Continuing: Have you ever wanted to just give up?

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

I heard back from yesterday's letter writer with something surprising, and poignant, and painfully true. It threw me back to being nineteen, and looking at the crash of some dreams of my own. With the permisson of the other writer, then, the continuation of our conversation.

> *If it takes a bit of insanity to stay in the business, then I do have at least some small chance. Jokes aside, thank you very much for your advice, in the reply and in the writing diary. Perhaps I've some talent at getting people's gears turning.*
>
> *Anyway, thank you. It's cleared my head a little bit. Writing, in the end, is not so important; telling stories can be a beautiful thing, done right, or it can be a simple diversion about as useful and healthy as sitting in front of the television for four hours. Do you know, I've never analyzed why I wanted to be a writer; it simply seemed natural, and since I had some small inkling of talent for it, I thought, Run with it.*
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> *I don't think this is the job for me, which is a terrifying thing to admit, because everything else that interests me, I have no means of getting training in, and probably not brains enough to do them competently. This is a rather fearful admission, because that makes me nearly indestinguishable from the millions of other workers-for-life in this country who didn't get college, who didn't get vocational training, and who didn't do this, didn't do that. (I already suspect that a lifetime of hard work only means a lifetime of living*

paycheck-to-paycheck, and that the only real way to make money is to set up shop in something; but even then there are risks involved and the risk of failure great, and I don't have any notion of running a business. The American Dream as I understand it is this: Find something you love to do, and someone willing to pay you to do it. And for the longest time I've thought it was writing, because I've no talent with paint and no competency at programming, but was rather good at stringing together a few pretty words. And to find out that pursuing such a dream requires cladding your spirit in riot gear just to make it—yikes.)

Thank you for listening. Writing as a career is probably not for me, painful though that is to admit. It's actually got me a bit teary thinking about it, because when I look at all the facts, all the thoughts, all the notions and all my ideas, I start to understand: I haven't the grit it takes to get rejected over and over, and lack the willpower to plow through eighty-thousand words which might not come to anything.

In a very strange way, it makes me angry—the one road I thought I could easily walk, the one path I've set my mind on since I was twelve years old, turns out to be one of the worst paths I could have chosen. I ought to feel freed, because there are so many endless roads to choose from in this big world; but they're all so dark to me, who hasn't thought to go anyplace else. Dark, and lonesome, because I know no one who walks them. (Even the hardest way is manageable if you've got a friend to walk beside you. In this case I lack that luxury.)

All the talk in the world won't solve our problems half as quickly as two good, strong hands; and I've done my share of talking.

And my response:

I know what it’s like to walk away from the dream, and to face a path with no lights, no signs, no guideposts. From the time I was six, I wanted to be a professional artist. I knew where I was going, so even though I looked at other careers, all through school I took art classes, focused on artwork, made sure everyone knew that I knew where I was going. I was okay. I didn’t need to think of other options. My future was assured.

And then I started to work as a commercial artist, and I discovered that I hated it. It wasn’t just disappointing. I actively hated the work. I was crushed, devastated, and completely lost. My future had turned from comfortably bright and known into a yawning abyss.

I fell into nursing as a frantic fallback. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I had a lot of my illusions about life kicked out of me, I learned life and death and personal sacrifice and setting priorities up close. And nursing taught me to find my compassion, and to listen to my soul.

I found writing by accident. It was first an escape from a bad marriage, and then it ripped into me and changed me. But only because I was ready to be changed. Only because I had first been a nurse.

There are some jobs where, if you go into them with your eyes open and with your mind questioning, you can be transformed. EMT, firefighter, cop, soldier, nurse—staff positions only, not office, not admin. These are frontlines jobs where lives are in your hands, where you see the best and the worst of humanity, where every day you have to make the choice “Do I do the right thing or the wrong thing,” and where every day your choice matters. These jobs can devour you. They can give you the opportunity, as no other work can, to become corrupt, venal, hard and cold, brutal. But they can also rebuild you, and fill you with a love for people that is anchored in the

real, and not in trite phrases. You come out of them knowing, in bloodiest detail, exactly what your fellow humans are capable of, and yet, if you choose well, you can love them still. And you choose, every single day, which person you will be when you are done.

Consider a job of personal self-sacrifice—not as a lifetime career, perhaps, but as a path to finding and using your full humanity. You'll get paid, you'll eat and pay your bills, you'll grow in ways you cannot imagine… and at some point other lights will come on, other signposts will beckon, and the future that is so dark now will offer doors that only your walk through the fire could have offered.

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