed he would pass without calling for me. Eventually, he noticed my drawings and would call me down from my room to proudly show them to his friends. However, it was difficult for my father to accept art as a viable vocation. I recall his struggle with its intangibility. To further torment him, all five of his sons were artistically inclined.

School was difficult for me. My attention span wavered as a focus on the rote memory of dates and names somehow eluded my grasp. My teachers would say I “just wasn’t there.” I’d spend most of my time staring out of the classroom window, daydreaming, traveling in time through distant worlds. In spite of my erratic grades and lack of interest, my artistic edge somehow gained the support of some of my teachers.

I entered the Bridgton Art Show when I was fifteen and won first place in the student category. At the awards ceremony, I was introduced to Alan Magee who won the grand prize for his painting entitled *Stones*. I was amazed by his technique -- such great realism, done so simply. Alan spent a great deal of time talking with me and set a standard of excellence not only in his work, but in his person. I have never been able to match his skills, but I have instead cultivated merits of my own. Throughout my career I have remembered that meeting with Alan and always offer an ear or a little advise to aspiring artists.

I felt I had led a rather sheltered life in the rural climate of Maine, and the reality of attending a college for the arts seemed out of reach. Perhaps I lacked confidence, or perhaps I lacked encouragement. In any case, I never went to a formal art school. I studied for two years at the Central Maine Vocational Technical Institute for mechanical and architectural design, and I then began working for architects and builders.

My father often battled me with his complex understanding of calculus and formulas that went on for pages. He would deliberate them for what seemed like hours, assuming I was able to follow along. Although I did not inherit my father’s mathematical proficiency, my eye for perspective and my knack for illustrating architecture proved very helpful during my first few years of working with architects and developers. After I had proved my abilities, my father invited me to work in his company. I gladly accepted his offer, as working in the family business seemed to promise greater rewards.

As the business grew, I found myself burdened with more and more responsibilities. In time I became depressed, and my senses began to numb. Eventually I reached a point where I became over-



whelmed and riddled with guilt. Realizing that I was never going to achieve excellence in the construction business, I decided that I should do what I had most desired. My father had a heart-to-heart talk with me and revealed a side of him I'd never seen before. He said he felt he was letting my talents go to waste. It felt strange hearing this strong, burly man suggest I pursue a career in the arts. This began what was to become a lifelong vision quest, one that gave my life a whole new meaning.

I determined to cultivate my art and learn to survive from it. Taking on any other type of work would certainly have been a distraction, as I had not kept up my painting during my previous employment. I worked in my studio day and night, seven days a week, stopping only to sleep for a couple of hours atop my homemade drawing board. I rented out my house because I could not afford the mortgage payment and was never home, anyway. Home was in my head, and my head was in my studio. Taking no time off for leisure, I diligently kept up this pace for two years.

When I was twenty-three I moved to the harbor city of Portland, Maine. Working for an art gallery, I was able to arrange a rent/trade agreement for the vacant basement below. It was dark and musty, and the furnace seemed to use up most of the oxygen. The walls were made of crumbling brick and fieldstone. The mortar had turned to dust, and calcium deposits lined the cracks. I found



some old French doors, built them into partitions, and hung drop lights from the ceiling. It was home for a while, but eventually the furnace exploded and the basement was flooded with black, sooty water. I found myself out on the street on a cold winter night walking through a snowstorm, too proud to go home to my parents and needing a floor on which to sleep.

There were times when I felt like giving up, but eventually I turned things around by perfecting my artistic talent. If it had not been for my weaknesses, I never would have discovered my strengths. As my body of work grew, so did my place in the art community.

There are people in our society who believe in the artist's place in the world. I am fortunate to know some of those people, and they have never stopped believing in me. They have shared their thoughts and feelings and given me support and encouragement. They have shown me that what I do is important. Through my art I have learned the importance of following my heart.

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