

## Rick Nelms and Painting Without Brushes.

Rick was sitting on a beach in Mauritius watching the sun go down when he realised that this would be his last trip abroad, training teachers as part of his work in international examinations. He knew that he was not well, stumbling and walking stiffly as well as forgetting to do tasks at work. The risk of a fall in the laboratory caused early retirement in November 2013.

Rick's GP was sure what was wrong, but Rick saw multiple neurologists who all told him that his symptoms were connected to mental illness. One day the GP, concerned about new symptoms, sent him to A & E. There, a kind and very thorough doctor gave him a detailed examination. She arranged for him to be admitted. The next morning a wonderful consultant told Rick that he did have some very definite and serious symptoms. Rick burst into tears – at last someone believed him!

It took two more years to diagnose Primary Lateral Sclerosis, a rare and slowly progressing Motor Neurone Disease. Mobility was lost fairly quickly and he now spends most of his day in his powerchair, an impressive machine with leg lifters so that he can keep his legs raised and avoid painful lymphedema.

The journey that led to that beach in Mauritius was an unusual one. Aged 7, Rick's dad took the family to what is now Zimbabwe where his dad set up the medical school in Harare. Within ten minutes of arrival, Rick was in a garden. He had never seen a succulent, or a cactus, or a Jacaranda tree covered in purple blooms. Within five minutes more, he had become a plant biologist.

He is on the autistic spectrum, and after a bullied and troubled childhood characterized by the refrain 'I can't understand how someone so obviously intelligent can be so stupid' he was headed for trouble. At Bangor University, chosen because it was as far away from home as he could get, and it was the only one that let him study everything botanical, even seaweeds, he met the lovely Sue, to whom he is still married. Sue was a stabilizing influence, and little by little, the angry young man learned to love. Sue was a Christian which puzzled Rick. It took a few years, but

eventually Rick discovered that what Sue believed made sense and Rick became a Christian.

Realising that he wanted to teach people better than he himself had been taught, he diversified into other areas of biology to enable him to teach A level Biology in Sixth Form colleges. Twenty successful years on, work as an examiner fired him with enthusiasm for assessment which led him to Cambridge University and the world of international examinations. After ten wonderful years in Cambridge came that beach in Mauritius...

Rick went from an extremely knowledgeable biologist to someone who could not read a book because he forgot what he was reading about, who could not watch TV or a film because he could not remember the characters. Although an art teacher had told him he was useless at art, as an adult he had occasionally painted dramatic and colourful pictures. Now that he could not hold a brush, he wondered if there was anything he could do with his laptop. Both Rick and Sue have been prolific photographers, though now it is only Sue who takes the pictures. Rick started to play with the photographs using programs which you could configure to paint the colourful pointillistic impressionist paintings that he used to create. The paintings got rapidly better, so he did more.

As he spent more and more time painting with his computer, he started to get problems with lymphedema causing his legs to swell. Sue managed to source a wide, high desk that he could drive his wheelchair under and put his feet up, thus solving the problem, so he was free to spend as much time as he wanted painting, re-establishing his normal sunny disposition.

Rick has discovered that different programs allow him to paint different ways, and that some cheap or free apps for mobile or iPad can be just as much fun as the more expensive painting packages that he also uses. At a Quiet Morning run by Under the Thinking Tree, Rick did a couple of unexpected and unplanned paintings. Under the Thinking Tree invited him to become their 'artist-in-residence' – not bad for a boy who was labelled useless at art!

Rick's paintings get more and more complex, some taking months of work. He does illustrated talks, sharing his talents, encouragement and paintings with other people, including the lovely people at Arthur Rank hospice, the local MND association and local churches. The talks are backed up by a pdf about how Rick paints and what he uses, intended to inspire others to have a go. The combination clearly works, because many of those who have seen the talks have started experimenting with their own photographs.

As an artist his inspiration is colour, beauty and the future. Driven by his faith and his positive outlook on life he paints in dramatic colour. His paintings wonder: what it will be like in the refreshed world after Covid? what it will be like on this little blue pearl which is our home when we fix the climate crisis? how can you be happy no matter what life throws at you? how does love conquer everything? what things are so beautiful that they make your heart sing?