



Leenata Shah peered out of her car window into vast open skies. Her boundless imagination was at work on the finer details of the dream home she was planning to buy and design. The one that only she could colour and adorn in the way she did, a space to bring people together.

However, there was some deep dissatisfaction marring her dream. As a senior advertising professional, Leenata Shah was growing increasingly tired of working in an industry that peddled white lies, masked in her beautiful designs. She was disenchanted with selling things to people that they did not need, in an environment of corporate politics.

Creativity is boundless. While at times it can rein you in, it can also set you free. And so she decided to give up – rather, replace – her dream by leaving her corporate career to pursue a life of authenticity. Her values of love, beauty and unbridled creativity needed a better canvas.

During her days at AVM, studying at a time when math and sciences were the hallmark of academic excellence, she never felt like a good student. Fortunately, she also studied in a school that allowed learning through creative mediums – handwriting, art, craft, project work, dance and music. Her personality was about expression and she could find modes here. AVM also nurtured her spiritual inclinations through non-idol based prayer, yoga, dharma shiksha and social work. Significantly, AVM helped her discover her career and future calling in life. Art.

This led to Sir JJ School of Art and she passed out with awards and work placements in 1995. For someone who thought she was a poor student, she realised that, when she followed her passion, it brought out her best. She ended her education with accolades.

The India of 1995 offered limited avenues for creative people and, like others of her kind, she ended up in the advertising industry. Fortunately, she was gifted with sufficient talent and an insatiable desire for improving her designing skills, and rose in her career without resorting to politics. There was, however, this nagging feeling that she could do a lot more. Not being able to stop designing, she kept awake at nights. Already swamped with long hours at work, she organized a clothes exhibition in 1 month of a 100 pieces, selling 96 in 2 days, despite never being trained in fashion. A sabbatical from her corporate career also allowed her to spread her

creative wings. She worked with fabrics, created jewellery, designed sets for TV, styled spaces (homes, schools, offices) and created corporate identities.

The final straw on the back was her growing feeling of wanting to stay true to herself. She no longer identified with people who stepped over each other's toes to grow, nor with the nuanced lies of the advertising profession. She gave up her position of Design Director at Percept, a prestigious advertising firm, to walk on her own path.

As if a higher power wanted her to express the best version of herself, she soon discovered perhaps one of her greatest gifts. Her talent for painting, with her own unique style. That was not all. Free from the shackles of corporate life, her spiritual journey began to accelerate. She learned Reiki, became a certified counsellor and a tarot practitioner. Through her work, she began to reach more people.

No journey such as this is without its perils. Financial issues have constantly plagued Leenata. Money is a necessity, but not a driver. Creativity is. She hardly has any money left in her bank account in some months, but continues to paint. The faith that she will be looked after, faith that if she follows her heart she will live the purpose of her life fully, is what keeps her going on.



However, deep within Leenata lurked a dark, horrible secret. Authenticity was asking more from her. Her path of self-healing made her acknowledge what was hiding inside her, that which she would rather forget. She could no longer suppress what she had concealed for 34 years of her life: she had been sexually abused multiple times, by multiple people between the ages 4 and 9. And she had told no one about it till date.

Confronting it was difficult, but she was willing to work on the deeper, darker layers within to live the light that we actually are. Faced with tremendous amounts of emotional upheaval, instability and a roller coaster ride, she did not give up on her passions. That light was still shining – it was shining even before the healing. No matter the extent of the trauma, passion and inherent creative hunger kept her alive. The healing just made that part shine more. “With the kind of trauma pushed deep within, I could have been an addict of sorts, a hater of people (especially men), have gender biases, be an abuser myself, or could have been in a mental asylum”. The love of family, influential teachers and

friends meant she was not left alone. This allowed her to not hate people, but in fact be deeply empathetic and a people lover. She was able to assist people in making positive choices because she personally understood pain and going beyond it. Her motto in life became to love and spread love through all that she does.

Leenata wishes to reach more and more homes around the world through her paintings, to spread love and joy, and to bring people together. Her style is self-developed – vibrant inks on archival paper, and she allows it to evolve to new mediums such as edible art and wall painting. She has exhibited her work at multiple locations in India, Australia and Malaysia. Her repertoire expands beyond being just an artist. Her deep-rooted love for children and her desire to express her personality fully has made her combine art and counselling as a catalyst for inner growth. She works with street kids and NGOs, as well as conducts creative therapy workshops for children and grown-ups.

Life is already beautiful according to Leenata. She feels she is only adding to it.