



Country Lanes

by Judi Kauffman

Ketra Oberlander: Art of Possibility



Ketra Oberlander has lost most of her sight, but none of her vision. She is an artist, an entrepreneur, an articulate woman who doesn't believe in the words "I can't." Ketra considers near blindness to be an inconvenience. She's a Kansas-born California girl, a former stand-up comic who sees humor in situations others might find impossible. And like any good writer, she knows how to tell her story. So instead of the usual profile, I captured as many quotes as I could from a conversation that bounced from topic to topic. In the spirit of crafting, I took the best bits and glue-gunned them together for you here. It's a word collage, meant to inspire as well as to inform.

Ketra's business, Art of Possibility (www.aopstudios.com), handles the licensing arrangements for artists with physical disabilities. It is not a non-profit or a charity.

In her words:

When I began to lose my vision I had to decide whether to curl up and be a cripple or go be Lance Armstrong. I choose work. I choose this path, and I choose it very clearly. I say this to people without disabilities, as well as those with challenges: Your creative contribution matters. And it's okay to be high maintenance if you are the one doing the maintenance.

I can't take anyone beyond their expectations, but there are plenty of people who believe the same things as I do.

First, I wanted to make sure I didn't have to go on disability—for me, that didn't feel right. After that notion began to gel, I realized I could scale it to others. What I do with Art of Possibility allows people to exercise their value system at both ends of the equation: the making and selling of art, the buying of it. If there is a row of products in a store, if they are all lovely things, it's good when some of them are meaningful, too.

If a person has a disability, we [as a society] often make an assumption that someone has to take care of them—the charity and disability models. It wasn't a good fit for my temperament. I needed to be working, and in a meaningful way. I had to invent the business, Art of Possibility, along with the business model for it. As a disabled person, every day is a giant Sudoku puzzle. All I do is solve problems all day, every day. I maximize what I've already got. I do something that's evolutionary, but not revolutionary.

I'm dealing with physical limits in the physical world; it's a physics problem. Art of Possibility optimizes the ability of our artists to make a meaningful contribution to the world so we're not marginalized. The level at which we can contribute our art is limited (not being able to travel or set up a booth in the hot sun to sell artwork is a physical thing). By using intellectual property, I'm able to create a way for us to contribute that skips the "physics" problem. The one place where we can't contribute equally, we CAN do through rights management. You can't get a job if you're in the hospital several weeks every month or can't work traditional hours, so we do it where the artist doesn't have to be present and can create artwork based on his or her own body's requirements.

Artists are always solving problems, making something better than what we've got, from what we've got! I like the applied arts because I'm a populist and I think people deserve beauty. Art shouldn't have to be enshrined in galleries or cost a fortune. That's why, at this point, our products include bookmarks, note

pads, fabrics, affordable wall art, and fashion accessories, with other consumer goods in the works.

By building the Art of Possibility, artists maintain their unique look and feel under the umbrella of our brand. The look might be trendy or contemporary, but the values that underlie the brand endure. There will be disabled artists whose work will be commercially viable long after I'm not at the helm. It's an intellectual portfolio. I don't try to sell to anyone. Lots of people choose to say, "Yes, this matters, this is valuable, I want 'in.'" Life is the teacher; I don't have to be.

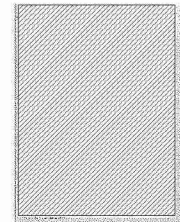
My goal is to optimize our strengths, mitigate our weaknesses. Making the business sustainable is the main thing—helping lots of people. This is as much my art now as my painting. We have a collaborative model. There are no Art of Possibility employees; all artists, including me, are independent contractors, and our royalty income is absolutely performance-based.

I've had to redefine what accomplishment is. That's true of people without disabilities—as we age, as our lives change, we all need to rethink what matters; we need honest appraisal of our strengths and to make sure we are using them.

I have tons of energy, fueled by lots of coffee and diet soda. I volunteer at a senior center, I garden, I grow and preserve fruits and veggies—and I do lots and lots of eating! I've put behind me the years of writing a racy newspaper column (I used to be Kiki Dakota). I'm too busy to do stand-up comedy these days with textile collections launching at six-month intervals. Art of Possibility takes most of my waking hours.

But I continue to drop pennies on sidewalks, thinking each time of the old saying, "Find a penny, pick it up, and all the day you'll have good luck." If you do a cost benefit analysis on the value of a penny, the best return on investment for a single cent is an entire day of good luck for a stranger.

See why I decided to let Ketra do the talking? As she puts it, "God knows I LOVE to talk!" ☘



Ketra Oberlander



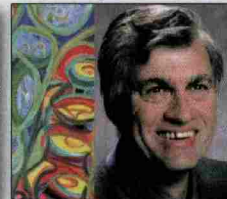
Lorna Ritz



Enid Swift



Suzy Combs



George Mendoza