

## *A Neverending Story?*



Mandana (Mondi Talieh) / Artist, Illustrator, Calligrapher

In this too busy, too frantic and often very scary world it often seems there's little space or time for art or for the artist who seeks the necessary quiet and solitude to create. I imagine most modern artists must work with "stolen hours," after pressing professional and familial responsibilities are attended to and fulfilled. The harried painter or writer can feel that her/his art is in danger of dwindling to a hobby, a neglected one at that, and so I was glad when a friend said one day, "A hobby pursued over a span of time is the intuition of a purpose."

Recently, I enjoyed an unexpected turn of artistic good fortune, which encouraged me to look back closely over the graphic art I've done in the last decades.

A fellow artist and former book agent suggested that I create a kind of "career resume," to arrange in order the development of my work, to present examples of different art from different years. The artist's suggestion for a career review was both encouraging and a little daunting – what had I really done, was it any good, did it have any purpose or pattern, considering the limited time I'd been able to devote to my art?

And so I began to recollect when art first became a central part of my life, art that I worried I'd too frequently set aside. I felt nervous, then surprised and relieved as I began to sense an elusive but consistent theme, something running through not only my art but also through my life -- my different lived experiences, deepest thoughts and feelings.

It seemed that Life and Art were intertwined and always had been, they appeared two necessary strands of one woven cord, a conception that began to echo with spiritual practices that I follow.

The friend who believes that a hobby is *a purpose developing itself* suggested that my work shows the influence of Persian miniatures, European early-20th Century art, and American

Pop, Comic and Folk art. I was flattered by the critique, but whatever the quality of my work the artistic styles do fit – at least geographically -- my varied cultural background and life in different countries. My mother is German, my late father was Persian, and with my parents and German grandmother I spent my first seven years in Tehran, in Iran, where I spoke Farsi and German. My mother remembers that when anyone asked where I was, she would answer, “Oh, Mandana is off somewhere alone drawing.”

What was I drawing? American Western scenes, with cowboys and guns, although my mother says American cowboy shows weren't on TV. But colorful cartoons were, and one I remember, called “Mr. Wizard,” proved a weird signpost toward the future.

Mr. Wizard is a tiny, Merlin-like lizard who continually comes to the rescue of the younger and less careful Tooter Turtle, with the magic words, “Drizzle, Drazzle, Druzzle, Drome, time for this one to come home.” Mr. Wizard always gave Tooter the same advice: “Be just what you is, not what you is not. Folks what do this has the happiest lot.” I didn't know it then but another magical lizard and a poetical turtle, along with two dogs, were waiting for their future animated portraits.

From the Iranian Revolution we moved to Southern California and suddenly I had entered a flashing, glittering culture overflowing with rock music, new styles and fads, movie stars and Valley Girls, all frenzied activity in a mild climate by the sea, the world's perfect youth culture. Iran to L.A. was quite a switch, a “culture shock” that was fascinating and I enjoyed. I wasn't drawing or painting but busy with friends and school, an extraverted life. It wasn't until we moved to Germany when I was in high school that I slowly began to think again about the side of myself drawn to art, an interior, fairly hidden side that hadn't disappeared but was only dormant, like a root in winter. Something was changing in me, especially after a strange, dramatic scare with a happy ending that also somehow prefigured future artistic directions.

We lived in Bavaria, in Munich, an historical cultural center, and once the home of the famous Emelka Studios, which with competing UFA Studios in Berlin made silent expressionist

films that so influenced modern cinema. I could speak German but I had to spend a year in school learning to read and write it, and then a year in a trade school. Oddly, we were living just blocks away from the Bavaria Film Studios, the old Emelka, where films were constantly under production, including “The Neverending Story,” which featured a flying dog with flapping ears. That was the movie being made while I was on vacation with a friend in Spain -- I got a call from home that set off something involving both my life and my art.

I was always worried about my dog, a Schnauzer and Mini-Pincher named Jimmi, when for one reason or another I had to briefly be away. He'd show signs of distress, even shed hair, until I



returned and he was all right again. This time it was more serious.

Jimmi had gotten away and was running down the street when he was struck by a bus full of tourists on their way to see that day's shooting of “The Neverending Story.”

Jimmi was badly hurt but thankfully recovered, yet after that I began to think of him a little differently. It was as if he lived in two worlds now, in this one and the world beyond he perhaps had briefly entered before returning. My beloved pet had in a way died and come back to life, after being hit on his way to the movie with a flying dog, about an endless journey. The whole situation seemed mysterious, something strangely “symbolic” that wanted expression, but it would be a long while before Jimmi would become an illustrated character in a book and have a role as an animated actor in a video, after his time as spokesman for the teachings of a guru.

I spent the next few years between Germany and the States, working in dress shops along the California Coast and in my mother's store in La Jolla where I designed a few dresses that

were manufactured for sale. I did sketches of clothes and other drawings and I remember I completed a portrait, just before my marriage, of someone I didn't know.

I've described the subject of the picture as "a woman in an evening gown looking out at nothing." My parents kept the picture and I later learned that a relative had admired and praised it. She later became troubled and I've wondered whether my work made her feel a little less alone, gave her a sense of companionship and shared feeling. The portrait was stolen from my parents' garage, though I thought art thieves only prize old and modern masters. Perhaps the robber wasn't thinking of money but of hanging the picture in his house, that for some reason it



appealed.

I wasn't sure who the mysterious woman I'd created was or what the picture meant, but it was soon after that that my husband introduced me to a spiritual work, *I Am That*, by Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. His work teaches a non-dualist philosophy that has been praised and followed by Eckart Tolle, Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra and others interested in psychic evolution. The book is a collection of 101 conversations with a questioner, the guru giving his answers. The sayings hit a sudden chord of buried feeling in me and stimulated such new thoughts that I contacted the book publisher and asked if I might print illustrated greeting cards with the guru's quotations, a request that was generously granted. I wanted to somehow help send his important messages out to a troubled world and the way I thought of doing that was through art.

For the cards, I wrote in a freehand, very simple calligraphy the brief words of Nisargadatta, but how to give the cards some color, with decoration? I decided I needed a



character, someone who is repeating, speaking the guru's words -- someone dignified, modest, kind, someone neutral. And so I chose an animal spirit to speak the lessons, a dog that I called Wise Dog, who embodied my dog Jimmi who had survived the near-fatal accident and returned to life, with perhaps greater wisdom, caution and purpose.

My first sketches of Wise Dog were fairly spare line drawings, a bit impressionistic with a few details only implied. I left a little white space between some of the dog's body parts.



The woman at the publishers said she liked my drawings but that I should, in the future, “connect all the parts.”

And so I did, and added more color and background, and soon another needed character to accompany Wise Dog, a younger version of himself requiring guidance and the guru's wisdom. The introduction of the second dog was part of my study of *I Am That* and what has been called *Nisarga Yoga* (Nisarga can be translated as “the natural state”). The meditative practice aims at living life with “harmlessness,” “friendliness,” and “interest,” and abiding in “spontaneous awareness” while being “conscious of effortless living.” This form of Yoga

involves meditating on one's sense of "I am" or "being," with the purpose of reaching its ultimate



source, which Nisargadatta calls the Self.

This journey requires the acknowledgement and balancing of different aspects of the psyche, in order to reach a greater perspective and unity. I suppose Wise Dog and Jimmi represent different but complementary personalities within us, and perhaps especially within the artist. Together the two dogs seem to show the play and tension between formality and spontaneity, restraint and impulse, logic and inspiration, ego and unconscious, experience and discovery, wisdom and youth. When the opposing but not conflicting forces meet in harmony – as in the I Ching's yin and yang within their greater circle – a Self at home on Earth is in sight.

So, in a way, the two dogs on the *I Am That* greeting cards displayed my own efforts to balance opposing thoughts and feelings within myself, and to find a proper balance between my life and my art, which were each the expression of the same underlying story.

Wise Dog and Jimmi introduced a stylistic direction into my work that I would follow in several subsequent projects. The cards stressed color and constant movement and aimed at the moment and the timeless. With the quoted sayings of Nisargadatta, the drawings resembled single frames with subtitles from a colored silent movie. It's a technique I later used in book form when I designed and illustrated a health manual for a local physician's network. The colored pamphlet incorporates Wise Dog as the guide.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/hrioeijm381rctxf6ifa7/Priority-Care-Binder.pdf?rlkey=le638p5vfen63sum5gbab5hy7&dl=0>



I was drawn to the kinetic, to pictures as pieces of moving life, of moving film, and then I made a video, a very short animated color feature that was shown at several film festivals, including the one in our town which I attended while pregnant with my daughter. "Tune In" is a surreal cartoon set to rock music, a sort of fantasia of circling, dancing inner contents and personas, maybe a thumbnail retrospective of California Culture at a certain time -- a Wise Dog figure observes the swirling ambiguous action, dream-like forms appearing, dissolving and reforming as part of an interior landscape and story that lives alongside and rivals everyday exterior reality.

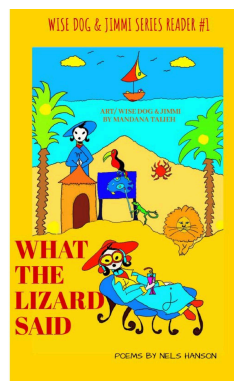


[https://www.dropbox.com/sc/1f/39lit4ba4kw3mqyult4i6/WD\\_Presskit\\_Fnt.pdf?rlkey=8lri228rmcj5mt3g25n0tg9wt&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sc/1f/39lit4ba4kw3mqyult4i6/WD_Presskit_Fnt.pdf?rlkey=8lri228rmcj5mt3g25n0tg9wt&dl=0)

My husband is a doctor, a general practitioner with a busy practice, and I soon became fully immersed in motherhood in addition to running a household and had no time for art. And then I was introduced to two patients of my husband's, a man and wife who were writers and editors with publishing experience.

The husband had completed a large collection of animal poems for children and was looking for an illustrator and I was looking for a project to illustrate. There are 30 poems, 30 animals who each speak and tell about their experiences and what they've learned from joy and hardship.

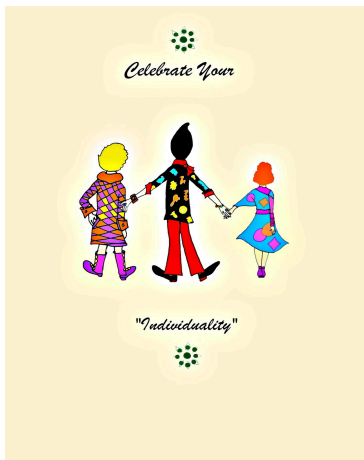
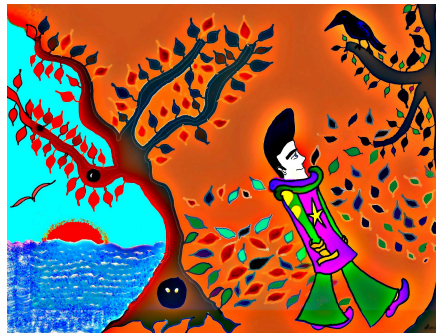
To collect the individual poems in an ongoing story that will span several books, we introduced Wise Dog and Jimmi, two dogs on a spiritual journey seeking wisdom. The first book is called *What the Lizard Said* and begins when Jimmi (like my real dog Jimmi) is nearly struck in traffic. Wise Dog decides to take the younger dog in hand, to learn needed lessons from four animals they meet -- a lizard who has lost his tail, a turtle who dreams of winning a race, a mother hen with too many chicks, and a hungry and grateful gopher who lives under a lawn. (Several years later I would illustrate a cartoon video, a book trailer for *What the Lizard Said*.)



<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/qvjcqsjnqeikooedrwwq9/WhattheLizardSa.pdf?rlkey=eabd1mi21d8kvh6vfbk19s1fe&dl=0>



Again, I was attracted to illustration as silent film with subtitles, and to constant movement and expressive color. I used the same approach when I next completed a series of promotional portraits for “Retro Bill,” an actor and inspirational speaker and motivator.

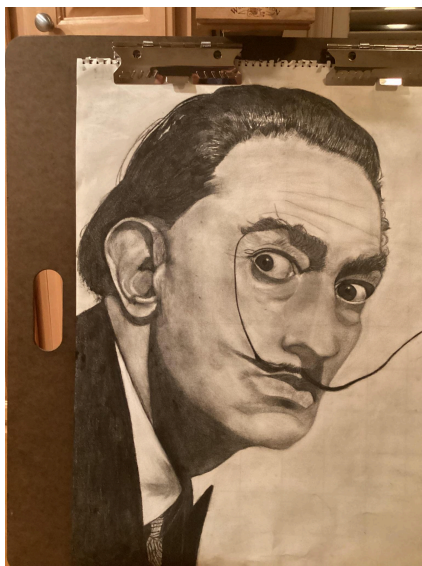
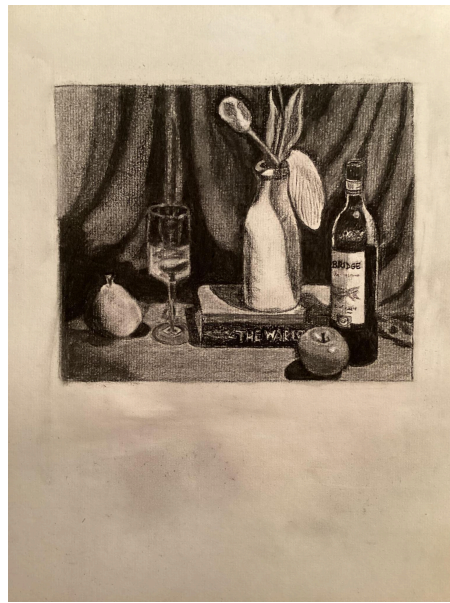
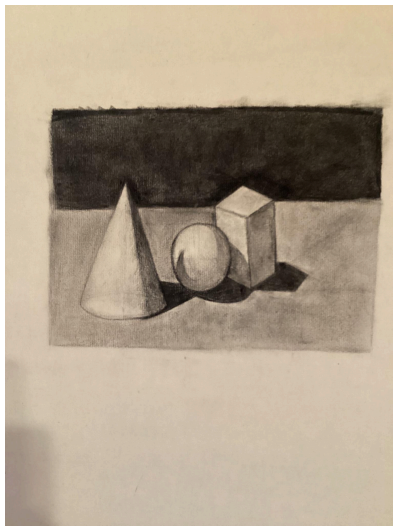


Since then time for art has been again hit and miss, with the pandemic and domestic and international upheaval. I'm still trying to finish the last illustrations for a long children's story called *Julia and the Sea Bear*, by the author of *What the Lizard Said*. It's the story of a girl with ESP and a lonely bear stranded on a beach who after a storm finds true love.



[https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/y77j8a5kjfomdi6cw5fhi/JULIA-AND-THE-SEA-BEAR\\_SAMP LE-1\\_1.20.17-2-copy.pdf?rlkey=cnrdwyrjs4evurhr4ult9ays2&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/y77j8a5kjfomdi6cw5fhi/JULIA-AND-THE-SEA-BEAR_SAMP LE-1_1.20.17-2-copy.pdf?rlkey=cnrdwyrjs4evurhr4ult9ays2&dl=0)

Not long before the artist and former book agent suggested I compile a career resume, I had a feeling it was time to go back to basics and enrolled in an online art class from San Francisco. Basic shapes, muscular movement, perspective, vanishing points, and “sight measuring” were all part of the quarter-long course. I was doing “studio work,” still lifes in charcoal and then a portrait in pencil, of Salvador Dali, who surely was an artist who contained many different people and artists.



Looking back over my work, and remembering the contexts in which it was created, I do see evolving patterns I was not aware of -- patterns in artistic style, and patterns in life that became patterns in art, so that underneath the scattered days and years I think there was one ongoing story unfolding.

And so what's next, in this new year of 2024, for me and you, for anyone? No doubt billions of people with more problems than my own ask themselves that question every day. I can only say that when my life and art are in balance, the contrasting aspects within myself are in better balance, better adapted to life and to art. It's a "live and let live" feeling for all things, an awareness that on Earth we always live between the present and the eternal -- all of us and all living things together in the same boat.



That's when I can best follow the lessons of *I Am That* that Wise Dog first learned and shared quite some time ago.

Namaste,  
Mandana Talieh

