

On Being an Artist

and other writings



Elaine De Lisle Membrino



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Dedicated to:

Richard, Zack and Summer Snow

Family and Friends

World Peace

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On Being an Artist

I'm trying to think where it all began, this love of art, in being an artist, was it or did it start when I took a walk down Main Street to the Travel-way bus stop in Fitchburg and looked around the narrow, cold looking bus stop with a few seats where I bought a paperback book titled "Interpretations of Dreams" by S. Freud

From my downstairs neighbor who sold tickets behind the barren gray counter where maybe you could buy some gum.

So maybe it was that walk from Fitch Hill Avenue behind Fitchburg State College where my parents rented the first-floor apartment that sat in a three family, owned by a doctor, years ago

The green porch dwelling sitting on the side of a wooded hillside reaching Pearl St; maybe it was there in my bedroom as a teenage high school student where I wrote poetry and listened to jazz on the Motorola record player that my brother gave me when he came home from the Air Force, stationed up in Ottawa where he bought me leather beaded slippers from the natives; he was a charmer, my oldest brother; always kind to his youngest (the baby of the family) sister;

So maybe it was my contentment as a kid, appreciating where I was, family I had and the parents; although it wasn't always perfect

The pure French girl, whose parents were both French, meeting in the twenties with Dad's Model T car and drive to Ayer to court my mother.



I enjoyed that apartment on the hill, the two bedroom, one for mom and dad, the other one for me and my sister, who married right out of high school at the age of 17 to her Marine boyfriend; and when my brothers came home they rented the apartment downstairs and went to college on the G.I. bill; maybe it was walking to the High School across the “rapids” stairs that cut across Blossom Street to the high school on Academy Street; maybe it was there in homeroom that I decided to be an artist for when filling papers for the senior yearbook I wrote down – interest in the arts – to become an artist and yet I had no idea only in that moment realizing my gift and maybe it was a decision while making mobiles in my yellow bedroom as a high school student with drawing like Modigliani, who I didn't even know about;

Those teenage years were easy going it was a fine time with the exception of hearing arguments of my parents about money that wasn't there for my dad had few jobs in his day until becoming a machinist for Dixie Cowdrey making dies for paper cups and products produced in the factory; and mom she didn't work I guess to stay home and take care of the house and me;

Maybe it was the time in my life I became the artist I am So there in that apartment watching my brothers go through college at Fitchburg State working their jobs; hearing their experiences meeting their friends and being asked to go to dinner with them joining in their conversations in a quiet way; or asking to go sailing on Bob's boat taking one of my friends up to the lake I can still feel the water and sun on those days;



Maybe it was the nature I felt and enjoyed; the trees the good smell of air; being asthmatic I enjoyed fresh air of course Dad smoked three packs of cigarettes each day half in the apartment I would always clean the ashtray piled with butts; then folks didn't know about the effects of secondhand smoke

And there trying to be a kid without a goal but to work these waitress jobs or clerk positions to get that small paycheck so you could try to buy a car – your new VW for \$1,700; and before that a Renault used that was traded in for the VW; maybe it was there in my life in working on the Vineyard for the summer waitressing and coming home and all my girlfriends had gotten married; and one point at King's Department Store on John Fitch Highway running into a male friend talking to his friend that I met my husband but at that time said "no" to go to a party; not knowing it was an adult dinner party at his mom's house in the "Patch" (the Italian part of town) Maybe it was there it was in front of Friendly's that I felt alone and isolated with no job yet back from the summer job on the Island that I was looking, not so much for people but for the arts – Inquisitively –



And then at clerk like jobs, having my little car, running into an old friend saying come to the Cape – P'Town – to work for the summer; then a lot of college students were working in P'Town in restaurants – so there I went in my little powder blue VW and my dress to P'town; my girlfriend who was a teacher already lived there and her sister too; so I got a job working for the dean of a college in Upstate New York; cleaning her apartments that she rented to women who came from New York City; staying with the sisters, Karen had lent me a bike to ride from Bradford Street to Commercial Street where her house was right on the ocean; maybe it was there as I rode the bike along Commercial Street edged by the ocean hearing seagulls and smelling the sea that gave me the kind of venture and desire to move forward on being an artist; there along the street seeing galleries and neat clothing stores; the Navy Surplus that carried all goods from

servicemen, used goods maybe it was there that I felt the desire for some unanswered question in my being a person that could express the feeling of the universe; so through the meetings with friends, parties, walks on the beach, the restaurant openings with tables of food and punchbowls of liquor maybe it was rubbing elbows with the artsy folk: writer, professors, artists summering having their vacations like Fritz Boatman, Robert Indiana love poster, where Norman Mailer; not good just meeting briefly; so as I left Provincetown to venture out to Indiana farm country in the Chicago suburbs and coming back when my brother Dick told me Mom had a heart attack but when you got home after driving back, mostly alone – it was just to get me home – they were happy to see me and I guess I was glad to be home; maybe through all of this I leaned toward the arts, the feeling of creating; something tangible expressive; so in comes another friend (who at this day has been a professor teaching in Toledo Ohio) saying “let’s go to New York” she wanted to get into theater big time; so that’s what we planned until I walking into the local department store, Rogers, on Main Street and seeing Richard my husband to be; and of course going in (he was a shoe salesman) to see him not knowing I had met him years ago when he was standing with my other friend in front of Friendly’s; so his friend talking with him knew me so introduced us by shouting out across the store and as you figured out I canceled my trip to New York; first I did ask him to come with us but he lived with his widowed mother, Agnes, which was understandable; so maybe it was then two creative people attracted to each other; enjoyed music, played the guitar, wrote and read about art.



We grew up like only children; for his sister was five years older and mine was seven years older than me; he grew up in the Italian section of town I grew up in Cleghorn the French section and I had moved to the college neighborhood and so across from the city from each other going to the same high school but only meeting after high school it just amazes me that I met him years

ago and said no and then dating; I had also seen him on Main Street before, in his peacoat years while he was in high school but I didn't know we would be married – so life went on and on the first date he picked me up in his white MG rather impressed until he told me there was a hole in the floor and be careful; maybe this was a red flag ... So now at 80 years old and 56 years of marriage with a house loaded paintings, collage, assemblage I decided to write about being an artist.

So as it goes Richard got a small apartment on Whitney Court a house that had four apartments and three had college students and one was for us; for a year we dated going back and forth to Mom and Dad's apartment and finally said something's got to give and we decided in 1969 to get married by a Justice of the Peace in Leominster; because the Priest (priest) at St. Anthony's in the Patch wanted us to have a 350 person wedding.

My goodness how life gets complex, and we lived on Whitney Court in Fitchburg with two dogs running in and out the kitchen window and on the second-floor roof to go down the back stairs into the street; so it was a small apartment with one bedroom; but it seemed so sunny with its square kitchen – at least it was warm and the beginning of our life together.

And before we knew it I was pregnant with our son Zack; and in between working and producing art; music tapes we still own and visual art we decided to move into a house in Ashburnham that my brother owned because he had built a new house on Packard Hill Road; and there I started reading and writing poetry that's where I picked out Zack's name with Richard; we stayed a few months and moved for I told my brother if he had a buyer for the house we would move right away; so we ventured onward to my mother-in-law's in the Patch until we found our apartment on Cedar Street in Fitchburg with Natalie Chase an older retired woman short with one tooth in the front of her mouth; a very kind person she lived on the first and we on the second; a light sunny two bedroom apartment and that's where our son was born in 1970. He (our son) grew up there until he was three and he

would sit on the front stairs going to the first floor where our landlady Ms. Chase would come out to get her mail and she would talk to him.

A rather simple life' as Richard finished school at the Worcester Art Museum School of Design and after took us to Prichard Street downtown; a one bedroom apartment with a great kitchen part of a duplex owned by two industrialists Coggshall and Hieronymos Blood; we made another bedroom out of the dining room and had the front room as a gallery for our paintings. It was a great apartment – such large rooms – with a bay window with a seat in the gallery room even pillowed with its old tapestry material; the kids loved the place running back and forth; and even the three tenants upstairs renting its rooms – and incredible Federalist building with its large welcoming porch holding up the roof with its large round pillars; a fun time – our bed was a pullout couch that my husband's mom gave us; there we worked also producing large paintings that now still sit in our studio in Ashburnham.

The bathroom had a small shower I used to sit Zack in a plastic tub to take a bath; the small window over the shower was a bit concerning but fine; it overlooked the immense hallway that brought you into the house; I loved that house tried to buy it but our friend banker said no! there as a medium as I am I started sensing our friend Mr. Blood wandering around the kitchen area of the apartment; I could visualize how he looked even dressed; one day I said to my husband, "Let's go the Historical Society and look up who lived there:" and so we did! and there in the old photos he was – dressed as my vision revealed; such a great guy but as I mentally related to him – don't be a spirit who would throw things around; and he seemed to understand and occasionally I would see his aura as an image. And life went on I bought a large desk and hutch to sit on top of it from the antique dealer my husband used to work for; it worked good in the dining room like bedroom: today Lawyer Bowen bought the other side of the apartment duplex which used to be the Red Cross; and it still stand there in its grandeur; we were there years

– helped out landlord picking up rubbish and shoveling; he was good to us too – lawyer Lamay.

Then Summer was born in 1975 (our daughter a joy from the get-go); Zack was 5 The kids enjoyed downtown; our walks on the weekends the city seemed quiet – playing in parks – going by the fire station and police station; I remember the sun-warm days of summertime and large bushes that surrounded the apartment covered with snow – it was living in an historical center with all its great building and plenty of sidewalks!

I'm trying to think where did the artist' dream begin; was it when as a babe lying in the crib at the bottom of my parents' double bed looking up at the famous baby print in blue and pink watercolor reproduction hanging over the head of their bed; was it as I was rocked to sleep in the big kitchen in the three-decker apartment house on Clarendon Street in the French section of Fitchburg; or maybe starting school with the French nuns; or maybe in the candy shop as small as it could be that my mom would send me with a few pennies to buy candy; as the owner woman came down her stairs from her place to wait on me; the green three-decker with the surrounding porches and a vacant dirt lot next door to play in and in winter my sister of seven years older would make me an igloo; or maybe it was in the Italian's garden across the street – that we would run to and sit looking at the vegetables until he saw us and ran us off the neighbor kids or only me; was it the there smelling the fresh green of his labor; maybe it was the puppy; the easter chick my brother brought home for me; and it all begins when we move from Cleghorn to the Fitchburg State College area where I attended Edgerly Grammar School affiliated with the college and students were becoming teachers; drinking the bottled milk that was put on the radiators to warm up! The business of it all and there in the fifth

grade finding out I needed glasses: that's where the artistic dream took flight; for I could never see the board hearing the teacher but she always looking like she was in a fog – nearsighted you say, someone get this poor girl some glasses



The junior high came next; right across the quad – as they say today – now being Fitchburg State University – a public school – clean and filled with neighborhood kids being taught by professors and students from the college.; is it there it all began with Dean Fitzgibbons taking us to look at the mice in the college biology room; or nature walks with the women's Dean Ross teaching us what a maple leaf, oak, or ash looked like; the wonders of nature from a vacant dirt lot to trees of splendor; it was all good a simple time moving from classroom to be guinea pigs for student teachers; a new one's coming let's give her the business; laughter; lots of laughter and friends; maybe it was there I took an art class with Professor Arsenault – drawing or being taught how to draw the perfect circle he told me I got an A; it was the only class we had for there were no other students who wanted to take it; years later meeting his daughter in Ashburnham and realized he loved to paint paintings! so after freshman year at the jungle, what student teachers called it, it was off to Fitchburg High School through senior year: another fun time with friends that lived in the area it was all a fascinating time meeting up with all the different nationalities: a few senior parties; basketball and football games; YMCA dances that were dead and the St. Bernard's and Notre Dame dances walking in a circle to the music then dancing – so many kids! maybe it was there I became bored and started drawing; making collages; writing poetry; listening to jazz.

The teachers were great in high school and such colorful characters: from Biology; Typing; Social Studies-History; English; they all fit into the puzzle of hope; maybe it was there in my senior year of high school days when we asked to write down info for the yearbook that I wrote the word Art ... walking the

majestic hallways of Fitchburg High with the granite slabs of stone that supported the high school and the regal steps going to the front door off Prichard Street going up to Academy Street maybe as the sun beat down on us students climbing to the success – life was being handing to us –

Years of struggling through the hallways of bumping rushing students faces that we may never see again except for the almighty class reunions creeping up on us reminding of our age – somewhere along the line in St. Joseph's kindergarten or at Edgerly Grammar School or Fitchburg State's junior high (the jungle) or maybe Fitchburg High School climbing those granite stairs or taking a few night school classes English and Algebra to see if I was smart enough – maybe while doing that and taking a job at Christmastime working in Park Snow's on Main Street the local department store in all it's grandeur – maybe it was there that I became the artist I know today at the age of 80 – and maybe as I have traveled through my life not realizing my womanhood of being an artist as I became that wife; mother; grandmother; great grandmother; –until now – even being that sister that always gave a helping hand as the youngest sibling and I realized to take the time to be creative as I danced in our Prichard Street one bedroom studio apartment that Henry Coggshall and Hieronimos Blood built as an elegant duplex in its day with its marble fireplaces and grand room with windows big enough to let in the world; –maybe it was there as we set up another studio gallery inviting artists, musicians and the new director of the Fitchburg Art Museum as we sat on the front granite stairs talking about the adventures of plans for a better realization of the arts, -- maybe it was all of it – the splendor of living in downtown Main Street taking summer Sunday walks to the park with your handsome children looking at sculpture bronze by Herbert Adams. – such a treasure to walk through churches that sounded their bells – maybe there in that colorful rivered city that lost its industrial to quiet; there where traffic was one way and then became two way Mayor after mayor and the only thing to stay is the local Espresso Pizza on Main Street – they do make a pretty good pizza –

Maybe it was moving about twelve times from apartment to apartment meeting all those landlords and neighbors some who you'll keep for fifty years; maybe in the quiet night when you could lay sleepless in bed to get up write poetry or work on a painting the creativity that has to creep out of you when no one is looking – maybe there in Ashburnham in 1987 until now meeting the crafters and surrounding artists and writers that you find the ability to say yes to creativity eating peppermint candy canes to sooth your stomach you became not only the little girl with pigtails who walked back and forth to school; who practiced to whistle so she could use it at basketball games in high school – maybe it was seeing Nature Boy as he was called well rounded soul walking with his blueberries and long auburn flowing hair; - - never really knowing who he really was or where he was going as he lumbered along Pearl Street heading to Main Street; it could have been there that no one else would do as I became a late bloomer; maybe it was another thing I didn't get; – but really not knowing life's turns from childhood to womanhood all takes time and will fall into place when it's time – friends college age dance around in nature climbing the gift of youth gone before you know – and challenges of age creep in like a turtle sunning itself on a rock in the sun on a pond.

And maybe it goes the gesturing of being the artist until you no longer see the reflection of the sun until the last exhibit in an art market; storefront or museum – and for someone else to see that internal message that you teleported through your desire and inspiration the magical charm of creativity communicating that message of hope and beauty to the society hopefully coming to peace in a rough tough world

As I walked with my family on the wooded rail trail running behind the house thinking how beautiful if all could see and appreciate the life I lived and enjoyed being the woman artist that I'm glad I became



So my daughter was fifty this year in June –Summer Snow; she has been all of her name and more – seeing her parents' art pushed up against the walls and hanging – the art reflected deep in her mind forever giving her the way to who she is today – the mother of four – the professional helping to run a university being the wife and homemaker – we don't work in the fields anymore – we are the field we are the granite foundation and yet the little girl that looked at her mom's theatrical clown series and then going to the Barnum and Bailey Circus to see a real clown sitting on a chair by the entrance/exit next to the tarpaulin tent with a reaction of splendid surprise going up to him and shaking his hand....

And here is the end of the artistic surprise the production of life with the creative work piled up in the front room of your one-hundred-year-old cottage by the side of the 101 highway in hometown America home of the free and the brave – bravo artist – believers of catching the slit in time to create your masterpieces of rhyme.

Poems

The Porcelain Kitchen Sink

I stand at the porcelain kitchen sink
there sits a piece of sea glass
shaped like a star – Tyna gave me –
in a small rectangle dish on the
platform next to the French dish strainer
I like to be reminded of the sea
using the computer but the yellow
sharpened pencil seems more comfortable
with its ultra special eraser
you watch the small pine siskins
feeding at the bird feeder
jumping from the clothesline
to the birdfeeder and back again
the fresh air rushing through
the kitchen window reminds
of summer it's here rushing away
with rainy June and July

I started this poem in my head
nights ago one of those nights
I couldn't sleep
coming downstairs to write it
on the computer but wrote
to Martha Stewart and checked
my email for not getting far
with this poem

so now a Tuesday afternoon
sent home early from work
cleaning a bookcase in the
bedroom finding this notebook
my friend Jane gave me
a few Christmases ago
and trying to find my creative
self in writing about washing
dishes at the kitchen sink
and really enjoying it ...
getting up to close the kitchen door
onto the little mudroom attached
to the house with its white iron
seats to sit on and relax
seeing the red bee balm in the
backyard garden being hit
by rain thinking of all
the books I dusted off upstairs
poetry and eastern philosophy
one I had bought for my son
Zack last Christmas but didn't
give it to him thinking he may
not like the book maybe I'll read
its poems and then give it to him

The reality of poetry we have
to sit and think past, present
and in between the emails
we even think of it daily as
a cup of morning coffee
if only we knew the answers
to all we try to do our creative
communication to a society that
closes doors ... the education we
have found in libraries after
working full-time jobs and reading
how to make a better life
the kitchen with its green spider plants

resting in water being held
by clear glass vases
holding them dear
the sound of rain dripping
the clock ticking
your daughter calls
it's hard to see her
face to face she's so busy

July 20, 2009

The Spirit of the World

In her first communion dress standing
next to her grey-suited Grandmother
she had already been there now
in her little white leather shoes and
white stockings next to the lilies
of the valley where their thick green leaves
touched her legs in the garden of hope

A young ten-year-old
or maybe she was eight
wearing pigtails and a summer dress
standing in a small triangular garden
with its flagstone floor
at the top of a paved driveway
where her parents rented an apartment
it was an old white two-family house
attached to it was a huge barn
places for antique cars
with a large copper kettle
in what used to be the washroom
yes folks used big copper kettles to
wash all their clothes and she remembers
the dining room table sitting
its chairs waiting for dinner
with the room's bay window letting in
all the sun that the day could bring

In the garden sunshine she
gazed at the lilies irises and peonies
she became one with the small woodland
that held her sweet warm and delightful
it was hard not to love the light of day
even when it rained ... the smell of rain
there she became the spirit of the world
the beginning of life and death
the old and the new

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Original 2009*

The Sparrow

The sparrow dances across the lawn
looking for its dinner
as for me dancing from project to project
breaking for lunch
It jumps from blades of grass
taking all the ready seed
as for me getting comfort
in the unseen melody
the sparrow with its
female brown suit
the male with its
blackened under bibb
has led me to pause
contemplate a gate in rhyme
the sparrow chirp's hello
at four thirty-five
sitting on the front porch
sipping coffee with time
I think dear sparrow
delight my senses
pursuing the next project
or to continue
the one left behind

New Dawn Writers Group 2025

August's Last Day

Walking along the
Rail trail today
We met an older
Woman walking toward us
She walked slow,
Firmly floating,
Carrying her dark gray colored baseball
Hat in one hand
In the other white glistening beads
Held together with red string
I Asked how she was
Her answer:
Tired of taking care
Of people –
Like her grandson
Calling for a ride,
Living a hundred miles
From here;
And her sister,
In and out of
The care facility,
To the hospital
Back and forth,
For the past six months
The medical profession believing
To put another tube in
And send her back

From where she came
the old woman also saying
I met a young man yesterday
wearing prayer beads
Around his neck
He Asked her about
World peace
Her answering yes
-it will happen-
-she said-look into my eyes-
The old woman
Carrying her white
String of beads
Needing her walk
Through the oak ash and pine trees
On the path
Half grass and dirt
To tell us
Her news of today
Walking back
To the house,
Enjoying the dry
Summer's end of splendor
I can still see
Her walking
Carrying those praying beads
While green brown acorns
Were at my feet

August 2025

A Group of Friends

When a group of Friends
Were standing on the porch
Of the Colonial Inn
In Provincetown, Massachusetts
Setting right on the oceans
Side watching the sea
Roll in and out candles
Flickered on the inside dinning
Tables and Debbie looked like
A fancy Shirley Temple doll
With a saddened face we
Rested our asses on the railing
Outlining the landscaped edge
Separating us from the Inn and sea

Mellow it was a mellow
Evening and we all fit
Into place enjoying each
Others grace and after capturing
Enough evening sea breeze
All drifted inside -
Through the Inn
Onto Commercial Street
And from there I really
Do not remember where
The group of friends
Took themselves but
It was a mellow evening
One filled with strivings
Of being one of the elite -
However we never could make
That scene because we were sons

And daughters of the working class
Lying in wait we enjoyed the
Aesthetics the town had to
Offer and we drifted in and
Out of that small port
As the sea



Elaine De Lisle and Richard Membrino with artwork by Michael Shattuck, Elaine and Richard Membrino, and Ron Parker. Photo by Dr. Richard De Lisle.

About Elaine De Lisle Membrino

(1945 – Present)

I am a self-taught artist and wife of artist Richard Membrino. Brought up in the French section of the Cleghorn neighborhood in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. My interest in art began in junior high at McKay School which was affiliated with Fitchburg State University. As I reflect back, perhaps even earlier as I studied flowers as a child in my landlord's garden and took a liking to drawing them. I have been living in Ashburnham with my husband for the past 37 years where we have continued our work in the arts, with an effort to progress the arts in a positive direction. Acrylic paint is my forte, on wood, canvas, or luan. I also enjoy sketching with pencil, colored pencil, and ink pens on paper.

My vision is that we are all able to look at the simplicity of the fruits and flowers around us, giving us a sense of openness and

the feeling of relaxation. The wowing in life and the wonderment of the creative mind. The mindfulness and imagination of the unforgettable world of nature. I use the feeling of form from nature to express my idea and sensitivity: inspired by the simplicity of Japanese, Chinese, combined with the excitement of 19th-century abstract modern art.



*Elaine De Lisle Membrino
photo by Richard Membrino*

In a touching memoir of questions, Elaine De Lisle Membrino traces her motivations and growth as an artist. Her stream of consciousness narrative portrays life in a small New England mill city from World War II through society's changes in the 1960s and 1970s. Of French-Canadian descent, Elaine ties her love of the arts and her family together. She is a visual artist, poet and writer.



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