The Woman With No Niche

by Julie Fitzpatrick 2020

Michelle was morose.

"What's wrong, my Shelly?" Her mother looked up from her design board, glasses perched on her paint-spattered nose.

"You have your art and Daddy has his lab, but what do I have? I want to make my mark, be successful, contribute. But where do I start? I love people. I love lots of things. But no one thing stands out. I want to learn everything, but the more I learn, the more directions I discover waiting for me to explore them. How will I ever decide, Mom?"

Mom stopped painting, became thoughtful. "You realize you are very talented in so many ways, don't you? I mean... you don't feel like you are inadequate, do you?"

"No, Mom. No. I just... I feel like... How did you know when you started painting that that was what you wanted to do?"

"I didn't. I knew I liked to paint, but I never thought I would end up doing it forever. It just happened. Sometimes things just happen. Your Uncle Leonard, on the other hand, he knew when he was six that he would study astronomy. Why don't you interview him and see what his take is on the whole finding a direction thing?"

So she did. It went well. It went well enough that she decided to interview as many people in professions that interested her as she could. Surely one of these interviews would pique her interest in an area of knowledge that she would want to pursue in depth.

"How are the interviews going, my Shelly?" Mom was tossing dye pods into the raised vat where she created batik fabrics. She insisted that fabrics with personal stories written on them with wax added power to the creations that she made from them. Michelle couldn't argue, as her mother's works were beyond beautiful. Michelle treasured the ones she had been given.

"Everyone has been so kind. I've found that most people are eager to share their passion for learning, and if I shape the questions right, I get very thoughtful answers and honest self-analysis." She didn't bother telling her mother that she had researched interview techniques to become a better listener also.

She had found that if she left time for her subjects to think, they would formulate new thoughts and feelings about the topic right there during the interviews - not just react to old questions with old answers. 'How did that make you feel? Why do you think you did that? When did you first notice yourself thinking that? Where did you find the motivation to try that?' She loved finding questions that nourished new thoughts.

She found herself sharing personal insights with her subjects and being gifted with knowledge in return. Each interview gave her new appreciation for that person and for their area of expertise. But the knowledge she gained was often personal, unrelated to that person's given field. Michelle came to realize that the harder she listened, the more the knowledge imparted seemed to pertain to deeper, intimate knowings, things one dreams about and then forgets upon awakening. She began interviewing anyone she could, regardless of whether they excelled in a known area of interest to her. She found that everyone had enlightening thoughts if she listened hard enough.

One day, her mother brought her Caring Tea and sat down with her on the dais. "Shelly, I'm worried that you are spending all this time researching the paths others have found to Fulfillment, but are coming no closer to finding your own."

Michelle reached across the knee-hi serving block and placed her hand over her mother's. "Why does this cause you such concern?" Her eyes looked patiently into her mother's, searched her mother's face for clues, waited for her mother to process the question. They sipped their tea.

After a few moments tears formed in her mother's eyes. She blinked them away and forced a wobbly smile. "When I was your age I wanted to become an architect - to design buildings and communities that would honor the earth and encourage the flourishing of our species." Her smile turning self-deprecating. "But I met your father and contented myself with lesser projects, so I could carry the weight of family and homemaking." She took another sip of tea. So did Michelle. "I have no regrets. But sometimes I wonder who I would have become, had I chosen my path just a little sooner."

Michelle said nothing. She sat very quietly and waited, sipping her tea, her attention on her mother, but not with a sense of expectancy; rather in a relaxed, interested state.

"I realize now that my anxiety reflects that wondering." She poured more tea into their cups. "I see that you have found your calling and I am relieved that I can embrace it wholeheartedly."

Michelle frowned slightly, not following, but still said nothing.

"You are a Harkener - a Harkener of the human heart. You listen and you hear; not just what is said, but what is waiting to be said - what is felt, what is yearned for, what is in the heart."

Michelle felt a great weight lift from her shoulders. She and her mother shared a hug, at peace with themselves and each other.

In The Garden, Michelle listened to the leaves as they fought to keep their attachment to the great ash tree arching above. She realized she had found her niche in the words of her mother. She had a gift, a skill, a strength to build on now. Placing her ear against the rough bark of the ash, she closed her eyes and listened.