



Niska's Life Story: More Than 50 Years as Painter of the Soul

By Elona

In the middle of the night, I can wake up (how many times?) and Niska seems to have vaporized without a sound to his atelier to face off with another white canvas. His discipline and moxie are honestly beyond my spiritual grasp. It makes what I do seem so easy. I just have to muster the courage to get out of bed if I want to attend "the birth" (of a painting). It is Niska who does the work. Splattered a bit everywhere with acrylics down to the paint on his hands and nails, they seem to match the painting like a good pair of shoes with a belt.

Niska is looking intently at this wet, textured painting with this critical eye, recognizing the genius of the artist is to know when to stop. Whatever he has or does to keep this up, I say *gimme* some of that. Niska makes it sound so easy; he says, "I would rather die than not paint."

Diagnosed with Parkinson's, it would make sense that the tremors would shut down his ability to paint. Instead - remarkably - Niska's hands stop shaking when he is in a creative state. PD makes him even more conscious of time so he paints as impassioned as never before. Niska uses his life and art with PD to serve as a message that he is not his Parkinson's nor as he always has said, "We are not just our bodies."

As part of the extended family of the Parkinson Disease Foundation in New York where they celebrate Creativity and Parkinson on a global scale, Niska feels so blessed to collaborate with this wonderful organization through his art.

This is a snapshot of now ... what about before?

In a nutshell: On the way to a piano lesson while crossing a busy street in the east end of Montreal, six year old Francois (Niska) was run over by a city bus. The local doctor at his side announced that Francois seemed clinically dead to his panicked mother who had run outside in the commotion. All the while, Francois felt he was “outside his body” while trying to grab his mother’s attention by pulling on her duster. His fingers seemed only to glide through.”

Moments earlier, Niska recalls entering a white light in a tunnel, what is commonly described as a Near Death Experience. This incident catalyzed his lifetime obsession to research and paint.

Over the next eighteen months, Niska (while in a body cast) was attending painting classes alongside war amputees as part of his rehabilitation. While the others painted with their mouths and feet, the nurses (mostly nuns) would say “you are so fortunate, you still have both hands, concentrate on the balance between your head and your heart.”

His family of twelve brothers and sisters were less than enthusiastic when obliged by his parents to visit young Francois in the hospital. His parents were more than concerned with the piling up of medical bills. Considering the poor outcome for Francois—at best wheelchair bound - support from his family waned. He learned early on to rely on his spiritual instincts to guide him and to this day he says, “Get out of God’s way and let him do the work.”

Soon after the tenacious Francois walked out of the hospital’s front door, he went to study in Ottawa in a school run by the (Christian OR Catholic Oblates. Most of his teachers - who often had more than one doctorate - recognized Niska’s intellectual abilities. Although first in his class, he was still very much a diamond in the rough who needed their guidance if he was to have any chance of realizing his true potential. For example, Niska would have to permanently shed his habit of beating up of children when frustrated. Many afternoons were used to teach him the power of the word over the fist. To further support Niska, the monks taught him the priceless values of discipline, silence and meditation - the essential tools to keep a focus and succeed. To reward him, the monks would give him the keys to the art room where he could paint to his heart’s content.

After High School, Niska was admitted to the University of Ottawa to the Bachelor of Physical Education program—not bad for a kid who was told he may never be able to walk again. Niska knew studying the arts was not even remotely a consideration for his deeply religious catholic parents who associated art school with nude models. Therefore Niska reluctantly accepted to study for a degree that was not his first choice.

Upon graduation, Niska used what he learned in school to help him “make it” as a budding artist. Now with a wife and two extra little mouths to feed, skiing and tennis

lessons helped augment his income, but - more importantly - the skills to organize a sporting event were the same skill set that could apply to organize a vernissage.

Three hundred exhibitions later in more than 14 countries, and garnering almost 70 international awards seemed to Niska more than enough recognition for him for his work. When he envisioned himself at eighty, with countless more exhibitions and how many more awards, Niska felt he hit a spiritual wall and found himself contemplating suicide.

To survive with the tools that he had, he felt there was no choice but to leave his life behind. Remembering the wisdom of the monks, he decided to grow roots like an oak tree in "his home town" so he headed back to Montreal.

The artistic community did not exactly throw open its doors to an artist who basically grew up in Ottawa and simply loved Canada and its place in the world, while they were riding the wave of Quebec nationalism.

Niska found himself wondering, "Why should I continue to paint and to serve what greater purpose?" In his meditations, he found himself sending out a request to the universe to meet a spiritual master who could evaluate the relevance of his artwork as a researcher of inner light and soul on canvas. As Niska says, "God is always there for me, sometimes he shows up at the very last minute."

Spiritual Master Shri Chinmoy found his way to Niska's studio with an entourage of about twenty disciples. This visit led to Shri Chinmoy, (as the Director of the Peace and Meditation Center at the United Nations) to honour Niska in New York, as a World Server of Peace. Shri Chinmoy was memorialized recently by President Nelson Mandela as his "dear friend working for the greater cause of world peace and for his lifetime service to humanity." Archbishop Desmond Tutu poignantly added, "In a world of suspicion, hostility and conflict, he worked tirelessly to bring the different faiths together."

Spiritual Masters continued to appear over the years on Niska's path. Their sheer presence of light and encouraging response to his work meant so much to him.

On this long, long road, an unexpected lesson for me was to understand the unique friendship between the art collector and the painter. This lesson was about kindness and trust between the two. There are so many stories; the love for Niska's art conveyed by the collector literally gives Niska purpose to continue painting.

One last thought: the name Niska was chosen with Dr. Zauhar, who had studied at Columbia University and encouraged him to choose a brush name. Niska is Cree for *bird* and the bird is considered a symbol of the Soul. Niska said this name jumped out at him from one of the pages of the piles of books on this man's large desk.