

Sigrid Burton '69

Ranney Award Acceptance Speech, March 9, 2019

I am humbled to be the recipient of this award. A heartfelt thank you to Liz McGregor and the committee; I will strive to live up to the honor. Thank you to my dear friend, Jan Wesley, for nominating me. Jan and I met in Mrs Morelli's algebra class when I was new to Westridge in the 8th grade. We were, almost immediately, required to sit in the front row, with a desk between us, directly in front of Mrs Morelli, so we could not socialize in class. Also, present today, are my mother, Betye Monell Burton and my husband, Max Brennan. I do not have words to express my love for them, but I wish to thank them for their lifelong support. And, on this, one of the nicest days of my life, I am surrounded by my beloved Westridge classmates celebrating our 50th reunion; their years of friendship have sustained me- along with many other friends who went to Westridge both before and after me. These enduring friendships are a testimony to our common Westridge experience. I believe all of us would credit Westridge with teaching us to think critically and to write.

It is hard for me to imagine myself among the august company of the Ranney winners, women I so admire and respect, including my classmates, Julie Cates and Nan Elliott, my very dear friend Joni Weyl, and others. At Westridge, I was not known to be a diligent student and, in fact, many of my memories involve meetings with my parents in Miss Edmundson's office to discuss my potential versus my performance. I've always been something of an unmade bed- slightly crumpled in both my appearance and thinking. I happily confess I love to get dirty- get my hands into it; my desk and studio are a mess. It has been my very good fortune to be able to indulge this proclivity in my life's work as an artist. And, I have been somewhat vindicated by recent studies demonstrating that a messy work environment contributes to creative thinking. My painting is characterized by its tactility; I learn by the making, the doing, the attempts and experiments. Sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't. Ultimately, for me, it's less about achieving the desired product than the process of getting there- the value of the journey over the destination- and I learned this at Westridge.

One of greatest strengths of Westridge is the faculty; the privilege of studying with teachers who are also practitioners and professionals, who show us what is possible, like my art teachers, Barbara T Smith and Karen Ransom Neubert, or Marian Lipschutz, a gifted writer, much beloved by our class, or the formidable Mrs. Wilke, an accomplished Olympic gymnast.

I was also inculcated at Westridge with a commitment to social justice, although that term did not yet exist. One of my most profound experiences at Westridge was participating in Project Open Future in the summer of 1968. This program, funded by the Ford Foundation, identified promising students in underserved communities, principally Watts and Compton, and provided tutoring and mentoring throughout the school year and a camp for several weeks during the summer, at the Claremont Colleges, combining academic classes, sports and other activities. We were hired as counselors and teaching assistants from Westridge and other area prep schools and spent the summer living together in the dorms. This was probably my first experience of being "the other" although I wouldn't or couldn't have contextualized it in

those terms at that time. I had the experience of being the minority in a community that had entirely different cultural backgrounds, references, and behaviors. I think I got as much or more out of the program as the girls we were charged with teaching and mentoring. Learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable was one of my best life lessons. It has given me the confidence to take risks and have experiences that would not have been possible if I had not learned how to live outside my comfort zone at Westridge.

In thinking about our 50th reunion, one classmate asked, “what was your high school quote and does it still apply?” Mine was Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm”. This remains apropos, except to my mind, enthusiasm implies a kind of sunny optimism. And optimism belies the excruciating number of times that I have sat in my studio, or laid in bed with the covers pulled over my head, totally depressed: because I can’t paint, or I don’t know what to paint, or I’ve lost my purpose in painting, or, conversely, although I am painting, no one cares- I may never have another exhibition. So, I would actually substitute persistence for enthusiasm. I recognize persistence as my best and also my worst characteristic, a double-edged sword, but one which has enabled me to pick myself up on innumerable occasions and, well, persist.

Immediately after college in 1973, I moved to New York City, because, serendipitously, I had landed a job as Helen Frankenthaler’s studio assistant. I was 21, absolutely naive, and knew almost no one in the city. Looking back, I cannot now imagine how I had the chutzpah. This opportunity changed my life; it was the road taken; I lived in New York City for the next 40 years. Helen was an important mentor and we remained close friends for the rest of her life. I subsequently worked for Jules Olitski and a couple other artists. It is a rare privilege to work in an artist’s studio. I gained an intimate understanding of their thinking and processes in bringing their work to completion. Notwithstanding their considerable success, I also learned about their disappointments and challenges and how they worked with and through them. It was a comprehensive and valuable education in every aspect of art making.

The reality of a life and career as an artist, as with many entrepreneurs, is that it is volatile and capricious. At a moment, one has several shows lined up and it’s all going swimmingly; then, suddenly, one falls into seemingly endless fallow periods of either toiling in obscurity or deep frustration with the work or, worse, both at the same time. This is compounded by the fact there is absolutely no guarantee it will ever work out no matter how hard one tries. Making art is entirely self-starting and solitary, and also, I believe, something of a compulsion; there is nothing I would rather do than paint, (at least when it is going well). Parenthetically, I would note that the practice and the career are two entirely separate and distinct entities which require different skill sets. I have never enjoyed the requirements of career development, and I have to force myself to work on these. At Westridge, I learned how to hear and accept criticism and take responsibility for my decisions; this was crucial preparation for both my professional and personal development.

My involvement in philanthropic and volunteer activities has provided a critical counterbalance to a necessarily self-involved and self-absorbed life in the studio. Once again, it was

Westridge that initiated my lifelong commitment to the community around me and the importance of being an active citizen. These activities have been a gratifying and fulfilling aspect of my life.

In 1991, I first travelled to India with my mother. I was, quite simply, blown away. The experience of a culture being lived in direct continuity with her ancient past and practices, utterly changed my thinking, in particular, about color and the purpose of color in my work. Color is woven into every aspect of Indian life from ephemeral daily decorative practices to expressions of the sublime. The elaborate, interactive ritual activities, that occur in astonishing variety, in homes, on the street, and in temples, are suffused with color and meaning. Color is a signifier of almost everything. For example, specific colors are associated with months of the year, the seasons, musical tones, emotions, and myriad other phenomena and esoteric constructs. In 1994, I received a grant to study the meaning and use of color in traditional Indian art forms; I lived and worked in India for more than 5 months. On return, to contextualize my experiences, I did graduate work at Columbia, a deep dive into the philosophical underpinnings of South Asian culture, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Muslim. These have formed the basis for my ongoing investigation into Indian aesthetic theory and color which inform my work to the present.

Light and landscape, travel, and studying antecedents in painting have been key inspirations and resources for my work. Over the years, the opportunity to see and study diverse material including Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna, Buddhist cave paintings in India and China, Indian miniatures, Jain cosmological diagrams, and the work of artists as disparate as Matisse, Manet, Miro, Mehretu, and others have informed and modulated my approach to painting. Recently, travel to Rome and the Netherlands to study the work of Caravaggio, Holbein, and Rembrandt have influenced my palette, and use of color for its atmospheric effects. For me, color communicates using its own unique language; it is a kind of poetry. It creates an environment and elicits emotional, psychological and physiological responses from the viewer. I believe a unique power of artistic expression is aspirational, an ability to transcend the quotidian and elevate discourse, and provide a window into the values and meaning by which we live. In our current environment of discord and uncertainty, it is more critical than ever to provide a window for the contemplation of universal ideals that unite us in our humanity.

I sincerely thank Westridge, my parents, my teachers, my husband and my friends, for keeping faith with me. Critically, they helped me to understand that my less successful experiments and even failures have been necessary learning experiences on the road to becoming an autonomous adult. From my parents and from Westridge, I have received that greatest of gifts: the permission and the freedom to make my own mistakes, followed by the encouragement to figure it out by myself, for myself.

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