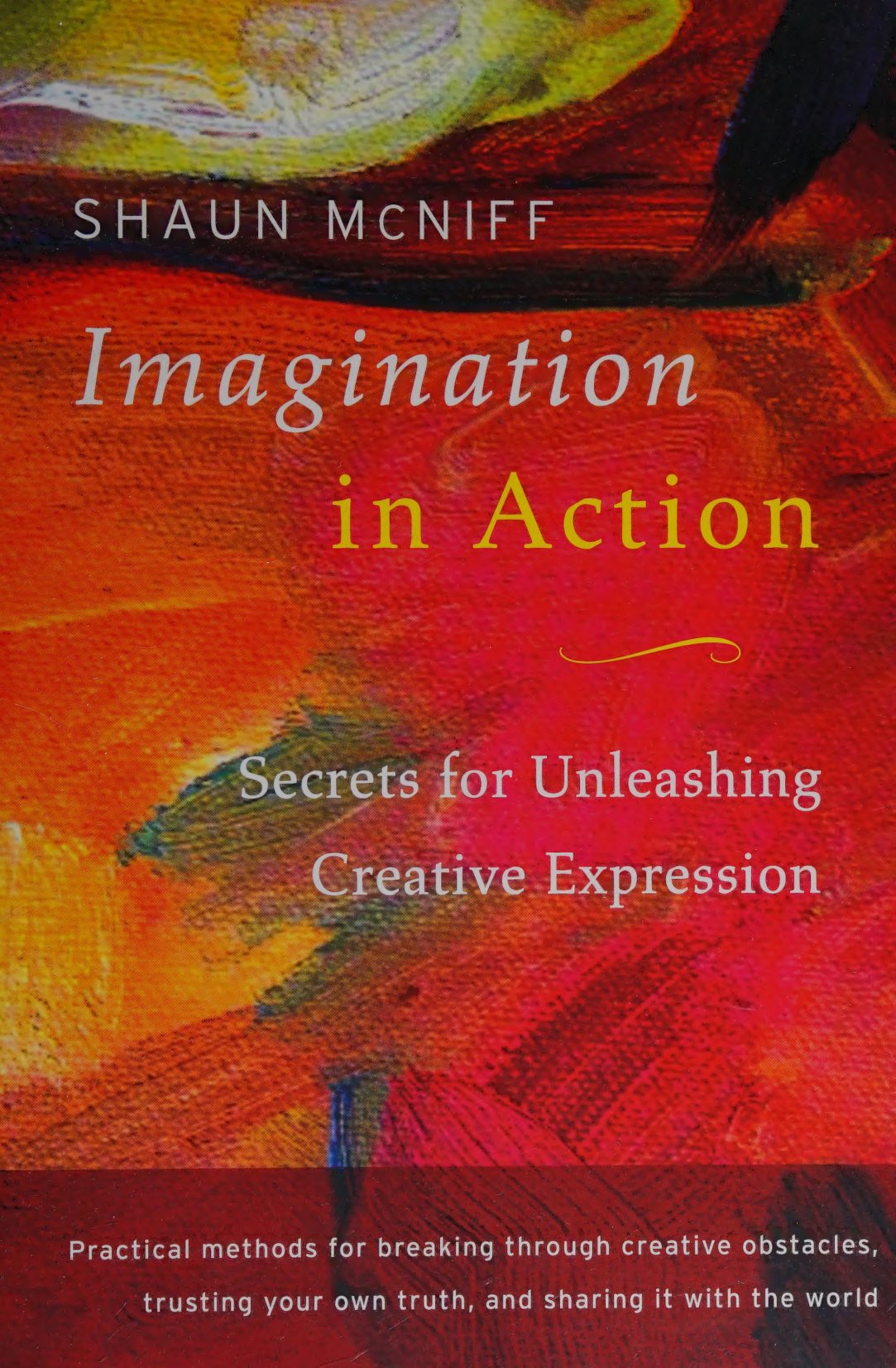


The background is an abstract, textured composition of warm colors, primarily reds, oranges, and yellows, with some cooler blue and green tones. A dark, possibly black, pen nib is visible in the upper right corner, pointing towards the center. The overall texture is painterly and expressive.

SHAUN MCNIFF

Imagination in Action

Secrets for Unleashing
Creative Expression

Practical methods for breaking through creative obstacles,
trusting your own truth, and sharing it with the world

Imagination in Action

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Imagination in Action

❧ *Secrets for Unleashing Creative Expression*

Shaun McNiff



Shambhala

BOSTON & LONDON

2015

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
www.shambhala.com

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

⊗ This edition is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39.48 Standard.

♻️ This book is printed on 30% postconsumer recycled paper. For more information please visit www.shambhala.com.

Distributed in the United States by Penguin Random House LLC
and in Canada by Random House of Canada Ltd

Designed by Dean Bornstein

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McNiff, Shaun.

Imagination in action: secrets for unleashing creative expression /
Shaun McNiff.—First Edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61180-201-6 (paperback)

1. Creative ability. 2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.) 3. Imagination. I. Title.

BE408.M337 2015

153.3'5—dc23

2014042224

There is only one thing a writer can write about: what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing . . . I am a responding instrument.

—William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*¹

Forever – is composed of Nows –

—Emily Dickinson²

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Imagination in Action

Prelude

☛ *Creativity is the ability to take what exists and change it into something new through unique responsive acts. It puts imagination into action.*

Rock the Reigning Order

Creativity is a defining quality of the human spirit, a force of nature, the mainstream of imagination accessible to all. Yet it is not free to run in schools and societies still repressed by restrictive ideas about the nature of creative intelligence, how it can be cultivated and taught, who can do it and who cannot, and how it changes the world.

The shackles to be cast off are largely fashioned by misperceptions that creativity and art are the domain of a talented few rather than the truly universal pulse advancing life everywhere. This narrow view is all too conveniently paired with entrenched values about educational basics—that is, that these basics do not include creative expression—and natural resistances people have to risking and acting outside the norm.

Forty-five years ago during a revolutionary time I was given a chance to cultivate creative expression in the back wards of a state mental hospital. My start was fortuitously in sync with emerging international communities training artists, students, teachers, therapists, and group leaders believing in the creative potential of every person. Engaging beginners, we explored how to create environments that would support optimal creative expression by understanding resistances, fears, and blocks—only to discover how valuable the same processes are to experienced artists.

After writing many books exploring ways to further creative expression and working with people throughout the world committed

to the arts and healing, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to reflect on the practices and ideas that have been most useful in helping myself and others. Of course I build upon all of my previous works and especially *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go* (1998), and I inevitably restate earlier discoveries, but this present book integrates what went before with new insights on creating with the shadow, witnessing and judgment, quality, resistance, the responsive aspects of creating, and most essentially how the creative expression is indivisible from nature.

While setting out to write a creativity primer for the general public I may have unintentionally written my most direct account of how art healing works, since the elemental qualities of the creative process are the same as healing. This accident underscores how anything with its finger close to the pulse of the creative source will fly the coops of conceptual silos and how the dynamics of nature hold all.

I start by reframing creativity itself and demonstrate how to reliably create if you are able and willing to let it happen in your most natural way. Commitment and attitude are everything. The most intractable obstacles and blocks are in the mind and in approaches to creativity that reinforce too much thinking and not enough practice and play. Of course thoughts and ideas have a prominent place in the creative realm but, as we show here, they have to relax their controls and follow the lead of physical gestures and passions that carry within themselves innate drives for quality and beauty. We will practice how to transform harsh inner judges into perceptive witnesses of the unique nature of a creative expression, its “suchness” transcending good and bad, and we will explore how difficulties and disturbing things are time-tested fuel for the alchemy of art.

Creativity is the ability to take what exists and change it into something new through unique responsive acts. It happens by building or simply altering relationships. The creative act involves doing things differently, sometimes even in unthinkable and illogical ways, which can be risky when the world values conformity and prescribed truths. It is a “process” of the moment rarely working in planned and

predictable patterns. This accounts for why it is so universally misunderstood and seldom integrated into formal education. Creativity puts imagination into action. It rocks the reigning order.

The prevalent attempts to reduce the creative process to fixed steps contribute to missing how creation involves acts cohering simultaneously, all at once, suddenly yet holistically, and in endlessly variable and personal ways frequently accompanied by a necessary chaos and tension that play key roles in furthering change. Sometimes the process flows and often it does not. Disturbances also have their place in making things anew, and the creative act and the fulfillment it brings cannot be realized without opening to their formative powers.

Artistic expressions offer a tangible resource for understanding the nature of creative action, which is broader in scope and applicable to any sphere of life focused on change and imagination. This book is art-based and written with the hope that readers will apply its methods and ideas not only to art but to all things people do.

The emphasis on letting expression happen does not encourage passivity. “Letting” is the partner of “making” that we do better by accepting and engaging the myriad and unrealized forces of creation moving through us and through our environments. Control has its role in establishing habitats for creativity and is more effective when responding and taking advantage of what reliably happens. We do not control nature. We creatively respond.

Can't Fence Anything with Wings—Endless Variations of Practice

Movement, painting, drawing, object making, performance, writing, vocal expression, and percussion are the primary artistic disciplines from which I draw examples and practice suggestions. Hopefully, this book supports application to endless variations of artistic practice. I also draw on experience with athletics, because I believe the dynamics of creating in both art and sport are bonded by common links to creative responsiveness in the moment. I have learned many

things about the psychology of art and creative practice from my often humbling personal participation in sports. There is a similar correspondence between the arts and leadership and all of life as a context for creation.

A Connemara farmer once said to me, "Can't fence anything with wings." This is how I view the creative process. It is not something to be encapsulated in a formula nor restricted to particular domains of practice. It flies and perpetually crosses over from one place to another, one idea to the next, one movement and gesture to those that follow.

The ubiquity of the creative spirit thus requires concrete and empirical examples to inform personal practice and not just float in the sky amid clouds of ideas. Every effort is made here to integrate reflection and doing, giving body to ideas and spirit to matter. In keeping with this reciprocity between thought and action, I attempt to write in a conversational style as much as possible, speaking directly to readers, asking questions, and offering suggestions for practice.

Action suggestions will be offered but with a view to approaching creative expression as our most personal genius; thus practice ideas are intended as prompts for doing something uniquely yours. Every element of practice offers different ways to realize the formative powers of natural gestures and perceptions and to experience how we can change together with the things we make.

The creative process evokes questions that may be as informative as the responses we give, maybe even more so since they underscore the importance of ongoing dialogue, reflection, and new contributions. My queries try to approach situations from different vantage points with a dialectical commitment to revealing the limitations of the usual ego position, which is bound by habit and the assumption it knows what we are doing and why. Contradictions are received as part of what I call the "complex of creation" not always lending itself to linear progression. The issues raised are starting points for ongoing dialogue and creations spinning off from them. Each question is

a basis for a new inquiry and thesis, consistent with the emphasis here on acts building upon acts in a process of change. They might be used in a course on the creative process, as private reflection, or in conversation with colleagues.

Readers are invited to participate in the discussion and reflect on creative expression. As I mention here, my years of teaching and community work have demonstrated to me how the group mind has the ability to transcend what any one person may present or say. As a teacher, artist, and leader, I try to get the creative process moving, step aside, and give it a chance to find its own way.

The practice suggestions and questions running through and concluding different sections of the book will, I hope, lend themselves to responses in words, images, and whatever creative forms you might engage—from digital media to the traditional bound journal.

This book is offered as a spark, an act, that hopefully will succeed in stimulating your creative response.

Creativity Is a Force of Nature

*Creative expressions grow from physical actions
building upon one another and cohering in a process
of ongoing change.*

It Can Be as Natural as Breathing

☞ *Deep down is here now; nowhere else.*

Everywhere Present

The commitment to liberating creative expression rests on the assumption that it is held back and restrained somewhere. I think it is for most people, but the place of repression is largely psychological and self-created. We establish these conditions with opinions about who can and cannot create, what is good and not good, and who has the authority to make these standards.

Change starts with being more imaginative about how we think about the creative act. I suggest reframing the process in the most complete way, likening it to elemental functions of breathing, feeling, and moving, accessible to everybody. I will identify stereotypic notions about creativity, obstacles to expression, and how to understand their origins. Everything can be altered and renewed if we are willing to experiment.

The most pervasive restraint is the idea that creative expression is restricted to those who “have” creativity within them. There are two problems with this idea. First, it suggests that creativity is identified with some people and not others; and second, it may be inaccurate regarding the whereabouts of the creative source. Experienced creators know they are channels for a force moving through them, prone to acting on its own time and not theirs. It is not something they possess or switch on and off. Creating is a dance with what we can and cannot control and the challenge is to be receptive, ready, and capable of engagement.

Locating the source of creativity exclusively within the person can hamper both accomplished artists and beginners. It may account for why so many people do not see themselves as participants in the creative process. They gaze inside and may not see anything in particular to bring forth.

I want to be careful here about suggesting a literal division between inside and outside. The inner world can be viewed as a perspective on experience and not as something physically located inside me. Looking out at the world is similarly an aesthetic perspective, feeling into otherness and things beyond our material bodies. Ultimately the two viewpoints are aspects of a consciousness containing them both and more. The same applies to the interaction between what is hidden and seen, between shadow and light, between angst and comfort—the tandems inform one another.

Of course creative and artistic expressions draw from a person's feelings, depths, memories, experience, skills, visions, and emotional turmoil, but an exclusive focus on inner states obstructs access to the things around us, inviting a response and paradoxically expanding internal consciousness. Creativity might be reconsidered as something both within the person and in the neighborhoods and places where we live, a force of nature permeating all things.

The key is to transcend the notion that it is only about us. We are certainly participants and centers of action, but everything depends upon how we engage other elements and learn how to let the creative spirit move us.

Approaching creativity as being everywhere present like the physical energies in our environments shifts the emphasis from initiating something alone to responding and participating with what is already here.

Acting like Nature

Art has been viewed as representing and interpreting nature but not enough attention has been given to how the process of cre-

ation in all of its forms acts like nature. Making art is closely related to how things grow and move in the physical world. What keeps us estranged from something basic to human experience, a discipline as potentially accessible as meditation, prayer, and physical conditioning?

Everything about creative vitality depends on how we respond to life situations—how we perceive and put them to use. I have found most of us carry considerable baggage about how we view ourselves in relation to the creative act, and these perceptions are another factor accounting for why such a small percentage of humanity is involved in some form of creative practice. We also tend to aggrandize “creative people” and place them up on an art-world Olympus, far from the conditions characterizing lives at home, at school, at work, on the streets, and even in the art studio.

In my practice of the arts, I observe how depth of feeling and meaning is on the surface of our perceptions of the physical world, waiting to be appreciated and engaged. This can happen with the most ordinary things, in contrast to the usual idea of creative expression being something uncommon. Successful artworks convey a sense of depth through presentational features evoking inner reverberations in viewers and audiences who complete their expressive cycles and who are as necessary to creative vitality as artists are. This happens when we witness someone take a risk, engage the immediate situation, and do something touching others and evoking empathy. Depth tends to involve feeling a vivid sense of presence and awareness in the moment.

Rather than the abstract and maybe even impossible challenge to create something from nothing, we physically “respond” to things already here with us. Deep down is here now; nowhere else. It helps to think more about the responsive nature of the creative act than the more typical focus on initiating action according to plans.

This responsive and spontaneous basis of expression underscores how we never create alone, even in the most solitary situations. My work with others concentrates on group participation in studios

that I feel illuminates and models universal forces of nature that both assist and block expression in every context of practice. Group dynamics, both good and bad, permeate life from global to cellular levels. The creative process is a group process whereby the varied elements and figures of our most intimate selves, inside and outside awareness, create together.

Creative expression is an incremental building process of responsive acts. Beginners, or experienced artists engaging new media, might even have certain advantages in terms of fresh responses not as constrained by habit and expectations. Where skill and experience play important roles in the total process of expression, they may have limiting features in relation to an overall scheme of creativity valuing new responses. Here we will view skill as the ability to respond with spontaneity, sensitivity, and imagination.

As someone who works with many hundreds of people each year to help them access creative powers, I can say without conditions that with the right support from others, and of course from our own selves, every person can tap into and release unique creative expressions. This innate capacity is held back by remarkably universal inhibitions, doubts, fears, and restraints. Experience also suggests that the best way to personally know the process of creative expression, and access it, is to understand the things keeping it at bay and out of reach and then do what is required to change.

Although the ideas and methods presented here are directed to all people who want to initiate creative expression in their lives, they have also helped professional artists connect with their most authentic expressions and renew expressive powers. Perhaps this egalitarian attempt to understand the creative source in all of life may become a gathering of forces, a creative convergence, where the collective effort frees some of the obstructed channels of creative energy in us and our communities. We can do so much more in creating what I call "slipstreams of expression," where group and environmental forces carry us much farther than we will go alone.

Re-Visioning the Creative Act

☞ *Creative expression happens when we immerse ourselves in a process trusting it will shape and lead.*

A New Framework

As creativity is being recognized as an essential intelligence bringing significant change to the world, we are appropriately asking what it is, who has it, whether or not it can be developed, and if so, how. The ideas and practices that are reliably effective with a broad spectrum of people experimenting with creative expression are presented in four threads of discussion.

First—although thinking has an important role in creating, we tend to think too much. Thus, a primary goal will be getting out of our heads and into our bodies where we are carried and influenced by essential movements and spontaneous responses to them, imagining ourselves as participants in larger forces of nature.

Second—it is possible to view quality from perspectives and values accessible to all.

Third—I have found the key suppressors of creative expression to be low self-confidence and harsh judgment, largely initiated by ourselves. Learning how to witness and perceive what we do with interest and compassion will be presented as an imagination-enhancing alternative to these inhibitors.

Fourth and finally—we will explore how these and other life tensions and difficulties provide dependable and potent energy sources for creative transformation catalyzing change in personal and social realms.

All of the above operate in a dynamic mix of action and attitude with each playing a part in motivating and shaping artistic expression. Although the page-by-page structure of this text requires a sequence and separate discussion of topics, I want to stress how the elements work together simultaneously and the weighting of the respective influences may differ. Affirmation of the unpredictable and infinitely variable nature of the creative process and its outcomes is in keeping with the way artists and athletes emphasize, "It never goes according to plan."

Embracing the most basic actions as sources of creative expression runs counter to just about everything we assume about the process of creation. My admittedly minimalist approach to creating combines the practice of moving and acting with reflecting. The perfection of any complex and creative skill requires both. Watching and perceiving are practiced in my studios as a discipline of witnessing that encourages empathy, concentration, and support, as I will describe. People generally find it challenging to move in simple and sustained ways and to witness others with complete concentration and silence. We might all benefit from perfecting the art of doing and witnessing the most elemental things that invariably open to deep and fascinating content. Change often happens through the building process of small acts.

Viewing the creative process as a force combining micro and macro elements of nature both inside and outside of us is reinforced by many world traditions and especially by ideas about the interconnectedness of all things, perpetual movement, impermanence, and how small and humble acts generate larger changes in the world.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead suggests that creation is never a totally isolated occurrence. It is a process where the particular expression grows within a context. Every "actual entity" cannot exist without undergoing changes in relation to other things. The various processes of the world connect to create "novel togetherness" that is always unique.¹ Whitehead called this "concrecence,"

from the term used to describe how different elements grow together in biology. In his view this creative process applies to all things in nature large and small.

Susanne K. Langer furthers these ideas in her three-volume masterwork, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. She explores how even at the levels of molecules and atoms, vital functions involve ongoing interaction and change: “acts within acts” and “rhythms within rhythms,” building upon one another and into “the incredible dynamism called a living body, which disintegrates if the creative activity stops.”² Langer called the force joining things together a “rhythmic concatenation” in which organisms at every level of existence have to keep moving, changing, in a process where “every act of a living unit transforms its situation,” and she aligns this with Whitehead’s “‘creative advance’ of nature.”³ In 50 B.C. Lucretius anticipated these ideas in *De Rerum Natura* (*The Nature of Things*), suggesting that all of life takes shape from the unpredictable joining of the most essential particles.

Experiences in studio sessions I lead concur with these views about how life and creation grow from physical actions building upon one another and cohering in a process of ongoing change, improvisation, and self-creation. The methods of acting and witnessing to be presented align creative expression with the way things grow and evolve in nature and how imagination exists in the spaces between people and objects of contemplation.

The process of engaging the life-enhancing forces of creative expression does not always evoke positive feelings. The root of the various art tensions to be discussed here is how the drive to make and create paradoxically requires the ability to relax controls and engage unexpected and often challenging results. We need support in understanding how difficult experiences not only provide the fuel for creative expression but lead to new dimensions of discovery and change. Where just about everything in life is oriented toward avoiding or suppressing darkness and uncertainty, soulful art requires them, as

well as requiring the transformation of the most vexing problems we face individually and in groups. Therefore, challenges and even chaos become valued partners.

All this emphasis on angst, difficulty, and shadows makes it necessary to say clearly that of course I encourage sensory pleasure, passionate play, and hopefully lots of exultation and laughter. If we can let go of impediments to expression, the process dependably generates sensory enjoyment and appreciation.

Art tensions are reliably present, no matter how effective I might be in trying to further acceptance, relaxation, and delight. Thus I conclude, these adverse forces are not only natural and unavoidable but vital participants in the overall process. We might acknowledge them, get to know them better, and become more effective in relating. Transformation of tensions, fears, and doubts may produce a deep satisfaction. I cannot say many develop an ability to enjoy the most difficult conditions, but we do become more comfortable and confident when creating with them.

How It Happens

In clearing the space for action and sustaining expression I suggest putting aside the linear step-by-step approaches to creativity that have held sway for generations. Neither the emotional realm nor nature operates this way. Stage theories have never jibed with what I observe as an artist and facilitator of creative expression in others. Creative discovery happens when we immerse ourselves in a process and trust it will shape and lead within a context where nothing is known in advance and expertise involves giving everything we have to the unfolding work and its perfection. We learn consistently that difficult and exasperating conditions are reliably part of an intelligence challenging us to cooperate with it.

In 1891 at his seventieth birthday banquet, the German physicist Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz said his course of dis-

covery generally followed three stages: saturation, incubation, and illumination. *The Art of Thought* (1926) by Graham Wallas (1858–1932) solidified the place of stage thinking by changing the name of Hemholtz’s first stage to preparation and adding a fourth phase, of verification. The Helmholtz stage theories still remain in use, with variations and tinkering shifting from four to more stages in just about every sector related to creativity.

It is questionable, however, whether anything in the sphere of imagination really follows such a fixed sequence. These theories offer impressions of order and logic in the often messy and random domain of creating where we reliably anticipate the unexpected and feel our way through terrain yet to be traveled. Yes, the process is characteristically episodic and involves different confrontations and passages that often convey archetypal patterns, but the overall sequence of creation is much closer to the unpredictable encounters of *Don Quixote* as presented by Cervantes than tidy stage theories.

Creativity is also highly contagious and it is often in sync with the correspondence principle of “like makes like.” Emotional forces of inspiration instantly affect the mind and all of our faculties. We are buoyed and guided, often subliminally and outside direct consciousness, by our experiences of art, by the witnessing I will describe and the internalization of influences and creative spirits acting upon our total being. For example, I read Ernest Hemingway and Emily Dickinson when I want to write tersely. Listening to James Brown helps me run faster. And Chaim Soutine and Nell Blaine assist in letting go with paint.

In my experience, both personally and in guiding others, the only way art making occurs according to set stages is when they are introduced in advance by those in charge to direct the process. If the context is more open and free, it does not work this way. The actions and range of contents are too vast, variable, personal, wily, and perverse. Since most people know this on a certain level, they fall back on devices that give them control and prevent chaos. When

I started engaging others in creative expression, I too leaned toward controlled and consistent steps. They made me feel more secure and gave a sense that I knew what I was doing.

I soon discovered that I was overly involved in determining what would happen rather than allowing it to emerge. All it took were a few spirited challenges from participants to help me realize how I was imposing a frame that did not feel right for them. These challenges, complaints, and rebellions have been constant teachers in relation to how tension and conflict define situations; they help us see things in more comprehensive ways and to change.

I also learned in the first years of my practice how structure is an asset and does help to liberate expression. However, I see the way the most elemental and basic structures further a comprehensive range of individual expression. I ask how I might design structures that increase the variability and imagination of expression while using and building upon the most organic and accessible gestures of expression.

Sometimes things fall together in a logical sequence, but for the most part creative inquiry tends to be distinctly nonlinear; very often it is contradictory, perplexing, emotionally exasperating, or infuriating as well as exhilarating, surprising, chaotic, and tenacious, all of which will never be replaced by predictable steps. Art and creative expression are by definition infinitely variable, never replicable under controlled circumstance as in science, and frequently characterized by suddenness of discovery—eureka moments, epiphanies, and simultaneous convergences presenting a completeness of form and feeling.

The creative act involves the ability to open to the occurrence and respond, to grasp the opportunity. Although each of us tends to have a style of operating as well as familiar themes and concerns—with some seeking order and beauty and others provoking tension and chaos—the more general mix of ingredients is always changing in relation to the present moment and the environment.

And of course creative discovery does not always happen sud-

denly or spontaneously; it may involve or require grinding away like Sisyphus pushing his rock: there is no fixed pattern. It is a discipline complementing scientific predictability with an embrace of the unknown.

PART TWO

The Best Things Happen

Creative expression in all of the arts tends to be all about not knowing the end at the beginning, and this characteristic is what makes it so challenging for people accustomed to thinking through what they are going to do before they do it.

A Failure-Proof Starter

☞ *The complex is best accessed through simple things.*

The Movement Source

Creative expression is a multifaceted “complex” with the potential for infinite variations even within the most distinct personal styles. Paradoxically the simplest methods, as with contemplative practice, are the vehicles for activating, releasing, and sustaining this range of possibilities. It is fascinating how the complex is best accessed through simple things. They also leave room for reflection and awareness.

When she was in her nineties I told my dance colleague Norma Canner how she had a lasting influence on my work in relation to letting movements build on one another; she beamed when I made a gesture in the air and said, “And the next one happens.”

In just about every situation when introducing artistic expression I ask people to make a movement as mindfully as possible and then let this gesture lead to the next—the simpler the deeper.

The effectiveness of this approach can be likened to the concentration on breath in meditation. We discover how things happen and emerge naturally from whatever we do, all of which cannot be planned in advance. Forces like gravity and the muscular tensions and instinctual reactions of the body sometimes direct expression more effectively than the thinking mind. The process is like weather; the mind responds rather than controls what emerges. The discipline involves staying connected and committed to the process with all of our sensibilities, giving it everything we have, while also relaxing

the pressure for outcomes in order to allow the creative intelligence the freedom to do its work. If we are involved with thought about anything other than what we are doing now, we lose contact.

This concentration on elemental movement or expressive acts is a failure-proof starter for those who are intimidated or who have no idea about what to do. I describe how the only way you will fail is to stop moving in this instinctive way and begin to think too much and direct the process with mental controls. Repeatedly I see how the expressive quality of paintings, dance, and other artistic improvisations vanishes when people lose contact with the movement source. I have learned it is important to let them know in advance how this tends to happen, using the “data” from so many previous sessions, to reinforce sustained commitment to the most natural and expressive gestures, even if they only serve as starting points for the overall composition of an artwork that keeps and refines their essential qualities or uses them as a basis for something completely different—perhaps as an irritant to go against or to eliminate as a new beginning.

I use analogies from sport and leadership to stress the importance of “soft hands” rather than a white-knuckle grip on the controls. When we hold on tightly, everything becomes focused on the controlling and linear mind and there is no room for the body to act as a conduit for the creative forces I have described. A friend mentioned how her skiing improved when she stopped “overthinking.” She said, “I pointed my skis down and let my body react to the bumps and moguls. When I let go and stopped trying to control the environment and my body, that’s when good things happened.”

Experienced artists also benefit from this way of beginning since it helps them get beyond habitual expressions. Oftentimes the most skilled artists are the ones who most appreciate how helpful it may be to start like this. In a weeklong studio a painter responded to my suggestion to begin with a simple movement by spending all of her time making a series of large paintings by repeating the same line gesture with different colors and formal characteristics, proving the

point of how simplicity and complexity, rhythm and variation, work together in art.

Not Knowing the End at the Beginning

Creative expression in all of the arts tends to be all about not knowing the end at the beginning, and this characteristic is what makes it so challenging for people accustomed to thinking through what they are going to do before they do it. Just about everything in our academic histories, work, and personal lives is based upon preconception and control.

When people are invited to simply make a movement, the natural tendency is to think about it first and send thoughts out like a point person to have a look at the terrain. This leads to trying to implement a preexisting concept, often a visual image of what one wants to do.

Inner visions and images of what we hope to express may inspire and inform expression but it helps to understand their preliminary nature and how the ensuing process of creation grows organically from responsive actions that often present surprising new contents. We may start with a distinct idea but creative expression requires the complementary process of allowing it to unfold intuitively within the give-and-take of action. Once the process of creating begins, effective expression depends on working with what is emerging in relation to the material process and how the interpretation takes shape as a separate entity. As the painter William Morris Hunt (1824–1879) declared, “See what makes the picture!”¹ rather than attempting a technical rendering of some other thing.

If we try to literally and exactly represent the inner image, this reliably dooms the spontaneous emergence of what happens naturally and innately through the body’s essential movement. This is one of many examples of how we create expectations which may be impossible to attain. Thoughts like this are all about being somewhere other than where you are right now.

Although I often create in response to an image, idea, feeling, or

sense of what I want to do, most people who are being introduced to creative expression are more apt to be without a sense of direction. Thus those of us who assist them learn how to introduce simple structures like those suggested here to get things moving.

Experienced artists who have no difficulty working from ideas often benefit from practice in more spontaneous ways of generating new expressions and directions.

The movement basis of expression applies to every art form: even writing, which is often viewed as a completely internal and contemplative process. Writers who procrastinate might especially benefit from these elemental movement dynamics. Motions and gestures on paper or a keyboard activate the writing process, which is all about kinesis as well as reflection, the hands as well as the mind.

Forms Emerge

Ideas emerge through the act of writing—as the writer says: I do not know what I think or what I am going to say until I write it; the process of writing reveals what I am thinking. Creative writers insist it is the characters who create the story. The characters incrementally give shape to the text through their dialogue and thoughts, as writers listen, feel, and channel the characters' expressions. In my experience, ideas and insights always come through conversations with others and this dynamic is extended to interactions among characters and other things in the solitary process of creation.

In addition to the emergence of ideas through movements, the writing process for many involves sustained revision—adding, trimming, polishing, and deleting. There are unique artists like D. H. Lawrence who write a text in an inspired flow from start to finish—rather than revise *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) he wrote three separate versions like spontaneous Asian brush paintings or watercolors where the original gesture is not altered—but most of us are apt to work and rework a text in trying to hone the best statement. In order for this progressive building process to happen it is

still necessary to get something onto the page, perhaps best achieved through the most instinctive movements, which help us access contents that cannot be preconceived. So even if we might not be able to do this as completely as Lawrence did, creation tends to begin with spontaneity of gesture.

I have learned through my setbacks in writing and painting that the revising process has to keep the expressive fluidity and foundational movement of the whole piece. Spontaneous and fresh responses are sustained through the different phases of creation and most people have more trouble maintaining expressive movement than initiating it. This reinforces my position that just about everybody is capable of creative expression and it also clarifies the challenges to be addressed in strengthening the ability to stay with the process and let it find its form by progressively building upon movement sources.

Move . . . and Pause, Too

☞ *Nothing happens unless I get going.*

Creating from the Body

"How do I begin?" is always the first question in the minds of people in my studio sessions when given opportunities to paint, draw, dance, write, or do just about anything spontaneous.

"Make a gesture, take a breath, and let the next one emerge from it."

There is usually a look of doubt saying, how can it be this simple?

"If you can move and stay with it, something significant will happen. Keep it simple and try not to think about what you are doing. Do that later. Right now just make a gesture, something that comes naturally to you and keep repeating it. Repetition, as with trance, and especially if you do it rhythmically, helps the mind relax and move out of the control tower. Check your ego at the door so that it doesn't get in the way."

As people begin to move with their bodies in dance, with paint, or making sounds, they benefit from support. I say, "Stick with that gesture. It is perfect and natural. Keep repeating the movement and it will begin to vary naturally and generate a larger composition."

I feel akin to a meditation teacher who keeps saying only "Breathe in and breath out. Think of the present moment"—and who says this over and over again, often nothing but this, because it is so hard to do. The same thing applies to creative expression, which is a thoroughly contemplative process. As with meditation, people can use lots of help with basic principles and in learning to trust the innate

wisdom of instinctual gestures, albeit practiced with discipline, attentiveness, curiosity, and a desire to shape them as well as possible. It is remarkable how the simplest things might be the most difficult. I will show later how quality expression, doing the best we can in a particular situation, is not necessarily foreign to elemental movement and letting the expression happen like a force of nature.

This movement basis of expression is different from the popular efforts to help people by focusing on different hemispheres of the brain. Although I recognize, of course, that some might find brain orientations helpful, for me they keep us in the head, not to mention within compartmentalized and dualistic concepts. The mind also tends to become absorbed with its particular focal points. Of course our brains are part of the creative process, but I like to think of mind in its entirety, working with all of the senses and faculties as an interdependent process, as an ecology of expression, where the oft-disparaged body and feelings are primary players in generating actions that give shape often outside the sphere of thinking. The individual mind-body collaboration expands to include all of nature, its intelligences, and ways of being and acting.

Staying with the Immediate Movement

In studio sessions everybody benefits from support and coaching in staying with elemental gestures. I often mention John Cage who said something like this in a session I attended: if you are bored after two minutes do it for four minutes, and if still bored then eight, sixteen, thirty-two—and ultimately it will become fascinating.

When encouraging people to begin through movement, I see how most tend to start off with unique gestures and expressions but they invariably stall when they begin to think about what they are doing and then start to direct the process with thoughts. The expression tightens up and loses natural expressive qualities.

To prevent this I encourage repetition. Inevitably the form and direction of the expression will begin to develop with additional

features but in the beginning most people find it challenging to stay with their gestures. I do my best to relax the mind and to further innate movement, constantly learning in my own art how I obstruct its creative power with too much control. The mind practices how to follow, respond, and appreciate what emerges from spontaneous gestures.

A studio participant described how her repetitions “felt” more unique and authentic as a result of sustained expression. We observe how the quality of the process and artistic outcomes results from an ability to let go, move freely, and sustain movements. Repeating a gesture helps the body take the lead and movement patterns tend to become more relaxed, natural, and expressive.

I try not to ask people to create according to a particular feeling or conceptual prompt, although I might sometimes suggest different kinds of movements to help sustain or vary expression, or both. When I do this, I keep whatever I recommend closely connected to the natural physical qualities of the body moving, holding that as our primary focus rather than abstract concepts.

I cringe when I see people asking others right at the starting gate to paint their fear or joy; and I avoid anything following the steps of a preordained exercise. Many use guided imagery, but for me it is overly directive and takes people away from where they are. If I am in a room in Cambridge or Hong Kong with a group of people, I want to engage the qualities and energies of the particular place and the people in it and their ways of moving rather than being transported to a beach in Tahiti or a stream in the Tetons. I am stubbornly attached to and fascinated with the spirits of the most ordinary places and things. This embrace of the ordinary and its creative potential models the process of creation I encourage. Feeling the need to go somewhere else reinforces detachment from the real now. Imagining different places and memories can be a core feature of creative expression and relaxation, but my concern is when these states are implanted by others.

All of the arts emerge from a movement base. I have learned this ■

not only through experiences in helping others but consistently with my own artistic expression. The craft and disciplined skills of experienced artists are connected to activating this essential movement, maintaining it, and giving it shape as they move with it.

People in studios find it helpful when I say, “If you can move, you can paint. If you start to move a finger or an arm, the dance has begun. Try not to be concerned with preexisting pictures in your mind. They tend to be difficult, even impossible, to represent by the most experienced artists. Concentrate on the unique features of how you move the brush or how the paint moves you—how you respond to its qualities.”

In many ways I am lowering the bar to further universal participation, but it is interesting how this “lowering” becomes a way of deepening, going down and into the kinetic sources of expressions, and tapping into expressive forces helping us make the best work possible. I will discuss this in relation to quality.

Everything from tone of voice, body language, pacing of speech, and most of all being comfortable taking pauses and encouraging others to do the same has a tremendous impact on helping people enter what I call creative space, a largely psychological and emotional realm affirming natural movement. As mentioned before, the first sessions are strongly oriented toward support and confidence building and toward doing everything possible to sustain expression.

No matter what the medium is, nothing happens unless I get going. Whatever the initial gesture may be, it becomes the source for something else to happen in response to it. One thing builds on another, leads to the next, and suggests possibilities emerging only through the action itself. I might begin with an intention, an idea, a sense of where I have to go, but the creation takes shape through physical acts. The outcome is always a surprise that cannot be known before I begin.

Not everything about creative expression is unknown. In both my studio sessions and in personal practice, I know my process of working, which tends to be consistent. Like most creators, I have

predictable rituals that activate expression—preparing materials, organizing the physical space—and I begin the work with preliminary gestures. The best things happen when I start moving, making marks, correcting things that do not look right but which may generate something growing from them that I could never plan. The discipline is based upon sustaining the particular movements of a medium, continued effort, and experimentation from which new forms appear.

Space for Deepening

An action focus does not have to be forced or driven. Movement is subtle as well as overt. It incorporates elements of stillness, quiet, and reflection—but in keeping with the nature of any living thing, kinesis is ongoing, even if unseen. Again, the best model is breath and the instinctive gestures of the body.

The work I do with others in studio sessions is permeated by pauses furthering awareness and appreciation of what is happening. After any significant expressive effort, whether I am working in groups or alone with another person, we “take a pause.” The life movement of the present creative moment does not stop during this interval. Rather it tends to deepen as we feel its presence. The pause melds body, the creative spirit, and everything moving through the immediate environment. It actually furthers the efficiency of our overall individual and group activity by gathering and combining resources in a common purpose versus the fragmentation and wasted energy tending to happen when we move too quickly from one thing to another.

Giving attention to transitions and honoring what has taken place are invigorating and there is a felt sense that it is the right thing to do. It also prepares us for what will happen next.

Participants in my studios are universally surprised by the invitation to take a collective pause after making a heartfelt expression.

This is because it goes contrary to the usual way we move from one thing to the other in our lives, a tendency that characterizes group work in particular. The quiet period universally becomes one of the most significant aspects of their experience. Its relevance is created I believe by the energy and emotional impact of the preceding action, which require a moment of stillness in order to be appreciated. We tend to move immediately from one action to another, often quickly when excited, and this usually results in a loss of awareness. Within our studios, pauses offer intervals of mindfulness: moments of integration affirming and holding the soul of what just happened.

I also introduce pauses when people experience panic and fear, which are apt to involve a radical acceleration of emotion and thoughts. I have found that making the suggestion to take a pause, rather than speaking, is the most effective way of transforming tense moments. I learned this the hard way through the crucible of group leadership. The silent pause conveys a sense of safety and commitment while also fully recognizing the problem and immediate emotions. If people can breathe and find stillness, they realize in a potent physical way how important it is to slow everything down because of the way fear and panic spread. The pause affirms they are still present and held by the moment.

As a leader I first discovered the importance of pauses when I began to use them as a way of responding to threatening conditions that can cause so much damage in groups and within our psyches. I recall an instance years ago where the tension was so high I instinctively put my back up against a wall, which was fortunately next to me, for support. Quiet ensued because there was nothing else that could be said to alleviate the conditions. I had to take a deep breath in order to keep my own consciousness. In doing this overtly I must have sent a message to the group. They did the same.

As the silence continued, I realized it was the only way to deal with the immediate situation. There was recognition and acceptance of what had happened, maybe even a sense of its purpose. It was a

complex situation incapable of being captured or resolved in words, explanations, judgments, and points of view.

I began to extend the use of the pause to deal not only with tensions but also as a way of responding to moments of beauty and creative expression that are similarly beyond the reach of words. The consistently supportive response made me realize how much people need this. Before pausing I always recognize and thank the person or persons who just offered a creative expression.

The power and impact of the pause emerge from the preceding action, positive or negative. It does not occur in a void. The artistic partnerships between action and reflection, expression and pausing, and doing and feeling contribute to an expansion of contemplative practice, which is usually perceived and approached as a process of quiet sitting.

Rest periods and even extended breaks may be necessary aspects of creative practice. I need them and I will often shift between projects and artistic media, seeing how parallel activities inform one another. But I know when I disengage from immediate contact, the particular phase of expression ends. The process may be reactivated by reentering the work. It is like taking a break from a dance, or a pause while playing music. The artist stays in sync with the tempo and rhythm, their felt sense in the body, and reconnects with their patterns when playing again. The same thing is required when we take more prolonged breaks from a painting or writing project. We learn how to restore contact by entering the space of the work.

Practice: Perceiving with Intrigue

It is necessary to relax the dismissive judgment and the more general lack of self-confidence permeating the creative process. One of the best ways to do this is to concentrate on the most distinct features of expressive gestures. The assessment of quality becomes a process of appreciating inherent character, looking more closely at what you do—and maybe more generously, too.

Reflective pauses enhance appreciation and sustain the flow of expression. The key is to concentrate on becoming more aware and mindful of what you are doing rather than judging it, which can arrest flow by severing the partnership between movement and contemplation.

What is the individual nature of the expression? What is it about it that is uniquely yours? Once you get a clearer sense of this, it will help you continue.

You might also ask how you might do an even better job conveying the character of your natural way of making gestures. Rather than evaluating what you do in relation to what someone else does, concentrate on determining and furthering the expressive character and quality of what you do. We get so busy evaluating and assessing expressions according to preexisting ideas about what is good and bad that we miss the opportunity to simply experience them.

I also think it is possible and helpful to approach every natural gesture with intrigue and fascination, especially the ones you dislike. Why not view them as special and manifestations of a soulful purpose? Everything in my experience suggests that significant changes in artistic expressions and the way we value them are determined by changing attitudes and learning how to appreciate natural qualities, which can then be perfected through practice.

While affirming the signature movements you make and your relationship to them, it may also help to distinguish and separate what is created from you, to simultaneously appreciate its autonomy.

What is it about a particular movement that is distinct? What characteristics relate to more universal expressions? How can they be developed?

We can go even further in reflecting upon how artistic materials reflect their qualities through us. Our movements can be viewed as agents that help materials realize their expressive potential. This perspective may alleviate inhibitions and excessive self-consciousness. For example, in the most elemental sense, look at how your position in space when taking a photograph of an object

determines its expressive qualities. When you move the object and change its relationship with its surrounding or adjust your position in the space, you alter its expression.

Practice: The Influence of Materials and Tools

In the visual arts we discover how different materials generate a range of effects and make varied contributions to expression. The same applies to the use of tools. People who feel blocked or restricted with a small brush might use large ones or shift to moving paint with a palette knife or even larger scraping or spreading tools. Rather than being too concerned about the outcomes on the painting surface, think about how you might use a tool to take snow or ice off your windshield or spread food and move in that way. Unplanned color effects will unfold as well as formal relationships and patterns.

Where traces of the artist's movements are visible with painting, drawing, and hand shaping with clay, they may be less apparent with other materials. In my studios we often make objects with twine, wire, and objects from nature. Because these materials have preexisting forms, the movements of the artist put them into new relationships, as we will explore in the chapter on "Shaping and Moving Things Around." As we wrap sticks and rocks, the repetitious movements and materials take the lead and the mind is more apt to relax and witness the process.

The same repetition benefits apply to drawing when we make pictures by repeating gestures and lines. In studio sessions we sometimes restrict ourselves to black markers on large pieces of drawing paper. I ask participants to make a gesture, keep repeating it—maybe hundreds of times—and let the marks vary themselves as the works develop. I mention Sol LeWitt's pictures to affirm how the basic lines can cohere into works of art. If people stay with the gestures, they invariably create visually dynamic compositions.

The qualities of the medium take precedence in these images and they affirm the body's role as a generator of expression. Rather than

compositional controls being transmitted from the mind, the black lines and repeated movements are the primary elements in shaping the picture.

Breaking the process down to these fundamental actions and elements has helped people become involved and build confidence. Accomplished artists similarly benefit from returning to essential gestures. The overactive and judgmental mind practices taking a break and responding with awareness and sensitivity to what happens beyond its directive controls.

Both contemporary painters and indigenous artists who focus on line qualities will often begin a painting with a shape or form and then build upon it through a process of elaboration that can have mesmerizing effects. The lines, forms, and colors emerge intuitively from one another and the final form is always a surprise.

Experiment with any artistic medium—paint, body movement, a musical instrument, voice, or writing—and begin by spending a few minutes in stillness, doing your best to empty the mind of thoughts and concentrate on your physical sensations. Some find it helpful to close the eyes, which may further body awareness. Imagine your body as the basis of all expression. Next begin to move your body with what feels like your most natural gestures. If you start with a hand, extend the feeling of movement origination to your other hand and then your whole body, right down to your feet and the ground. Stay in place and repeat what feels like the most natural movements and let them build upon one another. Do this for at least two or three minutes.

Take a pause for twenty to thirty seconds and then continue the same movement pattern. Even if you think you are doing the same thing, it is likely a new variation will begin to emerge. Embrace the changes and concentrate only on making the gestures purely for their own sake, free of any judgment.

You might also engage movements or gestures that feel unnatural. As you repeat them, does the feeling change? Do they feel unnatural because they are new and outside the scope of what you

usually do? Moving with the nondominant hand or parts of the body not usually engaged may help us be more comfortable and appreciative of a broader spectrum of expressions.

Shifting to Response Mode

☞ *The discipline of the artist is one of being ready and receptive.*

A New Take on Creating

Responding may be more of a primary factor in creating than initiating. Like the movement basis of expression, the idea of grounding creativity in the process of responding goes contrary to the prevailing notion of the artist always being the sole originator of the creative act. The discipline of the artist is one of being ready and receptive.

The first gestures we make as described in the preceding section can be perceived as responses to feelings, urges, or qualities of the environment. I call this process the responding intelligence of creative expression. It is closer to empathy and sensitivity than direction. When painting and drawing I try to let my mind and physical expression respond to the sensations and suggestions offered by kinetic activity. The same principle applies to dance, vocal improvisation, percussive music, writing, and other art forms. Interpretations of artistic expressions are also responses, and no single reaction will ever be final and definitive. Each response tends to elicit another.

Those striving for precise portrayals and representations in visual art, writing, dance, and theater interpret and respond through the unique features and agency of their expression. Even the most “realistic” of media, such as photography, display ways of looking, points of view, and styles. With drawing, beginners are encouraged to move freely with their pens or pencils and stay in contact with the surface. The same advice is given to writers. The goal is what emerges

unexpectedly between the perceived object and the artist; imagination, as I mentioned, is the space between them.

Musicians interpret already established songs and scores with their ways of responding to them. The same applies to actors with scripts, whose interpretations vary and change. Thus the most apparently exact presentations are infused with the characteristics of the artist's response. The skilled interpretation of a preexisting composition or object is as dependent upon what happens spontaneously as the more purely open-ended processes of creative expression. Attentiveness to the process of representation leaves room for the new things and surprises emerging from the artist's interaction with the object portrayed, from the acts of response that build expressions.

When I want to represent a landscape or person in painting, it helps to do quick sketches in advance where I am not overly concerned with exactness but instead am trying to capture something significant happening between me and the focus of contemplation. I am always interested in being truthful to the nature of the subject and its distinct qualities but I confess to being more interested in the autonomous quality of the drawings. As I repeatedly respond to a subject, I become familiar with it, and painting it from memory, as Edvard Munch said about his process of creating, gives more freedom for the emanation of expressive qualities.

Full attention is given to the making of the picture and "its" physical qualities rather than being overly concerned with the degree to which it corresponds to something other than itself. Relationships to subjects that exist independently are significant, but I am attracted to more suggestive and imaginative interpretations.

Suggestion, especially with paint, actually tends to give more of a sense of reality than a fastidiously precise representation of features. The more mechanical composition is incongruous with how the physical world is experienced, where the perceiver has a role in organizing and making images through the senses.

We have been schooled to think of interpretation as an exact and correct representation of a subject, and when interpreting artworks

there is typically an assumption the piece has a particular meaning. However, I feel artistic expressions can be likened to persons, places, and other life situations that can never be reduced to a single conceptual meaning. The process of interpretation, which will be described in more detail in a later section, is more accurately a response and always carries some features of the interpreter's relationship to the situation. Some interpretations may feel more accurate than others, and this is attributable to how the artist is able to experience and then express qualities of the subject. But as I say above, many of us are more concerned with the vitality of the new creation emerging like an offspring between artists, their materials, and the objects they contemplate. This way of approaching artistic responses is in sync with the processes of nature, where close observation shows the infinite variation and uniqueness within the context of things first appearing to be the same.

Shifting the primary focus of beginning an artistic expression, away from initiating a preconceived direction and toward a process of empathetic response, gives most people a sense they can do this. I tell participants in my studio groups that the only thing they can do wrong is plan how they are going to move before they act. I also describe to them how I frequently see the expressive quality of artistic expressions, defined as authentic and individuated spontaneity, start to diminish as we try to direct the process rather than respond to what we are doing through the body's physical sensibility.

Relaxing the Controls

With every form of creative expression the mind has to relax the controls, soften its grip (as mentioned earlier), and let the action happen as fluidly as possible using its powers to respond rather than direct the process. The quality of the expressive response is connected to the degree of instinctive reaction. My years of practice and experience form a basis for action, but they are moved aside in consciousness so that the senses in tandem with the mind lead in shaping

expression and accessing depths of experience. The artist's training and discipline are paradoxically most effective when they are essentially forgotten, so that creative responses may happen innately. Artists describe these states of creation as automatic and how they become agents for forces acting through them. Even when playing familiar characters, actors describe how they are intrigued with the different way they manifest themselves in each performance, which tends to be a consistent variation on the same script.

The artistic response is not to be confused with the more linear and mechanistic stimulus and response principles of behaviorism and operant conditioning. It is more like jazz musicians bouncing off one another in a free give-and-take of spontaneous improvisation. Responding to things around us again underscores how the creative process is always in the present moment, giving an interactive and generative spin to the now.

An emphasis on responding does not in any way question the formative significance of a person's unique and self-generated actions in shaping creative expression. It suggests that a reciprocal and interactive dynamic may be the primary source of expression even when we are creating alone.

The idea of responding to something other than ourselves may be one of the most effective ways of helping people get started. Creating becomes more of a conversation, a give-and-take, or passing the ball around. The context is no longer a solitary vacuum which is generally daunting to any person and especially someone becoming involved for the first time.

We are all familiar with how we tend to have more to say when responding to something arousing interest or challenging our sense of the way things really are or should be. Or we cannot believe how we act in a crisis when shifting instinctively into response mode. Thus difficult and offensive things may actually help to release authentic expression loaded with emotion and force. When feelings are provoked, we are more apt to respond without forethought. The same applies to our reactions to environmental situations calling for

balance, caution, strength, delicacy, stretching, aggression, quickness, or hesitation. When we are moving at optimum levels, these reactions happen instinctively and they are crafted by our unique ways of moving. They show how spontaneity is a natural, physical, and responsive process guided by emotion.

I have found it is impossible to plan this kind of fluid integration in advance. It is formed immediately and holistically. Memory, feeling, personal style, opinion, and expressive media all converge in the act of making a response if we are relaxed, open, and able to allow ourselves to be natural. These innate and intuitive sensibilities are forms of intelligence rather than what is widely described as “unconscious” expression.

In performance situations I repeatedly discover how important it is for me to prepare assiduously but then put everything aside in order to let the expression come through in a way that is shaped by the particular moment and context. Before giving a talk I tend to make pages of notes which I gradually pare down to a single page and then typically reduce to four or five talking points on a small card or scrap of paper just before beginning. If I have too many thoughts entering these situations I lose focus and confidence. I have learned over the years to trust this process of preparation.

It is more important for me to activate inner momentum and a relationship with the audience, especially at the start, and this reliably carries me. It is interesting how people see me as improvising, but there is always a detailed process of preparing in advance and gathering thoughts together in consciousness that flow intuitively into place as the talk proceeds.

Actors working with scripts describe a similar process. In reflecting on the acting skills of Robert De Niro, Jodie Foster said he knows a script so well, he goes beyond it, perhaps accessing something taking shape between his feelings, memories, instincts, the character, and the scene. Great actors construct characters in cooperation with a script; they do not simply follow it. Artists in every discipline strive to perfect technical skills so that they may let go and access

expressions happening within the conditions of each encounter with the creative process. A musician described to me how even though she always has nerves in starting a concert, the music is ingrained in her through practice and this furthers a state of complete presence when performing. "If I know the piece frontward and backward," she says, "I can let go of my brain and put emotion into it. Letting go takes preparation."

Presence over Plans

In my studios we use performance art to explore the practice of presence as a way of responding to what is moving through the moment. One of the greatest challenges participants have is trusting and believing something significant will emerge without detailed plans. Every person has to experience the process in order to understand it. As much as I might try to prepare and explain the essential dynamics of performance to participants (as I will describe in more detail in later sections), my introduction only helps to give a structure and helpful ground rules: it cannot begin to convey what is learned from doing the work, entering the unknown, and allowing the process to shape itself.

In line with the simplicity of movement principle I say, "Try not to do too many things. You will get confused and lost. In preparing, think about what objects you might have with you or how you will present yourself, and maybe what you will do to begin, and that is all. If you try to script the actions you will get caught by your thoughts and lose contact with what is happening in the moment and your ability to respond to it and go with it. Let your actions build upon one another. It is all about being present. See where it takes you."

Performers, worried about what they will do for even a minute without a definite plan, are shocked when discovering they had worked for over ten or twelve minutes being witnessed by other group members. The more completely they concentrate on essential

actions, in keeping with what the theater director Antonin Artaud called a “gestural metaphysics,”¹ the more immersed they become and the piece takes them into what is described as a more complete state of being. They are uniquely themselves, and the degree to which they play this true nature, and let the ensuing gestures emanate in response to what precedes them, the more engrossed they become—and this has a corresponding impact on the audience. They have to do it in order to get it. It cannot be taught any other way.

Nerves are another factor with performance. Nervous energy not only feeds expression but furthers a unique transformation and articulation that could not happen without it. I would rather not make people uncomfortable, but it tends to be inseparable from creative expression and the benefits it brings. There is an adage from sports: “Not nervous, not ready.” Practice and skill help us use the energy of nerves rather than be held back or paralyzed as in the case of severe stage fright. As my colleague Bruce Moon says, we become more comfortable being uncomfortable.

Practice: Keep It Physical, Repeat, Be Unusual

In addition to playing out our most familiar gestures in order to appreciate and respond to them in new ways, artistic practice offers opportunities to access unrealized or inhibited resources we have within ourselves. In performance this might happen as we repeat a familiar gesture or take on a different persona and character as in fiction. Figuratively and actually getting behind a mask may create new responses to old and difficult situations. The cure is sometimes responding to an insolvable dilemma as a different character.

We all tend to get stuck in habitual roles and do not realize we are able to practice different ways of responding to situations. At the start of performance experimentation it might be most effective to concentrate on the basic movement responses I am suggesting here, realizing that they may become an infrastructure for more expansive play with roles and varied ways of engaging experiences.

Actors tend to prepare in this physical way. We practice like them in giving and receiving gestures; repeating and changing them through our movement; generating the most random and unexpected movements, sounds, words, and statements and then responding to them as instinctively as possible. In my studios we tend to respond more than once to the same situation. Repetition helps the process unfold.

This is especially significant with vocal experimentation, which I find to be the most repressed mode of expression for most people, especially when we are invited to use it outside habitual speech patterns. It feels strange to make sounds for their own sake, and it often takes a number of tries to get relaxed and fluid. We keep responding to our responses. Repeating the utterance of words or phrases with different emphasis, tone, and pacing releases so much more than what we usually convey with the voice. As mentioned above, the process of repetition lowers the threshold of mental control and gives primacy to the expressions that tend to build upon one another with more fluidity and spontaneity because they are carried by the overall momentum and slipstream of the repeated gestures.

Vocal improvisation and experimentation underscore how approaching expression as responding may help release a greater range of possibilities. I encourage vocal play and the making of different variations of a sound given by a partner. We might also do this by responding to our own sounds, making everything physically immediate and instinctive. It also helps to work with someone else, with a playful attitude, to be supported and know you are not alone in exploring the most unfamiliar and vulnerable aspects of expression.

Humor, leadership, invention, and other spheres of creative action outside the arts are similarly determined by the effectiveness of responses. Identify a recent situation where you responded well—and one where you did not. How might you do it differently if given a chance?

Do the same in reflecting upon circumstances where you observe

others responding ingeniously or problematically. Try to recollect instances when you were taken aback by a response. Why?

If you tend to consider yourself unimaginative in your responses to interactions with others, experiment alone or with a trusted partner. Try being more spontaneous, more instinctive, less predictable, and maybe outrageous. Again repetition helps to relax inhibitions and enables you to respond automatically without thinking. This can be hard to do since our filters and censors are deeply ingrained—we all know people we wish had speech filters and more sensitivity to others—and in our efforts to be discreet, respectful, and protective of ourselves and others, we are apt to repress the ability to offer spontaneous and imaginative responses.

Keep at this practice as a creative discipline that you do within a safe place where you can experiment freely. Record your responses and reflections in a journal, which can become a valued partner in giving you a chance to hold on to your experiences and return to them over time. The journal entries may cohere, build upon one another, and suggest new connections between things, in a way similar to our overall description of how the creative process works.

Try responding to the most ordinary things in new ways. Play with taking on different personas and doing the opposite of what you normally do. You might find something significant in what first seemed unnatural and strange.

Momentum and Creative Contagion

✎ *Creative expression in one aspect of life triggers corresponding and contagious dynamics in others.*

Firing with All Cylinders

As I watched a team of roofers setting up to work on our house at 6:45 A.M., I realized their ability to get so much done in a single day is attributed to momentum, a movement source carrying everything in its sphere of action. The energy of the roof work was palpable, a real thing, all the more apparent to me as I stood outside it. I have felt the same way watching others dance, practice a sport, paint in a studio, or do just about anything as a group. The collective effort carries everyone in it, making it possible to do things from roofing to the arts that cannot be done as effectively alone.

There is a contagion to the energy of creative activity. Being around the buzz of work created by the roofers influenced me to make a series of seven small paintings, far more than I might typically make at one time. Participants in the studio groups I lead similarly report that working in a space with other artists has an energizing force that helps them start and sustain their creative expression.

I have felt this same slipstream effect when working alone in my studio. When I am immersed in a solitary project, my actions create together and generate momentum that energizes and supports all the elements. I liken it to an engine firing with all cylinders, a dynamic complex of participants working together. Athletes call this state being in “the zone,” where things happen naturally and with the best possible outcomes.

The idea of solitary creation is in some way illusory. When I create, I am a community of actions, all of which build and join together like the four men on my roof, calling to each other, passing materials, with nail-gun rhythms driving the pace. The way the roofers inspired me with their impetus does not suggest creative momentum has to be fast or goal driven. The tempo might be slow and deliberate, savoring every detail of action. Work rhythms are very personal, and in my group studios I have learned to appreciate variations that can be likened to moving with different dance partners, or improvising with a group of musicians, where sensitivities to the other and responsiveness to particular movements, sounds, and feelings shape the overall creation in new ways.

The impetus is not always positive. I am especially intrigued by how the expression of a personal struggle or feelings of negative momentum by a group member can inform and motivate expression by every person when it is heard and held rather than “fixed.” Empathy generates a transformation of the problem. Where analytic problem solving tends to burrow into the tension, art accepts and uses it.

This same attentiveness to participants in a group might be applied to individual expression. Within a painting or any other form of creation there are many forces being generated—positive, negative, and indifferent: what I keep referring to as a complex where the whole expression is shaped by the interaction of parts. I have ruined pieces when I lose contact with these forces working together, an interplay that is always unplanned and runs contrary to tendencies to control the action. The personal creative act has many things in common with leadership of large groups where value is placed on establishing decentralized environments making independent contributions to the whole.

Take Advantage of What Happens Unexpectedly

As I reflect on my history with creative expression and leadership I see how new directions typically occur spontaneously and even

against my will. For example, unfamiliar forms, gestures, color relationships, or new ways of representing a figure often appear by chance, and there is a natural inclination to make them conform to existing styles or patterns of expression. Because I have missed these opportunities, I try to maintain a more sensitive and appreciative eye for unaccustomed arrivals.

Success requires the ability to take advantage of what occurs outside our current frames of reference and outside our sense of what we may think we are doing and what is important. It is frightening to imagine how many important opportunities pass through our experience unseen and even more alarming to think we may be working away at projects that do not access our current and readily available resources, the potential momentum alive within ourselves and our environments unrecognized.

Repeatedly I observe how only when I am immersed in creative projects do they build in the incremental ways described earlier. Whether it is a book, a painting, improvisational dance and music, or solving a problem in a community, I cannot access creative insights unless I become absorbed in the particular undertaking, get something started, and stay attuned to it over a period of time. In this respect the piece carries momentum within itself. It is almost like the creative project has an innate inclination to perfect its expression. My job is to stay connected and responsive.

When I am not engrossed in a task of some kind, the creative insights and imaginative discoveries do not occur with the same frequency. As I mentioned earlier about one movement emerging from another in an expressive act, the same thing happens within larger compositions. Ideas materialize from areas of focused attention and concrete action. Creativity is thus thoroughly tied to physical experience and action in the world. The process has to be active in some way.

I have found when I am engaged with a creative project, I am generally able to move in and out of it with some degree of ease in order to deal with other demands. Even though I have found extended

breaks between projects to be helpful as a time of regeneration, I miss the sense of engagement and purpose when I am not involved with a task. And it is remarkable how during periods when my life as a whole lacks a discernible feeling of momentum, a committed involvement in creative work provides this.

When creative expression is happening naturally in my personal or group studios, the places feel distinctly different. They are permeated by a sense of what I described earlier as creative space, which is something more than physical features. It is an atmospheric quality integrating the activity and support of others, the immediate environment and the things in it, with the efforts of the person working.

Practice: Assisting Forces

Creative expression in one aspect of life triggers corresponding dynamics in others. As I emphasize throughout this book, contagious acts, often on what may be considered the small and humble scale of personal experience, are a source of change in the world. Artistic transformation is an empirical process corresponding to the dynamics of nature. Creative expressions give an energetic bounce, a sense of soul and passion, a distinctness of character that may appeal or disturb, and all of which further change.

Recall a time when you felt you were carried by the momentum of others in a work situation. How would you describe the forces making this possible? Are you a person who is highly amenable to these influences? Or are you more apt to establish your own work tempo? If so, how do you do this? Is it something you learned from others or has it taken shape completely through your efforts? Or might it be a combination of both?

Those of us who have been involved in athletics know the importance of momentum and contagious energy in both team and individual sports. I have experienced positive effects as well as negative effects—the latter including a loss of confidence and a sense of hopelessness and defeat that stops any sense of forward progress. I thus

marvel at those who are able to persist and turn the tables when the situation appears lost. Give some thought to your experience with these dynamics. To what extent have they influenced your overall character and perception of who you are as a person? Your performance in life? Your creative expression?

If you are new to artistic expression, try to hold on to experiences of positive momentum you have in other spheres of life and imagine them as your allies and helpers as you practice the different activities suggested here. The assisting forces and winds of momentum cross over from different aspects of experience, from one creative medium to another. Have you observed art-making situations permeated by feelings of contagious energy and momentum? What makes this occur?

If you have been involved with the arts, what are your most effective momentum builders when working with others? When alone?

Does music help provide momentum and energy when you are working alone? How? Are there spatial qualities that inspire you? What situations and people have been your most reliable sources of momentum in the past? Can you apply them to creative expression?

All of us have had experience with momentum busters. Have you experienced this in previous attempts to become involved with creative expression? What do they tell you about what you need in terms of support and inspiration? What can you do differently when they appear again?

Give some thought to identifying what supports your creative momentum and what inhibits it. In my studio groups, people find it helpful to embody these forces, focus on them in the most physical manner as a way of understanding, rather than just talk about them.

Start from a still position and let the body begin to move gradually and slowly. This helps the feelings to take shape and build momentum together with a sense of direction. Since the voice is part of the body's expression, I encourage its use together with movement. Dance and voice are assisting forces to one another.

Put your emphasis on being present to gestures you make and to

how they feel, and do not be concerned with anything else. A studio participant described how, when concentrating in this way, she is completely grounded and confident about each moment of movement even though she has no idea of what will happen next. The only thing that matters is immersion in the moment, and this paradoxically is the best way to further the quality of what emerges from that moment.

Sustained practice with purely physical exploration will help you appreciate bodily knowing and the way momentum and energy in creative expression emerge from sensory action. Discipline is focused on being as present as possible rather than on controlling outcomes. As you let go in this way, the bodily and sensory intelligences are given the freedom to operate at full capacity.

Shaping and Moving Things Around

✎ *We can change by moving into different relationships to our surroundings and the things we do.*

Changing Relationships

Compositions take shape in response to whatever is placed on the surface. New color and formal relationships in painting emerge from relatively random actions. “They” arouse my interest and establish the directions for ensuing expressions. I have learned how easily I lose the new qualities when I do not pay close attention to forms emanating like this.

Everything good seems to grow from something else. Nothing I have ever created in any medium existed completely in advance. In writing, words and ideas build upon one another as with movements in performing arts. Things always emerge from other things and from the process of creation. This discovery has informed my emphasis on responding as a basis of creation. As I mentioned, the most preconceived and carefully planned artworks are going to be influenced and shaped by the process of creation. Thus people who are intent upon control, and upon producing things according to a plan or set ideas, have to be prepared for what emerges from the activity. Nothing remains completely still and immune from change within creative expression.

I am frequently motivated to make artistic expressions according to a preliminary idea, an inner vision as described here, a sense something is needed, a desire, a feeling that something is wrong, or an outrage about conditions in my life or the world at large, but

these sources are closer to stirrings than defined outcomes. I generally know very little about what the finished expression will be as I start to work on it. This is probably why I would not make a very good architect, carpenter, engineer, or person using materials requiring considerable precision at the start. But even in the realm of construction there is room for emanation and improvisation. I collaborate with carpenters and contractors who have similar interests in working from a preliminary design that evolves through the process of construction.

I just made a series of granite walkways and walls. In some areas I did considerable planning, measurement, and preparation of materials because of the physical demands of the space, but the essential features of the project emerged from the building process. I began with a sense of what had to be changed. I am attracted to stonework because each rock is unique and I find ways to give the individual piece its place in the whole through accommodation and adjustment. Many people cut stone to implement their will and satisfy their sense of precision. In contrast I prefer to move elements around to find a fit.

Bruce Moon spoke to me about how his songwriting involves a similar process of moving things around. He starts with a "snippet of memory" and invites "images to come . . . sort of like loose associations that may relate directly to the memory, or seem very far afield. But I don't judge them, I just let them come. I am left with this jumble of images. I lay them out on the table as if they are pieces of a puzzle and begin to put them together in relation to one another. Sometimes they fit perfectly and other times they have to be massaged, trimmed, or even discarded. It really is a little like building a structure."

The arts of collage, assemblage, and certain sculptural activities are based on moving preexisting things into new relationships with one another. They may also be the most accessible forms of creative expression. The process might be serendipitous and accidental or carefully designed based upon trying different combinations. All are

characterized by form and composition emerging from actions that create new placements. The shifting of location makes a new reality. Sometimes the most significant changes happen like this. The whole as well as the function of the parts is transformed by altering vantage points or modes of contact.

The same happens to people. We change by moving into different relationships to our surroundings and the things we do. It may be healthy to move ourselves around and relate to things in different ways and discover how we might become another kind of person. We all have ingrained patterns and a certain artistic DNA manifesting themselves in whatever we do, but change will be much easier than we realize if we are able to try different ways of locating ourselves in the world.

I have found required change in habitual routines generally has a positive outcome. As much as I am supported by daily rituals and habits, they may limit change and creation. As someone who is required to travel, often at great distances, I always resist leaving my familiar environment. Repeatedly I discover how the contextual change and challenges invigorate me and my work, especially when I return home. It is as though I am living an ordinary life version of the classic myth cycle of the protagonist's separation, penetration, and return. The time away also helps me see the familiar environment with new appreciation and fresh sensibilities.

Practice: Changing Positions, Direction from Random Selection, Restatement, Influences

Without traveling far we can experiment with the same process. Life changes can be stimulated by simply altering spatial relations at home, the office, and the most basic physical features of our lives. We practice separation, penetration, and return with elemental acts like taking a walk, working on a task, or making artworks. Travel can be a metaphor for moving through the commonplace and being more attuned to creation and change.

The unplanned emergence of movement encourages a creative “random selection” paradoxically establishing direction for the ensuing construction of a dance, painting, song, poem, story, or enactment. I recently worked with an artist who made unplanned and instinctive movements slowly and mindfully. This deliberate tempo gave her the opportunity to let the gestures build upon one another with precision and grace.

Try doing this with body movement or other art forms. Move slowly and encourage the most random gestures and then build upon them with the same slow tempo, doing your best to be mindful of the incremental shifts. Use video to record your movements and view the expressions in successive stages of reflection. I will often focus the video recording process on the hands and other body parts which furthers appreciation of the nuances of expression we often miss.

All of the arts involve play with different placements. If you write a series of lines in a spontaneous poem, try shifting their placement into varied sequences. Keep the original and compose variations using the same words. These chance compositions and adjustments may improve more intentional efforts.

In dream interpretation we use a technique called restatement to tell the dream in new ways. Shifting the placement of words can offer a completely different sense of the dream. The same thing happens when we speak from the perspective of different figures. Expand beyond the usual “I” or ego position, and tell the dream from the perspective of the grey cat lying on the green grass next to the granite wall, or give voice to the granite, the grass. What does the cat have to say? This play with possibilities furthers appreciation of the bias of narratives and the assumptions we make about the nature of things.

The sequential and lined up qualities of narrative are not necessarily in sync with how things happen in art, dreams, and life in terms of space and time. So much occurs simultaneously, all at once. And in reality there are endless viewpoints and things to be observed.

Select passages from a conversation you record or any piece of

your reflective writing that has meaning to you. Rearrange feelings and passages into different sequences. Does this change the feeling you have about the text? How does the shift in location alter your sensibility?

One of my doctoral students, Sarah Hamil, responded to interviews she conducted by selecting significant words and phrases and rearranging them into poems. Rather than the usual and now standard procedure of reducing interviews to a quantitative coding of words and themes for hidden meanings, she experimented with an aesthetic and empathetic focus on what she felt was significant and meaningful to the participants in her study.

I believe we are changed by what we do. Thus it is important to take liberties in altering the physical forms of expression and open ourselves to a continuous process of change, transformation, and quality expressions that give us options and choices as to the nature of reality.

Objects, words, and persons convey distinctly different expressions when their position in space is altered. Colors change in relation to other colors. The same happens by changing sound and movement relationships. We learn that everything is capable of change if it moves.

And we change in relation to what we perceive. The structures of expression thus shape thought and shape what we think is real. We can do so much more to expand possibilities and be more sensitive to the influences of design and physical structure on thought and feeling.

The mind is shaped by the company it keeps—I dream better when I read quality literature before sleeping; my art is enhanced by experiencing inspirational works. Stereotypic and standardized forms also have a corresponding effect on consciousness.

Try experimenting with how exposures to different artistic expressions influence your own. Artists wisely caution against being overly derivative, so concentrate on the emergence of your own distinct and individuated style.

I have a postcard of Gustave Courbet's 1865 painting *Seascape* in my studio. For a decade I kept it next to me when painting because I liked the image and the person who sent it to me. Recently I decided to start simplifying my own ocean paintings to focus on horizontal lines and the viridian blueness of sea and sky like the Courbet picture. I realized how the design was similar to large minimalist paintings I did in the late 1960s with parallel bands of color. I did a series of pictures in response to the Courbet postcard, never literally trying to copy what he did, just responding to the feel of the composition, the vivid color, and the movements of the atmosphere. When you respond spontaneously to the feeling for another artist's work, it reliably generates something new. Each one of the pictures involved a simple moving and changing of the same elements within the framework of a style.

Aspirations and Desire

✎ *Creative expression becomes an act of service to something needing us to accomplish its purpose.*

Guiding Visions

Everything said about spontaneous expression, improvisational responses, moving things around as a way to establish new relationships, not thinking about the end at the beginning, and letting expression emerge from elemental gestures does not have to be perceived as contrary to being inspired and informed by what you aspire to do. As I have described, my practice affirms how structure liberates. In my studios I see how a certain environmental predictability together with limits help people deal with uncertainty, chaos, and the possibility that things may get out of control. The structure of the studio and the group experience helps us hold things together or gives the support necessary to allow things to break down as part of being changed. It also provides the freedom required to let the process find its own way.

Although creative expression takes advantage of accidents and things occurring outside the frames of intentions, it is not necessarily haphazard and random. The creative process is apt to take aim and doggedly pursue goals. Many artists say they experience a force or purpose inside them that they must bring into the world, often experienced as callings, something they are destined to do—imagined as spirits, *daimones*, angels, and demons arousing and guiding their expressions.

You might look at your life in relation to the influence of aspira-

tions—also experienced as what we call the *imago*, an inner image of a soul's purpose and desire, a guiding vision, a felt and imagined sense of what we are intended to do. The image might inform what you hope to do in life or become. It may act as a muse which can be another person, place, or work of art offering a sense of direction.

The imago tends to come upon us, and it is felt in the most personal and sustained ways, sometimes with a passion and intensity transcending complete understanding. As with the process of creation, it is not calculated and planned. It takes shape and appears within us sometimes as a clear epiphany and in other situations as a less-defined attraction or urge.

On the morning of his fourteenth birthday, John Grimes, the protagonist in James Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), reflects on how he felt at the age of five, in response to a school experience, that he had power within himself enabling him "to save himself, to raise himself"¹ and realize the love he desired.

What about you? What is your history with creative aspirations? It might help to revisit childhood. What did you dream of doing? What has changed? Been sustained?

Creative inspirations may be characterized by unusual qualities, things not existing in the world, things that we want to bring forward. They might live inside us as a unique image and invisible feelings manifesting a sense of soul, our most personal statements in life to be brought forth through creative acts. The longings may be deeply intimate and revealing, so we often keep them private.

Because creative expression is not subject to the same controls as deliberate thought and speech, many fear it will reveal these secrets. Yet we show ourselves, and perhaps the visions influencing who we are, in the most rudimentary acts of expression. This is in keeping with the idea presented in this book about the way the depths of our lives often exist unnoticed on the surfaces of experience.

My personal aesthetic sensibility, the imago permeating my art, has been consistently based on aesthetic appreciation of the most fundamental qualities of daily life. As with shamanic soul loss and

retrieval, I regularly lose contact with this purpose and recover it again. It is thus predictably lost and regained, almost rhythmically like breath. I fall from grace in terms of appreciating the things closest to me, become impatient and preoccupied, or doubt what I and others are doing. Sometimes it is a crisis that restores awareness, or a simple moment of feeling significance or relaxation helps me see what matters.

I have always said the condition I fear most is an absence of desire and longing. I reconcile this with the contemplative emphasis on extinguishing desire by saying what I desire is relationship to immediate things, an appreciation of what I already have, what is here with me.

Courage and Confidence

Artists who have helped change the world have been willing to show unusual visions that may affront socially accepted and popular beliefs. This is an area where there are true risks to creative expression. We rightly ask: what if showing these images and ideas hurts my position in the world?

We will explore these issues in more detail when discussing creating with the shadow. The imago is not necessarily positive and comfortable. The decision whether or not to express it in particular situations and moments is ongoing and fundamental to aesthetic sensitivity.

When responding to these sources of artistic expression it is important to maintain a flexible relationship, like athletes who may visualize desired outcomes but must deal with what presents itself outside their control. The soul's purpose is something that has me rather the other way around. I am in it; it is the mainstream of my life carrying me even unawares.

Courage and confidence may be required to respond to the imago, especially when it goes counter to norms. We easily shut it down or dismiss it, thinking others will show no interest. Artists have

described how their inspiration is sometimes felt as a divine force and how this sense helps bring it into the world when they are facing obstacles. Creative expression becomes an act of service to something that needs us to accomplish its purpose.

Experienced creators know the image of desire interacts with the spontaneous and often accidental acts of expression described here; they influence the appearances of the vision and how it is carried into the physical world. As we see in the arts, a vision might motivate a sustained series of creative expressions, with each piece presenting distinct physical and aesthetic qualities.

In this respect the imago does not have a single face and form; it is dynamic and part of an ongoing process of change, as contrasted to an explicitly defined objective. I have been intrigued in my own experience with themes persisting for many years. I think it is because they never lose their ability to stimulate new expressions. They are alive in us like persons.

Practice: Aesthetic Callings

Sometimes people say that they do not feel they have a creative drive and that they would like to find a sense of purpose and direction. Artists generally become involved in their work in response to a creative urge or calling, but it can be painfully lost. Some do not recover.

You might explore to what extent your present life has been informed by an aesthetic calling. All of us are shaped by things beyond our control, but it may be interesting to examine how the way you live is influenced by the inner imago I mentioned. Also, look at the things you do that interfere with the imago's realization and why you do them, what you can change and cannot change.

Creative expression provides opportunities to respond to aspirations, shape them, and see how they change and unfold. You might not have to go far to begin this process. I suggest looking at how the image informing your life is conveyed in the way you start and end your day and in how you move and present yourself and respond

to others in the present moment. Are there gaps between what you imagine and what you do? Is it possible to hide from what you do and how you act? You might explore creative practices that help integrate these inner and outer realms in a more complete and satisfying expression of guiding visions.

Think about how your aspirations relate to what other people do around you and especially how they relate to those who may have influenced you—as both inspirational models and examples of what you do not want to do. Take some time with your journal to identify people who have inspired and informed your visions and sense of calling. What did they do that influenced you? Try writing letters to these persons and then consider taking on their personas and responding to what you say to them.

It may be helpful to do the same with those who you feel have deterred your expression or have helped you realize what you do not want to do. To what extent have you internalized these figures and made them part of yourself? Is there something you have been reluctant to show or express in relation to them? Maybe this is where your creativity might grow in new ways.

The negative figures have great potential to take on new roles through a reconciliation process. I suggest addressing them in a kind or humorous way if it is possible for you. Giving some love to the demons may be the best way to assure they have a constructive impact on you.

If this process of letter writing in your journal is helpful, do the same with positive and negative events, places, and other memories. If you are able to personify them, the creative reflections and expressions will further your appreciation of why things are the way they are and how they can change.

PART THREE

To Witness Rather Than to Judge

*Change happens more effectively through
acceptance and understanding.*

Witnessing Others and the Self in Action

- ☞ *Performing before compassionate witnesses may result in extending the same kind of empathy and interest to our own expressions.*

A Theater of Being in the Present Moment

The companion feature to the movement basis of expression is the process of perceiving what is happening. In my studio sessions we approach this as witnessing. Participants say it is more than observing. It is a way of looking characterized by empathy and commitment. As a leader and participant I have learned that whatever is happening has to be the most important thing in my life—at that particular moment. If I am doing anything other than paying the most complete attention possible, my concentration and witnessing power are diminished.

Acting and witnessing, doing and perceiving, are the yin and yang of creative expression. They are reciprocal elements but also in many ways the same thing, different aspects of the present moment. As an artist and studio guide for others I have been able to experiment with and closely examine the making and witnessing of art. In this section I will discuss how the witnessing process has unfolded for me over the years in relation to efforts to be more aware of what we do and perceive when making art.

My experience with these processes started when I was working

as an expressive arts therapist with adults and children and it has expanded over the years to engaging a broad range of people in studio groups. My first experiences concentrated on helping people become more attentive to the perceptual qualities of artistic expressions during and after the process of making them. In the late 1970s performance art began to play an increasingly important role in my studio sessions. As we experimented with this art form, I realized how it became what I call a “theater of being in the present moment,” crystallizing and integrating the different strands of my practice in perceiving and reflecting upon artistic expressions.

In performance sessions participants act and others witness. We do the same thing with two people working together in painting, drawing, and sculpting—one works and the other witnesses, and then they shift roles. The process is applied to other art forms such as music and movement.

The roles of acting and witnessing present challenges even when pursued with total commitment. The physical embodiment of these complementary functions in distinct roles gives us the opportunity be more aware of each and to perfect them. In witnessing others we are more apt to relax and put aside the harsh judging we often do to ourselves. We practice witnessing with fascination and unconditional support. As we perfect this process and understand it better, we not only affirm others and their expressions but we prepare the way for witnessing ourselves in action with the same values.

A parallel affirmation occurs when we take on the role of the performer who is witnessed by others. The attentiveness and sympathetic comments we receive give us a better understanding of what we do. We see ourselves through others and discover how actions we may have disparaged or overlooked may carry significance and intrigue.

The witness function described here is not obsequious and fawning. Rather it strives for authenticity and for the communication of what is perceived and felt. It is fascinating how this honest exchange

of perceptions and responses removes the negative and often confusing elements of judgment.

When immersed in the present moment of creative expression, self-consciousness is relaxed and performers describe how they lose all sense of time. Action and perception are in harmony and support one another in a state of artistic mindfulness.

Practice: Of Presence

The performance art I do involves the most elemental acts practiced with awareness. Try standing in place or sitting in a chair and doing what at first might appear to be “nothing.” As you stay still, you may become more aware of your body’s form and the way it fills the space and expresses itself even when not moving. We tend to be overly concerned with doing things, often too many things, and thus miss the opportunity to appreciate the expressiveness and imagination of stillness. The absence of movement paradoxically helps us become more aware of bodily gestures. When you are ready to move, do it simply and very slowly, trying your best to sustain the awareness you had when still. Then let your body return to a quiet position and pause there for a couple of minutes, reflecting on the physical expression of your stillness. Look at the different parts of your body as you sit or stand. Take time to reflect through memory on what you just did, how it felt.

Expand your practice to contemplating an object in the room with you, or select a place outside where you can sit and witness the environment. You will become aware of the vast possibilities for witnessing the physical world in every place. Concentrate on the expressive qualities of things—their forms, colors, shapes, and movements. Attentiveness to their aesthetic and material qualities will prepare you for appreciating the expressiveness of a person you witness during a performance. It will make you more aware of how we miss these qualities when we project narratives and other

meanings onto physical acts. But feel free to have your personal responses to what you witness. As you establish empathy, the expressions will act on you and generate feelings and insights into your own experience. Just do your best to minimize the projection of your thoughts onto others.

Depth Is on the Surface

- ✦ *If we imagine the depths in some other place, locked away or hidden in a vault, or if we feel they are inaccessible, we essentially avoid the opportunity to engage what is happening now, what we are doing and cannot see.*

Creating with What We Have

The act of witnessing generates a concentration of energy. What at first may seem mundane and insignificant becomes an object of fascination and wonder. This aesthetic awareness reinforces how the source of creation is located in the most immediate actions and perceptions of the present moment.

As I keep emphasizing, we learn how to create with what we already have—to see these things in new ways and do imaginative things with them. We do not have to travel to distant places or do exotic things to contact the creative source. It is with us all the time. We access what is here.

Depth is on the surface of what we do and perceive. If we imagine the depths in some other place, locked away or hidden in a vault, or if we feel they are inaccessible, we essentially avoid the opportunity to engage what is happening now, what we are doing and cannot see. In this sense art starts with the most ordinary and basic things we do and learn to appreciate in new ways.

Where immersing ourselves in the act of moving with particular materials of expression is forever tied to inhibitions, resistances, fears, and bad memories, perceiving and witnessing what we do is similarly connected to ingrained attitudes that not only hinder

appreciation of what we make but literally prevent us from seeing the most immediate things around us. Just about every person first becoming involved with creative expression is far more caught up with negatively judging every move rather than experiencing it with a sense of wonder or at least an evenhanded curiosity.

The reasons why we instinctively fall into this default position of harsh judgment are explored throughout this book. From an operational perspective I have found that because the position is so pervasive and strong, we all have to be taught how to practice the witnessing role. In my studios we experiment with this process by first witnessing the acts of others, where we are generally more capable of empathy and able to approach what is happening from the perspective of acceptance and intrigue. The presence of these “others” as partners and focal points, as well as “doing something” as a basis for reflective practice, helps both the witness and the person working.

Practice: Learning How to Be

Although the witnessing process can be done with any mode of artistic expression, I prefer to begin by working with a partner and concentrating on painting, drawing, or other physical art-making activities in which the hands and body working with materials are the primary focus. Hand movements are relatively neutral and less threatening than other enactments such as dance, vocal expression, and performance, yet they are aesthetically fascinating and the circumscribed viewing seems to heighten the impact. Practice concentrating on these most fundamental actions initiates us into the discipline of witnessing and being witnessed. In my studio sessions we expand to other art forms and group witnessing, which I will describe later.

The practice sessions give us the chance to explore how to quietly look and open to the intricacies of the expressions of others and also to experience what it feels like to be witnessed. Each of these ele-

mental roles is loaded with personal histories that give shape to the judging function within our lives.

When witnessing another person in studio sessions for at least five to seven minutes, we are given permission to look—which runs contrary to our lives in the world outside the studio, especially in public settings, where sustained eye contact may be viewed as inappropriate. Both the witness and the person making art are generally uncomfortable at the start as they begin to act in these different ways. Reversing roles gives the chance to experience each side of the witnessing process.

The witness works through the process of being given freedom to look and have the feelings of intimacy aroused by this. The person being witnessed generally has to get past feeling the need to perform for the witness, to do something “interesting.”

No matter how much I might say in advance about how the purpose of this process is to learn how *to be*, to see the inherent beauty, drama, and significance of the essential actions of the body moving, and maybe even enjoy ourselves in both aspects of the process, we all tend to be caught up in various distractions. The practice sessions with witnessing and being witnessed give us the chance to activate these instinctive reactions and get to know them better. We are invited to experience them within a context where there is sincere interest in what we are doing, and no judgment. Creative change comes through experimentation with new approaches to being with others and ourselves.

Knowing the Judge

- ✦ *Within most people the judge has developed into an imposing figure, while the compassionate witness is barely present.*

Easing Restraints

The inhibition to act in unfamiliar or apparently strange ways combined with the harsh inner critic is the most essential one-two punch of repression, and for the most part it resides completely within the person, manifesting itself with great power even in situations unconditionally supporting creative expression. In every sector where I have had the opportunity to engage people in artistic activity, these two forces—a reluctance to do something unusual amplified by a glaring critic—are present with total consistency. Even the most accomplished artists are stricken when approaching unfamiliar territory.

While encouraging people to move naturally as a basis of expression, I suggest suspending judgment of what they do. I say, “Ask ego to ride in the backseat for a while and let the spontaneous gestures of the body have some time at the wheel.” We all need egos to help in the making of decisions, and arguably artists require ego strength to persist in the face of obstacles, but during the process of initiating the formative forces of expression, ego (and its tendencies toward control) restricts the free and unplanned circulation of possibilities.

In recognizing the repressive influence of what I call harsh and dismissive critics, I also affirm the role of the helpful critic, the one who aids us in doing the best we can. I am uncomfortable with approaches to art making where only a feel-good sensibility is encouraged and

where any form of criticism is discouraged. These approaches are out of step with reality. Sometimes the process does not feel good, and this might be useful in shifting direction. Anger and other forms of irritation may foster important new expressions.

Discomfort can be an instinctive guide, helping us find the way. As I have mentioned, there is an innate critic within every bodily movement influencing the gesture in fulfilling its expression, in getting it right, doing it as well as we can. I find my best work happens when this aesthetic sensibility is operating intuitively, outside conscious deliberation and not, as we say, thinking too much. It is an integration of acting and witnessing that I described earlier, a process involving the whole of the mind and bodily sensibility as well as responsiveness to the surrounding environment.

While these inhibitions hamper spontaneity and the ability of creative energy to move through us, the most crippling obstacle to artistic expression is the inner character of “the judge.” Although this figure is usually an aggregate of past experiences and the actions of others, the surviving and most intimidating character is wholly self-created. It tends to be a finger-pointing and severe presence whose basic message is “you are not good at this.” The judge often draws attention to what others around us are doing and declares boldly (or sometimes whispers), “They are better than you. Do not waste your time.”

Like the inner critic, judges also have important roles in life and within our psyches when it comes to making assessments and decisions about how to move forward. What we are talking about here is the all-too-common tendency of this potentially judicious and guiding figure to morph into a dominant character or characteristic that negates just about everything we do which does not fit into already approved forms, and the negation is reinforced by internal guards who secure the ramparts of normalcy. The incremental building process I describe as the basis of creating is at work here, too, but in this case it takes us deeper into a suppressive mode. Acts cohere and grow into positive and negative forces.

The one-sided and repressive inner judge is a strikingly universal figure, growing from legitimate needs to protect against harm. It is this thoroughly natural tendency to guard against threat that in turn empowers the inner judge to become a supreme potentate who banishes anything that challenges the ruling equilibrium of self-perception.

Rather than simply blaming parents and other significant past figures for these patterns, we might also look at how they may have been trying to shield us from harmful setbacks, again as part of natural forces in life. We might then reflect on how it all became one-sided and how creative tension in making aesthetic decisions was diminished.

Blame and attributing responsibility to others, and ultimately seeing ourselves as victims, are a way to avoid doing things that upset this status quo, a status quo that often defines who we are and protects against change. It also augments the repressive powers held by the inner judge, whose ability to restrict creative expression is cloaked in the guise of people and experiences from the past. This tricks us into attributing responsibility to others and not seeing how these characters are now aspects of us.

I find it more helpful to try to understand how the judge is tied to well-intentioned efforts to guard against threats to well-being and how this self-protective instinct may block creative expression that in varying degrees requires risk, mistakes, failure, vulnerability, loss of control, and inevitable setbacks. And thus I am perhaps answering my own question about why the creative process, which is so potentially life-enhancing, is not more widely practiced.

But just as creative expression will reliably induce all of these negative states at various points within ongoing practice, it is also the most historically validated way of doing something good with the bad things in our lives. In order to harness the transformative forces of creativity we must open to the inevitable presence of the negative, all of which our inner judges are trained to suppress. Where the

repressive judge rules by banishing all threats to the current equilibrium, the creative process requires their presence.

We will explore how to enhance the role of the witness while relaxing the power of the judge. It is a fact that within most people the judge has developed into an imposing figure, while the compassionate witness is barely present. While watching the psychological dynamics of the judge at work is part of this process, the witnessing function is strengthened by giving careful attention to the physical actions I am describing as the basis of artistic expression. As I will try to show, the process of witnessing leads to imagining, which happens as perceptions and images emerge from the space between the person and the objects of contemplation. Imagination is classically called an “intermediate realm,” and we explore here how this happens through aesthetic reflection.

Practice: Enhancing Creative Energy

It might be useful to reflect upon your experiences with being judged by others. Do you also have your own inner judge figure? If so, how has this character been influenced by others? Is your inner judge more of a helper or a suppressor? Both? Is the relationship with the judge something you want to change?

Do you see others as being significantly influenced by inner judges in positive and negative ways? What do you think accounts for this dynamic? Does it restrict expression? Guide it? Both?

I think the practice of simply witnessing physical actions without any assessments of value leads to seeing them in new ways. It also exposes the suppressive effects of judgment and helps us use it more effectively.

In addition to furthering awareness, witnessing enhances artistic expression; the presence of another person giving careful and positive attention increases creative energy and its overall circulation and flow. The same applies to witnessing our own actions. The ability

of witnessing to assist creative expression is an empirical process analogous to what happens in physics where certain conditions enhance the flow of energy while others impede it.

The presence of a supportive witness acts like an electrical conductor in the way it allows a free flow of energy when there is a positive and open commitment to the expression being witnessed. The feeling is palpable and moves through us as an animating force.

If the person watching does not convey this sense of compassion and empathy, it is likely the artist will feel the more familiar judging role, which constricts creative energy. Continuing the physics analogy, a negative or indifferent presence functions as an insulator with low conductivity, and the absence of aesthetic sensitivity blocks the flow of expression.

Overthinking

- ☞ *When we relax the controls, we discover how insights and fresh appreciation happen indirectly, accidentally, as we provide more room for an open field of exchange where things can connect to each other in new ways.*

Clearing Away “Shoulds”

The practice of witnessing starts with establishing a certain distance between yourself and the object of contemplation. Paradoxically, this separation helps us get closer. It fosters what I call a creative space where actions and perceptions merge into new creations.

Most people tend to lock in to their particular vantage points, either in witnessing or being witnessed—which are taken over by the judge—and this arrests creative movement. As mentioned in the previous section, try to concentrate only on the physical qualities of the artistic expression.

It helps to clear the space of preconception as much as possible, to sweep it clean of anything other than the present moment. Clear away expectations, “shoulds” of any kind, and everything but what you are doing. This is like the emptying of the mind’s thoughts and preoccupations as encouraged in contemplative practice. The clearing out of thoughts sharpens awareness in helping us see and feel what is happening rather than concentrating on what we think about it.

When we relax the controls, we discover how insights and fresh appreciation happen indirectly, accidentally, as we provide more room for an open field of exchange where things can connect to each other in new ways. The creative process is particularly prone to working

outside the scope of plans, and so the discipline becomes one of opening up to the moment: being ready, seeing the connections that appear, and then responding to the opportunity. But at the same time there is a discipline of preparation, a sense of purpose and intention providing a context and direction that incorporate the new contribution.

"Suchness" Is the Meaning

I find it particularly important to let go of any attempt to search for explanations or asking, "What does it mean?" This involves looking for something not present and it always replaces the multifaceted things before us with our own thoughts about what they are, their origins, and why they appear—as we will discuss in the following sections on the process of interpretation.

It is a natural reaction for people to interpret physical gestures with narrative accounts and the attribution of some kind of meaning, all intended to offer something of value. When you listen to these explanatory responses as often as I do, you realize how they are projections and are all about the person making the statement. On the basis of these experiences I say stories have an important place in the creative process, but when witnessing actions we are after something else, more direct and physical. So many of the expressive qualities of music, dance, visual art, and even creative writing are transmissions of energy; they are not simply narrative, which may sometimes reduce artistic expression to something other than its true nature. Creative expressions are like people and facets of nature; they are more than the narrative we invent in response to them.

Artists being witnessed have to be given the freedom to just be. I call this a "theater of total being," where the meaning of the expression is inseparable from its physical and evocative qualities, in keeping with the Buddhist idea of "suchness."

The embrace of physical action combined with the suspension of judgment is the best way to not only further awareness but also to

engender an overall environment of safety, which helps us progressively let go, relax our guard, and open to what is happening in the most complete way possible. These simple and elemental practices are reliable channels to the experience of depth, wonder, and creative action.

If the judges appear, I suggest not being surprised, because again this is natural. I encourage adopting a welcoming perspective while asking them to take a seat and witness together with you.

Maybe say, “You can take it easy for a while and not work so hard to control and evaluate everything. You might even become better at doing your job.”

Change happens more effectively through acceptance and understanding. I do not see the judge as something to be conquered or banished. Lasting improvements do not happen this way. In keeping with our definition of the creative process, we try to change the nature of relationships and transform what they have been into something else as we move forward.

Witnessing and relaxing the negative dimensions of judgment begin by viewing artistic expressions without thoughts about meanings and value. Begin by looking, listening, and sensing in the most impartial way possible. Try to perceive what you and others do in terms of suchness, the most unique qualities of the thing or action.

Witnessing begins by perceiving as attentively as possible. There is a time for making judgments about the value of our expressions—like what to keep and what to let go, what is indicative of a new and significant direction with future potential, and how the work might be applied to other situations—but not when we are trying to expand and deepen our ability to witness their qualities. Early and hasty judgments can block this process.

Try your best to relax the judge, especially the one who hinders your ability to perceive what is really there. See if the judge can learn how to lay back, benefit from giving the lead to the witness, and only act when needed.

Practice: Relax Thought to See What Is before You

Begin working with any artistic medium and give complete attention to its physical qualities. You can do this even with words on a page, looking at the shape of the lines and the whole composition and the graphic style if writing by hand. With type, give closer attention to its aesthetic qualities and maybe experiment with different fonts and formats.

Declare narrative responses and meanings off limits for a while to concentrate completely on how the forms convey expression, what they say about themselves, and maybe about you, too. Verbal descriptions of what we do are, for me, another phase of creation. They have their place in furthering imagination, insights, and appreciation, but they too often take the place of the things to which they refer. Try reading a story concentrating on sensory images and reactions.

Relax thought to see what is before you, its unique being that cannot be replaced by words, as important as they may sometimes be. Take a pause to look, hear, feel, and imagine. Relaxing thought and its controls will help you think better and deeper.

Dynamics of Witnessing

☞ *Every act and gesture, no matter how seemingly small or irrelevant, is a bearer of expression.*

What We See and Miss

We practice witnessing with the assumption that every act and gesture, no matter how seemingly small or irrelevant, is a bearer of expression. Our purpose is to be as attentive as possible, realizing that our attitudes, vantage points, and degree of awareness will influence what we see and miss. By looking from different and unaccustomed perspectives we may see more.

When witnessing another person we also realize how there are many elements of expression and action happening at the same time. I refer to this as the “principle of simultaneity,” which entails what we call “sacrifice,” since it is not possible for any one of us to focus on everything happening in a given moment.

For example, if I am looking at the right hand moving, I may not be able to see the left hand, the person’s facial expressions, and other aspects of the body’s movement. When two or more people are working together and being witnessed, this dimension is magnified.

I just received photographs of a museum event where I was a participant. I was taken aback by images of classical statues, a few feet from where I was standing, that I did not recall seeing. As familiar as I am with how perception is selective, and how looking at one thing results in missing what may be happening nearby, I was stunned by how the photos showed me features of the environment I would have appreciated and greatly enjoyed if I had been aware of them. As

a poet said to me after a reading, “Better to leave hungry for more,” and this is how I think about the most elemental acts of perception.

In committing ourselves to witnessing another person with the most complete concentration possible, we immediately sense how focusing on particular aspects of expression results in not seeing other aspects. This reality is another thing to let go in order to do what we can do as well as possible. I call it a sacrifice because it is a definite loss, something we give up in order to concentrate on the chosen object. It is a necessary part of the overall process that underscores how human perception operates.

As much as we may desire omnipresence, most of us are only capable of being present in one place and perspective at a time and we will be most effective if we can give ourselves to it as completely as possible. Although we may value “multitasking” in some domains, creative expression and witnessing demand total attention.

When concentrating on the present moment as a witness, I will often consciously shift from highly focused perception to an emphasis on peripheral vision, while also concentrating on sounds and bodily sensations. The witnessing process may move in and out of a detailed focus within the whole field of perception. Even the most circumscribed points of contact, like a person drawing on a small surface, present this variety.

I first used the term “simultaneity” while witnessing performances, dances, and musical improvisations involving two or more people where the degree of possibilities for perceptual attention is exponentially increased. I do not think highly focused concentration on one person in a solo performance is necessarily better or worse than these group activities; each context presents its unique features. Again the options analogize to life situations and our goal is to engage the different opportunities to further a sense of the reality of present moments and our perception of them.

When working with groups where we witness performances with just one person, I am always fascinated by how we see so many different things even when we are apparently witnessing exactly the

same occurrence. After witnessing the work in silence for a period ranging from five to twelve minutes, depending upon time availability and our particular group goals (the allotted time is, however, always consistent with sequential performances in the respective groups), the group members offer responses to the performers and invariably the range of observations is vast, even when dealing with the most minimalistic performance gestures.

Although the relative vantage points of where a witness happens to be located do influence perception and the degree to which certain things can and cannot be seen, these structural and spatial factors are not nearly as influential in generating varied interpretations as are the perceptual style and individual interests, worldview, and present consciousness of the particular witness.

For example, when viewing the most contained, slow, and simple actions with performers seated facing the audience and where two hands pour water from a vessel into a bowl or one hand makes repeated lines with a brush and black ink on paper, and where we are all able to generally look at and hear the same things, predictably there will be tremendous variation in the interpretive responses. These experiments reinforce the natural variability of human reactions to experience and they raise interesting questions about the existence and nature of objective reality and how it relates to human perception of the same occurrence.

When witnessing performances with two or more people in groups (in my studios we work solo, and in twos, threes, and fours), the experiences of simultaneity and sacrifice are significantly increased. I prepare participants for this and present it as an opportunity to experiment creatively with a range of perspectives, each giving its unique opportunities and challenges.

The term “sacrifice” originated in response to performers expressing regret concerning what they missed when hearing responses from audience members to what their partners did. People involved in performance are so concentrated on what they are doing they are typically not aware of people around them—I actually encourage

this focus, which is a key part of letting go and becoming immersed in the present moment.

If performers are busy looking around and paying attention to what others are doing, they lose contact with their own expression, not to mention potentially interfering with the work of others. It became clear that performers concentrating fully on their own actions are unable to be attentive to their partners and thus they sacrifice the ability to witness them for the sake of the collective work.

As we continued to experiment with the witnessing process, these more clear-cut examples of sacrifice were extended to every instance of perceptual attention—including, as I mentioned, with only one person working. We cannot have it all within perception and these restraints are a corollary to the wealth of possibilities in every moment.

Witnessing Oneself in Action

After giving witnesses the opportunity to speak about their perceptions in our studio sessions, we shift to listening to performers describe what the experience was like for them. Consistently people describe how they cannot believe time passed so quickly. They talk about how they at first felt anxious and uncertain about whether or not they could do simple existential acts for even two or three minutes and then when they discover they worked for periods of ten, twelve, or more minutes, they are taken aback. They also say they could have continued longer and that time was not in the foreground of their thought once they became immersed in what they were doing; and they describe how the presence of the witnesses, even though they may have never looked at them, furthered concentration. A distinct feeling of energy is generated by the attentiveness and support of witnesses. Performers claim they could not do what they did without this presence.

There is an intriguing dynamic whereby immersion in what we are doing tends to affect our ability to perceive what is happening

both in terms of heightening certain aspects and limiting others. There is no question the sensory motor involvement enables the performer direct access to dimensions of the process not accessible to a witness watching. As described earlier, art as contemplative practice integrates both functions in witnessing oneself in action.

The Completeness of Simple Acts versus "Performing"

Witnessing pieces with more than two artists, I am very aware of making a choice in paying close attention to a focal point and missing something else. I have practiced scanning as I look and concentrating on peripheral vision without locking onto a particular perspective, but these techniques also involve degrees of sacrifice.

On the whole I move from one vantage point to another, trying to shift and give attention evenly. Although as a leader I do this with a sense of responsibility, I can honestly say after more than three decades of experience with these processes, the degree of interest I have for each element of individual performance stays relatively constant.

I describe to groups how there is a quality element involved with performing but it has everything to do with being present and authentic rather than clever. If a performance is completely in the moment and not following a scripted plan or trying to convey preconceived ideas, the pieces always work.

For example, we find the process of pantomime, which entails the use of bodily gestures to mimic or convey a narrative or idea, tends to be preconceived and convey something other than the actions for their own sake. Of course pantomime is a recognized and important art form, but we discover how it does not always enable the performers in our studios to access the state of complete presence to which we aspire. Perhaps it is because pantomime typically requires technical skills in order to realize the full presence we seek, whereas the performance of elemental existential acts does not. What is required is immediacy and presence, which are accessible to all. There is no

separation between the gesture and the idea, no mental space where the performer can disconnect and become self-conscious or confused, and no questions about whether the expression is effectively conveying the intended message. The spontaneous, natural, and unplanned act is the complete expression unto itself. It contains everything it needs and we see how it generates considerable meaning and significance for those who perceive it.

As I mentioned earlier, depth is on the surface and reliably related to the degree we are grounded in the moment. I tell performers if they can trust this and keep everything simple, the piece will offer its unique enchantment.

One of my most significant learning experiences in experimenting with performance happened when I was working in a studio group with visual art therapy students who were reluctant to move beyond the confines of traditional drawing, painting, and object making. The idea of performance generated angst and the retort, "What does this have to do with art therapy?" I stayed with the use of performance art in our studio but suggested they could simply enact the most essential acts of visual art-making. However, rather than quickly making a picture or sculpture in the usual way, I recommended they explore a single gesture of painting or sculpting, repeat it, allow it to develop, and possibly change.

I discovered this even more simplified and elemental approach to performance, used as a way to engage resistive participants, deepened the work for me. The focus on essential actions furthered concentration and fulfilled my maxims about the power of simplicity and depth being on the surface of actions. What first appeared to be an accommodation to enable people to participate went on to inform and inspire new phases of performance practice.

There is also something to be said for reframing the things we ask others to do in terms of a context they will accept and that they see as relating to their goals. People committed to more traditional art materials are not as likely to be attracted to ideas of performance and enactment. When introducing performance art I make it clear

that the work is not about “performing” in the conventional dramatic sense. It involves doing elemental and existential things with awareness and witnessing the process, again more like contemplative practice than being on stage. People hoping to work with others using the arts can relate to this.

Although provocative and more risky performances can have a tendency to grasp attention, I find they are not necessarily more aesthetically and emotionally engaging than the enactment of the most ordinary acts from daily life in this process that I call “existential theater.” Almost universally people in my groups choose to experiment with the ordinary acts rather than the provocative ones, appreciating the challenges offered by the simplest and most personal actions and sensing how more confrontational or histrionic expressions may not fit the context and sometimes generate manipulative effects.

Rules that Further Expressiveness and Perception

I establish rules in advance about performers staying in a designated physical space and not interfering with others, being sensitive to sound that travels across spatial boundaries (but never discouraging it), and most of all making sure the actions are safe, for otherwise I will have to intercede.

I also discourage any physical engagement of audience members, even eye contact. I explain that making those of us acting as witnesses a literal part of the piece in any way compromises our role, our concentration on the action, and our freedom to select what we perceive.

Experience suggests we are more apt to move in and out of awareness. Sometimes the concentration happens immediately and then it is lost. Rather than try to fight or prevent loss of contact, I find it helps to accept it as natural, and this helps refocus attention and discovery. Witnessing demonstrates how the creative process is a discipline in which action and perception move steadily at some times and unpredictably at others. The different modes complement one

another. As discussed earlier regarding the spontaneity and unpredictability of the artistic act, creative perception does not necessarily occur in reliable stages.

The witnessing process gives us opportunities to consciously experiment with these dynamics. Sometimes we latch on to a discovery and stay with it, thus missing other options for perception. If I see something a person does as helping to answer a question I am addressing in my life, this might so completely occupy my attention that I lose contact with other opportunities.

The same thing happens when writing or painting, where I latch on to an idea and lose others that may be moving through me at the time. The perceptions of writers and readers correspond to these dynamics of witnessing, as do streams of consciousness in making and listening to music. When the process is operating at optimum levels, it is a truly oscillating dynamic of gain and loss, concentration and letting go. This is another example of how sacrifice happens in the creative process; I have learned it is a natural condition and what matters most is quality contact with the focus on the present moment rather than trying to hang on to and preserve everything moving into consciousness, which invariably interrupts the creative stream of action.

Practice: Revisiting and Playing It Again and Again

My experience in the museum is an example of how fascinating it is to return to places or look at photographs of ourselves in a particular context to explore what we saw and remember and what was completely missed. I experience this vividly in reading literature, listening to music, watching a favorite film, or returning to a meaningful place from the past. The quality of a book or any other artistic expression is related to its ability to invite ongoing engagement and discovery.

Where some might focus on the negative aspects of what is missed or unseen, I prefer to concentrate on realizing the complete-

ness of each engagement and the bounteous nature of expression and life. Perception by nature concentrates on focal points and has the potential to constantly see new things. This is one reason why I discourage fixed interpretations and meanings. They guard against the new and the surprises of imagination.

Leading

☞ *Open the door and step aside.*

"Less Is More, Lucrezia"

Early in my career I realized how injecting an uninvited idea while a person was working usually interrupted the process and obstructed depth. With complete reliability I have observed how significant experiences with creative expression involve individual freedom combined with environmental support. I learned how the discipline of leadership entails being present and responsible, helping to establish objectives and a sense of purpose, hopefully furthering motivation, but then letting the other person and the creative process take the lead. When these forces are fully activated, the leader takes on the role of witness who affirms, supports, and often marvels at what happens. Again, these same dynamics also happen within the individual creative act.

In helping others with the creative process, I try to foster an environment that activates creative energy and where each person establishes a personal relationship with it. I am there to watch over the studio space and support everyone in it, maintaining a certain order and structure that permits people to take risks and do new things that may evoke discomfort, tension, and even a certain chaos. The predictability of support in the more general context makes it possible to allow the inevitable difficulties to play a transformative role.

Understanding from my own experience how helpful an insightful observation might be, I try to insert myself and suggestions only

when they seem truly needed. On the whole I have learned it is best to be as sensitive as possible to giving the other person the chance to request anything I might offer. Overbearing advice or eager assistance have a reverse effect in blocking autonomy and personal leadership in expression.

But complete passivity may result in missing chances to help or needlessly letting an unproductive process continue too long. Leadership roles with others or within our artistic expression sometimes require the risk of mediating or changing what is being done. Skilled practice is based on sensitivity to the give-and-take of how we engage the ever-changing context.

As mentioned earlier, structure has an important place in artistic expression, but I approach it with minimalist values: in keeping with my dictum, "the simpler, the deeper," and Robert Browning's "less is more, Lucrezia."¹ I will often give people "suggestions" as to how they begin or organize what they do with materials in making art or in witnessing the creative process, as I do here in these pages, but then I try to get out the way. I call this opening the door and stepping aside. Modeling this process as a leader helps studio participants lead their own creative expression by relaxing controls and learning how to activate, follow, and shape the forces of creation.

In leading, making art, and witnessing expression, we do our best to mobilize the leadership of the creative intelligence that moves through us and our environments. Each of us is involved with a distinctly individual journey, quest, or inquiry defined by the unique conditions of our lives.

As the role of witnessing takes on greater importance in my practice, I am increasingly aware of how people who are being trained to be with others in helping roles are not being prepared to do this. Most people assume witnesses are passive. The discipline does have a passive aspect when trying not to interfere, but it is much more than mere looking or standing by. The witness may withhold urges to become physically involved, yet as mentioned earlier, the process actively involves empathy, compassion, and imagination, as well as

creative perception and much more than observation in the usual sense.

Experiences in training arts therapists reveal how the values described here are at odds with the often exclusive orientation to “interventions” and “directives” in current therapeutic practice. The latter is explicitly authoritarian; the former involves inserting oneself into a situation, which may be necessary at times to protect or save lives or when a process is irrevocably blocked, but not as the exclusive basis for helping others express themselves creatively.

I ask my colleagues to reflect on what is conveyed by the use of this language. What are the subliminal and overt effects? There is a compelling case to be made for nonintervention training. The threats help frame the importance of witnessing and the values it espouses.

Holding Presence

I am not encouraging unquestioned acceptance as standard practice but I think for most people, especially those who are capable and skilled in taking action, it can be challenging to relax instincts to control and direct. D. W. Winnicott spoke of holding spaces and how he might interfere with a creative and natural healing process when inserting himself. We lead by helping to establish relationships and a space within which the forces of creativity are free to do their work and act upon us. As Kurt Lewin said, the only forces we can activate in a given situation are those already present; the skilled leader helps realize innate potential.

I learned early on, informed by group participants who were not reluctant to protest when something did not feel right, that the less I injected myself in their expression the better. But they did need me, actually relied on me, to maintain the overall space for them, to have their backs as we say, so they could let down their guards. In opening to the unexpected they had to expect and rely on me being there for them and the work they were doing.

Skilled and effective leaders do intervene, and they do so deci-

sively, when the forces at work in a particular situation are unable to do the job and ensure safety. But their primary goal is usually fostering creative and productive group work. Often leaders will give suggestions in response to requests for help, guidance, and direction. At other times they act to alter the course of activity to achieve an objective or when something is not working.

Practice: Appreciating Leadership within Our Own Expressions

All of us have considerable experience with leadership both good and bad. Many are disinclined to take on the role, feeling not suited. But often it is the reluctant leader, the one who has to step forward out of necessity, in contrast to the person driven to lead, who is more sensitive to the nuances of cooperation with others.

Use your journal to identify the positive and negative features of leadership you have observed in others and in yourself.

Are you someone who has difficulty lying back and restraining the urge to intervene? It might help to recall situations where you felt others became intrusive and overly directive in their efforts to help you with a problem.

What is it you want from others when in difficult situations? Can you recall instances when the compassionate presence of another person helped you deal with a problem? What is it about empathy, the absence of judgment, and noninvasive witnessing that is so effective in generating support? Can you apply this to yourself?

As suggested here in comparing leadership dynamics in groups to what happens within our individual expressions, you might reflect upon instances when you interfered in this way with your own creative process.

Try experimenting with the application of supportive leadership dynamics to personal creative expression. Reflect on the extent to which you are able to tolerate and hold things that at first may seem out of place, incongruous, and odd. We might be working in complete

privacy and quickly intervene in an awkward or unfamiliar situation to change, control, and regularize conditions.

I admire leaders, teachers, and coaches who have the ability to watch closely and if possible give people the freedom to find their own way through challenging situations without being overly directive. It takes skill and character to patiently support people when you think you might know exactly what they need to do, and yet the masterful leader knows this kind of direction might interfere with something new and unique being created outside their existing frame of experience. The same thing applies to giving ourselves leeway in experimenting with things that at first feel uneasy and different.

There is a season for straightening things out and establishing order, but it may be beneficial to your creative expression to try to withhold the urge to do this too quickly and thus eliminate something new that presents itself.

Excellent leaders have a gift for being able to perceive the whole field of action without being overly entrenched in singular perspectives. They juxtapose objects, ideas, people, and groups, encouraging them to relate to one another in new ways, and they appreciate risk takers and unusual ideas being generated in the spirit of positive creation. Rather than encouraging others to think just as they do, they realize imagination thrives upon variations.

Try juxtaposing apparently unrelated and random words, images, sounds, and gestures to generate artistic compositions. Be surreal, act like a dream maker who realizes how the most apparently incongruous combinations of things incites imagination.

Take on different characters, personifying aspects of yourself that may be different from the usual face you show, what we call the “ego position.” We need our ego judgments to navigate through daily life, but we do not always realize how we lock in to them and suppress more whimsical, fantastic, and revolutionary possibilities.

Concentrate less on proper and correct placement; be more concerned with allowing things to take shape in ways that marvel and

provoke, that interest you and perhaps show something about your imagination others have not seen.

Encourage the leader of your inner group dynamic to support the free play of possibilities. Record the outcomes and do not judge them at all. Let them be and perhaps return to them later. Keep a sense of detachment: give them autonomy and do your best to see their purpose, their role within an expanding field of creation.

Interpretation as Witnessing

- ❧ *Interpretation is a way of perceiving and relating to our creations. It is fundamental to every aspect of the creative process and we can do it better.*

Furthering Communion

Liberating interpretation has been a career-long challenge for me. When entering the mental health field I was appalled by how drawing tests and psychological interpretations categorized artworks and the people who made them, not even hinting that there might be other perspectives. There have been times when I have felt maybe I and like-minded colleagues have been able to reverse these trends, but then I see people, even within what are considered liberated zones, attaching explanations that are little more than psychological clichés to artistic expressions. The process is invariably negative; as I say, whatever you express can and will be used against you.

Art interpretation in psychology and education has a history of reducing creative expressions to concepts, often based upon a reading of the artist's so-called unconscious intentions and motives, which are purportedly projected in the art like fingerprints or an MRI. What is more apt to happen here in keeping with the dynamics of interpretation is the projection of a viewpoint. As Georgia O'Keeffe said about the psychosexual interpretations of her flower paintings, you are talking about yourself, not me.

Psychology tends to ask what the painting says about the emotional condition of the person who made it, and in education at every level there is a long history of attaching fixed symbolic meanings to

expressions in all of the arts. We can probably all recall school tests asking for the explanation of the symbolic significance of a poem or novel according to a particular account presented as a factual position. These educational experiences are all about reducing complex artistic expressions to prepackaged meanings, and there is usually very little engagement of artistic elements or encouragement to freely respond to them in imaginative and personal ways within a continuous process of interpretation. No wonder interpretation has a bad name in some circles.

In criticizing these approaches I never questioned that we respond to art and dreams by interpreting them, and the same applies to all of life. The process of interpretation is not at fault; it is a matter of how we do it, the attitudes we bring to the engagement, and the degree to which we are conscious of how the practice works.

The art therapist Helen Landgarten, who was also an accomplished painter, described to me how for many years she was reluctant to hear peoples' reactions to her paintings. She said it felt like they were opening the drawers of her dresser and going through them. Ultimately, she concluded—in a way that brings to mind Marcel Proust's description of art serving as an "optical instrument" for readers who find their own meanings¹—that when looking at her paintings "they were looking into their own souls" and not necessarily hers, and the pictures acted as autonomous entities in facilitating this process.

Of course artworks and dreams have intimate and meaningful connections to the lives of the people who make them. In my studios we explore ways of getting as close as we can to their expression and uniqueness; we try to know them better, deepen our relationships with them, open more to their communications, and consider a range of interpretive possibilities rather than reducing the complex of an expression to one thing.

Pablo Picasso described how every time he passed by a painting, they had a different conversation. The generative powers of an artistic expression may be attached to its ability to further this fecundity

of interpretive possibilities as with a rich and deep relationship with another person, place, or theme.

As I have emphasized before in *Art as Medicine* (1992) and *Art Heals* (2004), in exploring the use of imagination in interpreting images, treating artistic expressions “as if” they are persons furthers their autonomy and their capacity to act upon and influence us. I have likened artworks to offspring who carry our creative genes but also exist independently. My primary artistic satisfaction is the arrival and presence of these images that become part of my life and community.

When I look at the paintings in my studio, I am fascinated with their being. Interpretation is a process of communion, a way of perceiving and relating to our creations. It is fundamental to every aspect of the creative process and we can do it better in all sectors of art, psychology, education, and life.

Explanationism

I have concluded that the tendency to approach interpretation as a process of providing exact and singular meaning is deeply ingrained in human thinking. Exactitude has its place in many areas but not necessarily art, where it tends to generate what I call “explanationism.” Having to categorically explain and label an expression can be all about control, predictability, and power, not to mention fear of the unknown and what I have observed to be a lack of imagination and artistic sensitivity in responding to both the people who make art and the things they make.

As emphasized in this book, negative and disturbing situations can be significant sources of creation. The general turmoil breaks apart the usual ways of doing things and we are required to act differently. In my case the discomfort I felt with psychological interpretation inspired a sustained critical analysis of the problem and its history. The irritant and accompanying sense of injustice prompted a deeper engagement with artworks. It defined the challenge and

presented an opportunity for creative discovery and change. In my efforts to relate more closely and accurately to artistic expressions and give careful attention to the most organic reflections on experience, the process of witnessing emerged as a mode of interpretation. The problem generated a new interpretation of interpretation.

Interpretation is our most instinctual response to the world. Every response to an artistic expression is an interpretation made by creators, viewers, readers, or audience members. Artworks convey a whole field or complex of sensory expressions that we contemplate, feel, and then synthesize into perceptions, thoughts, and emotional reactions that change as we shift our focus of attention, just as we move in a more general way within our environments.

Types of Interpretation

The word “interpret” has a number of related but different features that can be more clearly distinguished in relation to the arts. The most common usage involves the attribution of meaning, often applied to the interpretation of an artistic expression by a person other than the artist. Artistic expression is itself a process of interpretation in that the artist responds to a subject, idea, emotion, song, or script with an expression.

All facets of the interpretive process are characterized by a person’s effort to understand and respond to something that can be viewed in different ways—interpretation can involve the perception of a person’s mood or tone of voice, a description of an historical event, a poetic response to an emotion, a portrait of a person, the rendition of a classic piece of music, a painting of a landscape, responding to an artwork.

The process of interpreting experience ranges from efforts to determine and convey the contents and intention of a communication in very precise ways—as in language translation—to imaginative expressions where the interpreter intentionally adds something new and different in the response. There is considerable confusion

when the principles of giving explicit interpretations and meanings are applied to the arts, where the impact of an expression is linked to a novel response by the artist and the ability to generate varied responses in audiences.

Even when translating texts from one language to another, a faithful communication gives “the sense” of the source. The interpretation is a new creation made from a state of empathy in which the interpreter establishes a felt sense for the original, experiences corresponding emotions and thoughts, and proceeds to convey the impressions through the unique qualities of the translator’s consciousness and style.

Voltaire’s 1731 reflections on Shakespeare states the challenges and perils of translation: “Woe to the makers of literal translations, who by rendering every word weaken the meaning! It is indeed by so doing that we can say the letter kills and the spirit gives life.”²

Translating literature and even ordinary human speech is more than moving information from one place to another. The successful translation establishes a corresponding sense of the original expression and transmits its vitality through a new creation. Thus all forms of interpretation, from the most exacting to the most imaginative, involve being what William S. Burroughs described as “a responding instrument”³ to whatever is experienced.

Expanding the idea of interpretation has many advantages for people beginning to become involved in the arts as well as for experienced artists. Where exactitude is encouraged when interpreting information in many domains, the arts benefit from more liberal and sometimes contradictory responses. Even when the artist’s intention is exact representation—as in portraiture, photography, documentary film, and written text—there are still likely to be a range of interpretive possibilities. If there is an assumption that creative works provide exact representations, convey preconceived forms or messages, or mean only one thing, the playing field of expression and imagination together with possibilities for invention and discovery

is dramatically narrowed. Liberating artistic interpretation in this respect becomes a basis for doing the same for creative expression.

Artistic expression in every medium is a process of interpretation, which is then continued by audiences who interpret the interpretation. The process is ongoing and ideally permeated by imagination, discovery, and variations. When musicians interpret a well-known song, we expect it will be rendered in different ways, each expressing the style and feeling of the artist. Furthermore, the same person is apt to interpret the music differently with each performance. These artistic interpretations magnify possibilities for experiencing the music.

All of the arts interpret people, places, emotions, situations, relationships, and the whole spectrum of life experience. In both making art and in responding to it, interpretive freedom deepens experience while furthering understanding and appreciation.

Practice: Accuracy and Imagination

It might help your understanding of interpretation to recall situations where people responded in unexpected ways to something you expressed.

The details of how another person or group interpreted what you said or did can form a basis for showing the difference between your intention and how perceivers often read very different things into it.

I am sure you have past experiences where these differences, when offered generously as a subjective response, might have helped you see more in what you did. In these situations there is generally no sense of right or wrong. Rather you appreciate how personal expressions are capable of eliciting many different perceptions, some of which might be close to your purpose and others quite different. These variations are, in my view, a manifestation of how art interpretation operates in a more general context of what philosophers call “intersubjectivity.”

You might also reflect on situations where you felt misinterpreted or were concerned about how another person's expression was being interpreted by others. Can you recall the details of how the responses of others differed from your own? What accounted for these variances? Did the structure of the expression invite this? Was it indefinite or open-ended? Or were people being insistent on the correctness of their viewpoints? Was there a reasonable basis for these assertions based on the form and contents of the expression? Or do you feel it had more to do with the character of the interpreter—a tendency toward fixed and singular perceptions versus flexibility and openness to different possibilities?

Go through the same process in recalling situations where you acted as the interpreter of another person's expression and where you took on both the role of being an imaginative interpreter, sensitive to your subjectivity, and other times where you may have felt a sense of factual correctness. Were there times when your view was at odds with the artist's?

When the response is given as another person's point of view, as a personal or creative reaction, it feels very different from being presented authoritatively, objectively as hard fact. Your felt sense of accuracy, rather than a complex intellectual analysis, can be the best resource for grasping the nuanced process of interpretation.

Select an artistic expression in any medium and perceive it as a live drama, imagination in action. The process of aesthetic contemplation is inherently imaginative, a succession of artistic acts. Imagining furthers the accuracy of perception when it is sensitive to the objective qualities of an expression and immersed in those qualities—as opposed to the more stereotypic notion of imagining as a way of going off into a different fantasy realm or a totally subjective trip. As Percy Bysshe Shelley said about loving contemplation, we “vibrate with the vibrations”⁴ felt in response to others, a process that may be more about nerves and bodily sensibilities than purely mental states.

Play off the features that move you and build upon them. In my studios we interpret art with art, moving in response to paintings, letting the characters in dreams tell their stories or dramatically enact the scene, engaging a feeling with vocal improvisation, all of which interpret expressions, enrich relationships, and deepen understanding.

Contemplating Physical Things

☛ *Feel the blueness of the blue.*

Generous Perceptions

When I was coordinating an arts therapy program in a mental hospital at the start of my career, my natural inclination was to perceive what people expressed in a positive way, especially since I was sensitive to the challenges and risks involved with both making and showing art. Although well aware of what brought people to the hospital and the conditions they faced, I generally viewed their art as I would any other person's. Rather than see pathology in their efforts to express themselves, I perceived achievement, especially since most were facing more acute emotional obstacles than the average person.

There were expressions that intentionally conveyed rage and other intense feelings related to the person's overall condition, but for the most part the art people made in the hospital was what might be considered normal and just like what people everywhere did. Yet these expressions were still analyzed for pathology, with the rationale (as mentioned previously) that it was being expressed unconsciously in the more seemingly benign compositions that were viewed as defenses. The artist is behind the eight ball if these interpretations do not feel right, since the "real" source of expression is purportedly outside consciousness. People who clearly suffered from severe emotional disorders were particularly vulnerable to this kind of analysis, because there could be no argument about the existence of their personal problems.

Struggling with these procedures, I asked myself, Are you being

naïve? Denying psychological reality? Masking your inability to make these interpretations and see what is really happening in a person's expression?

I arrived serendipitously in the mental health field informed by artistic and philosophical studies that fostered awareness of the aesthetic qualities of things rather than attributing meaning to them according to a particular psychological paradigm. In college I sat close to Thomas Berry—a soft-spoken professor who went on to write *The Great Work* (2000), *The Sacred Universe* (2009), *Dream of the Earth* (1988), and many other books—in his small classes on Eastern religions that encouraged a sense of wonder, coherence, and communion in response to experience. These influences led me to studies of indigenous spirituality and C. G. Jung's sense of creative acts manifesting archetypal continuities and a certain human dignity.

At first I felt a degree of fascination at how mental health professionals made quick and facile psychological interpretations of artistic expressions, attributing emotional and psychopathological conditions to colors, line qualities, textures, and overall compositional features—what might be considered a perverse use of imagination. It was clear these interpreters were looking carefully at the details and structural qualities of pictures, often with an eye for subtle characteristics, with the same acute sensitivity associated with paranoia. But it seemed too simplistic to assume dark colors indicated depression and red signified anger. The concepts had a formulaic structure, with arts providing data for procedures conducted like a medical lab test. I interpreted the interpretations with considerable cognitive dissonance and continued to perceive creative expressions with imaginative generosity.

Aesthetic Reflection

I turned the tables and began asking how the psychology of perception and interpretation might help us respond to creative expressions more completely.

When approaching art I looked at the physical qualities of the work with a curiosity as to how the picture visually conveyed expression; how the forms and colors were arranged; and how the artist constructed the picture. I did the same thing with poems that were often given to me. I looked at children's art and images made in the studio of the psychiatric hospital where I worked the same way I approached art in a New York gallery or a museum. Whenever I visit shows, I engage the work first and then read whatever has been written to accompany the exhibit. And in the studio sessions I lead, I always try to provide time to look carefully before entering into verbal communication, which is for me another phase of responding to the artistic expression.

Verbal reflections do make contributions, and as I have emphasized, they often enable us to see things we may not have seen or they help us look in different ways. The words, artist statements, and historical information have their place in the overall process of interpretation but only in assisting the primary process of looking, feeling, and engaging the work through the senses. Words and ideas may complement perception but they never replace its foundational role in aesthetic experience. Artistic knowing happens primarily through sensory intelligences.

In my early work, mentored by Rudolf Arnheim (who wrote the 1954 classic *Art and Visual Perception*), we would look and relook at pictures from a purely perceptual perspective to become aware of their objective structural qualities and the effects they had on us. We did the same with music, poetry, and other art forms. As we perceived more in these expressions, corresponding psychological and emotional effects were significantly expanded. The practice was distinctly contemplative and the reflections made palpable connections between inner and outer experience; what we perceived in the material world aroused emotional and spiritual sensibilities. The correspondence effects operated as a kind of artistic homeopathy, and they engendered a realization of what we miss in our interactions with

the physical world and how we can experience so much more. This is how the practice of artistic witnessing began to take shape.

Practice: Always the First Time

Reflect upon how you respond to creative expressions. Are you more prone to witness and perceive by contemplating aesthetic features and the way physical qualities relate to one another or do you seek explanations? Are you captured by the “thingly” nature of the expression or its meaning? Or both?

How does information about an artist’s method, purpose, and historical context influence your perception? Does it further your personal engagement? Your ability to feel the blueness of the blue or the dolorosa of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Stabat Mater*? Or do you prefer to engage them with as little orientation as possible? Some combination of the two?

Although I might overlook features of an artistic expression without an introduction, I prefer to experience them first and then receive contextual information, which often helps me discover new aspects complementing my core perception.

Experiment with a familiar artwork. Try to put aside everything you know about it and perceive it as if this is the first time. Do your best to concentrate on perceptual and structural qualities, the things that you feel and imagine when viewing, listening, and reading. Record your responses and reflect on the extent to which the process may or may not have changed your relationship to the piece.

Thin Places

- ☞ *Interpreting can be a contemplative practice in sync with whatever is happening without judgment or wishing for something else.*

A Breadth of Possibilities

If we shift the basis of interpreting to witnessing, there is a completely different context for understanding and relating to artistic expressions. Attentiveness, curiosity, and openness to being influenced replace judgments about significance. Some interpretations will always be more attuned to expressions than others, and the process is informed by the instincts for quality described in relation to the making of art.

As an artist I welcome a breadth of interpretive responses. Different reactions help me see aspects of the work I do not perceive. I am always learning from these responses. Artistic expressions, like people, have many qualities, and the interpretive process enables us to experience and know them in more complete ways. Where many feel the individual artists are ultimately best positioned to speak to the origins and purpose of their expressions, I welcome responses from others since (as I have discussed here) they look, read, and listen from their unique vantage points.

The witnessing consciousness encourages starting with a clean slate, trying to minimize bias as much as possible. I do my best to approach the situation with intrigue and I concentrate on looking, listening, and feeling the expression. Since the process of perception is ongoing, witnessing requires the ability to engage what is happen-

ing in the moment and then let it go in order to be receptive to the next phase of expression.

How does she hold the brush? Relate to the painting surface? How does she approach color? Form? Is she more deliberate or spontaneous? What is her tempo? Where does she seem most absorbed? Comfortable? Do you see expressions of tension, and how do they affect the composition?

The same kinds of observations can be made in relation to a person dancing, playing an instrument, or performing. The objective of effective interpretation becomes the appreciation of the overt and subtle aspects of expression—perceiving the qualities of sounds and movement, changes that occur, patterns, how every perception is organized by an overall design we can learn to see. As you begin to experiment, you realize how the discipline can be perfected. Practicing with others helps us see different qualities, again highlighting how we are unaware of so many things in our most immediate environments.

Withholding the Attribution of Meaning and Contemplating Presence

When witnessing another person or ourselves dealing with the ups and downs of the expressive process, we try to be completely in sync with whatever is happening without judgment or wishing for something else. When we find ourselves thinking maybe a little bit more of this or less of that could be beneficial, we practice letting these thoughts go and returning to what is taking place and concentrating on it completely. Our contribution to the process is the most complete attention possible with a commitment to what is manifesting itself through the actions taking place.

Witnesses often feel an urge to step in to assist and assuage when they watch another person doing something that appears difficult or painful. Or when witnessing anger or expressions suggesting destruction, they describe how challenging it is to sit with feelings

and withhold urges to insert themselves. They discover how important it may be to stay with the discomfort and how taking action can interrupt the creative process and its ability to make a more effective repair. Artists in turn say it is more important for them to have someone who is willing to stay with them while expressing difficult moments.

Our discipline as witnesses is focused on holding, protecting, and supporting the organic forces of change, inserting ourselves only when we feel it may be necessary to keep the process on track, revive it, or prevent what might be harmful. We trust, as both witnesses and actors, that if we are completely committed to the process, it will work its way to where it needs to go. We stay with the emotion and expression of the moment, whatever it happens to be.

There are endless details and nuances to every expression, and each act has its particular values—which we strive to perceive in a context that is always changing and where there is generally no hierarchy of significance. Interpreting becomes contemplative practice.

Our usual way of perceiving artistic events tends to be influenced by ingrained assumptions about beginnings, climatic moments, endings, and other stock attitudes. In witnessing a person move with a brush or with clay, moving in space, or making sounds, we explore a more level stage or field of perception where every moment is as significant as the next. Rather than looking for breakthroughs or key insights, try to concentrate on how instants of expression can be complete unto themselves and how we can be more sensitive and aware of their nature. Photographs and videos of hands moving and making the most subtle gestures show how much more there is to perceive when witnessing another person. It can be fascinating to try to be more aware of the drama presented by the most elemental features of every artistic medium.

I often encourage contemplating various details and moments, observing how they influence one another and how they affect us. After exploring the whole of a composition, we often choose par-

ticular features to explore with sustained reflection. In his practice of active imagination, C. G. Jung asked people to select any detail of a dream and then give it their total concentration. These small elements become openings to worlds of imagination. I liken them to shamanic portals. The effectiveness of the process results from the degree to which we concentrate and give of ourselves to the engagement.

Concentrating on any detail in an artwork helps us become more aware of the whole. As I look closely at a single scale of a fish, I see how it is part of a repetitious design. The particular element furthers awareness of the entire composition and the movement from micro to macro features in turn furthers appreciation of the role small things play in the larger context and are in turn influenced by the whole.

Stay in the Moment

In my practice, as suggested by examples offered here, I have a bias for present-centered contemplation of physical qualities and the effects they have on us, so I am always supporting people in staying with and returning to the things before them rather than leaving them in favor of fantasy trips. We appreciate how the physical properties stimulate imagination that in turn furthers perception in a reciprocal movement between inner and outer realms. Empathy as described here is both detailed observation and imagination—the two go together as the witness imagines what the other feels, what it is like to do a particular action, how it evolves.

Imagination in this respect enhances witnessing by increasing awareness and keeping the focus on the person or the object of concentration. It helps us enter the world of the expression and to a certain extent transcend the idea, if only temporarily, that we are in a completely separate place. When I envision myself within the space of a painting, poem, or dance, this helps me access many more

dimensions of “its” expression. We practice how attentiveness to the most immediate things and their physical qualities in the present moment intensifies reverie.

The interpreter as witness acts like a maker of art, moving from one gesture to another. If we fixate on a particular aspect of the expression we block access to the ongoing movement of the composition and the cumulative effect of the interpretive process.

Practice: Portals to Imagination

As I have mentioned, imagination is the space between the creator and the object of contemplation. It may help to liken it to Celtic “thin places,” where the veils between material and spiritual realms are subtle and porous. Although many traditions feel some places and things have greater spiritual and transformative powers than others, I have a perverse preference for the most ordinary objects of contemplation becoming thin places: as I described in *Earth Angels: Engaging the Sacred in Everyday Things* (2005). James Joyce said it best: “Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods.”¹ What matters is quality attention, applied to the most apparently insignificant features of an environment or composition. The hierarchy of importance in interpretation is totally eliminated and we find, as Jung emphasized, the “savior is *either the insignificant thing itself, or else arises out of it.*”²

This preference for the ordinary took shape in response to the often physically limited, bland, and difficult settings where I worked. I have discovered that the most apparently impoverished space can become a “thin place” when we choose to seriously engage it as an object of contemplation. The same applies to any artistic expression.

I encourage seeking out what you might consider to be the most overlooked and disparaged aspects of your immediate physical environment and contemplate them in new ways. Give compassion to lowly places and things. Create a space for serious aesthetic viewing, like a gallery or shrine, and place the object in it and see if the spatial

forces influence your perceptions. Contemplate the formal qualities of a mundane object—a broom or a simple cup. Try to separate it from its daily function. Give everything you have to marveling at the unique qualities of its form.

After meditating on individual objects, place two or more together in an arrangement and reflect upon how they relate to one another, what might change in them and you.

Bring the same kind of attention to artistic expressions you are apt to dismiss. Interpret them differently by concentrating on unappreciated features. Perhaps you will find they offer the “gate of access” you need right now.

Creating with the Shadow

The shadow is the force of life and the expressive potential we keep in the dark and often suppress. It includes agitations but also agitates on behalf of the soul's deepest purpose. Liberating creativity is all about creating with the shadow.

Art Alchemy

☛ *Art survives with vitality because it has a unique ability to do something productive with troubles.*

Essential Fuel

No matter how much I try to help people relax at the onset of creative expression, there tends to be a pervasive feeling of angst, fear, and hesitation. When I first encountered this I wondered why, and I have been asking the question ever since, maybe getting a better feeling for the inevitable reactions people have when given the opportunity to express themselves in the presence of others. I have become convinced something so universally pervasive must be connected to the source of creative energy. So rather than try to eliminate it, I encourage putting it to use, engaging it as the essential fuel of creative expression. Because these troublesome forces are not always appreciated as sources of creation, I refer to them as the shadow of expression, building on Jung's view of the dark aspects of ourselves we try not to show. The shadow complements and completes the light.

Larger than personal difficulties or blemishes we are reluctant to show, the shadow is a force of life and the expressive potential we keep in the dark and often suppress. It includes agitations, but it also agitates on behalf of the soul's deepest purpose. Liberating creativity is all about creating with the shadow.

When I first started introducing people to how art furthers healing and social transformation, I viewed myself as evoking the positive aspects of creative activity. I often encountered a reluctance to

participate: “No way am I going to do that.” And if people did start to work, they were guarded.

At first I thought the discomfort came from something I did, which may have been partly true, but experience has shown that the source of tension was already there smoldering and I ignited it.

The prospect of becoming involved in spontaneous and unplanned artistic expression elicits dark and troubling feelings for most people. As a leader trying to help others express themselves, I have discovered the importance of showing empathy for these emotions and fears and being able to tolerate the unavoidable tension and even hostility that tends to exist just below the surface in even the most agreeable settings. The same dynamics apply to broader aspects of leadership when we invite people to operate outside areas of comfort.

It is never easy for me, no matter how much I may understand the forces and their purpose. I always wish people could just get to work with an appreciation of what artistic expression may bring to their lives. I ask why one of the most constructive aspects of human experience has to keep arousing so much angst. Yet year after year I have learned the importance of patience and withholding all judgment, because I continuously see how the people who may struggle the most are dealing honestly with their fears and tensions, and they surprise and delight me with how they move through the process if they are able to stay with it. They are the ones who have taught me to “trust the process.”

With students aspiring to involve others in the arts, I say these challenges and difficulties are the subject matter of our work, so universal and natural they are not something to be fixed. Rather, we learn how to engage them more successfully. The same applies to leadership. Negative feelings are loaded with energy that we transform and use to fuel expression and do things that would not be possible without the power and openings generated by the problem. We have to be able to hold and tolerate the inevitable angst we experience when invited to do risky things outside accustomed spheres of activity.

We assist others by showing sensitivity to their situations. If we become annoyed, impatient, and preoccupied, this will typically lead to outbursts of some kind. However, I have found these lapses may stimulate external expressions of tension that tend to be far better, if we are able to accept and embrace them, than silent and passive antagonism. The expression of the difficulty is often the beginning of a new way of dealing with it as a source of creation. Sometimes, the fomentation will happen even if we are giving total concentration and support, as a natural eruption within the ecosystem of creating.

“Tension is beneficial,” Heraclitus of Ephesus (fl. 500 B.C.) said. It activates, communicates, and gets things moving. Outbursts offer opportunities for leaders to gain the confidence of others by accepting them and acknowledging their contributions to moving forward, sometimes with greater support as a result of weathering the crisis. The same thing happens with individual artistic expression, which often requires surges of emotion to flourish.

Creative Tension

Although in most every situation in life we do our best to eliminate the tension, creativity requires it, and the discipline of practice becomes one of learning how to keep the tension alive and work with it. The word “agitate” derives from the Latin *agito, agitare*—to move, drive, urge forward. A certain agitation enhances creative expression, like the washing machines in our homes. Things have to be broken down, dissolved, softened, and stirred up so that they can change and be made anew.

It is a perverse process whereby problems become opportunities and we create by responding to them. The inevitable rough going does not suggest advocacy for instilling misery, but yet we do know that artistic discovery will most likely make demands on our ability to persist and withstand hurt, chaos, crisis, and sometimes the more extreme process of having our worlds torn apart—which may be a precondition of being recreated.

I have seen that whenever people open to these difficult emotions, they are the basis for generating what I call a process of art alchemy, a force of transformation that could not take place without a certain degree of agitation and angst, grist for the mill. It is a kind of artistic yeast. Maybe it is connected to how we are innately reluctant to do things involving a loss of control, uncertainty, and change.

As someone whose life work is involved with the arts and health, I have been able to see how this ability of art to engage the difficult materials, appreciate their place, and do something with them as affirmations of life offers a practical model for how healing and creative change happen in personal and social realms. The process may not cure the angst yet it brings relief and satisfaction in a reliable way. It demonstrates how setbacks may be part of moving to better places in our lives; how there is a natural rhythm to loss and recovery, falls and resurrections; and how change often requires the destruction of what exists, or at least letting it go in order to open to something different. The instigations and tensions of personal angst are activators, motivators who press for change.

Transforming Difficulties into Affirmations of Life

Experiences with supporting others have reinforced the formative power of angst in my own art. Where I have always been motivated by beauty and the sensory satisfaction of art making, I have come to appreciate the complementary role of their more troubling counterparts—as I will try to show with examples of how myself and others have accessed deeper realms of expression by creating with the shadow.

Throughout history, from shamanism to Greek tragedy and onto Frida Kahlo and the moaning piano in “The Weary Blues” of Langston Hughes, the arts are replete with models for transforming pain and difficulties into soulful expressions.

- » The poet Theodore Roethke wrote, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see."¹
- » Ruth Brown, at age seventy, sings, "Lord I got nothing to lose / and it's a good day for the blues."²
- » Friedrich Nietzsche in a 1882 letter to Franz Overbeck says, "Unless I can discover the alchemical trick of turning this—*muck* into gold, I am lost."³
- » S. Ansky, in his classic Yiddish play *The Dybbuk*, explores how "ascent" is tied to "descent" and great falls.⁴
- » Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear* makes the aside "the worst is not / So long as one can say, 'This is the worst.'"⁵
- » Samuel Beckett, "sparked" by Edgar's speech, gives the slightest nod to the positive in *Worstward Ho*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."⁶
- » And Joseph Conrad in *Lord Jim*, "The way is to the destructive element submit yourself" and "make the deep, deep sea keep you up."⁷

Edvard Munch, who is often associated with depression and emotional difficulties, described how his art is a reaction to the joy and pain of life, "mostly pain."⁸ He said because he paints sickness, this does not mean his art is sick: "When I transform sickness into a painting, like *The Sick Child*, it is on the contrary, a healthy expression. It represents my health. When I paint suffering, it is a healthy reaction to it—something others can learn from."⁹

Can you recall situations where you used difficulties to further artistic expression? Losses or hurt inspiring poetic expression? Sometimes artistic expression becomes a necessity, a way of surviving.

My involvement with the arts in therapy has been grounded in personal experiences of how artistic expression transforms problems, brings relief and feelings of satisfaction. It is the most effective soul medicine I know.

In addition to catharsis, artistic engagement can completely

change our relationships to difficulties and angst. In an earlier period of my life, I suffered from what I called existential “meeting angst” and the way I was left with no time for my art and the engagement of nature. I started making drawings in meetings and then developed them into paintings. The source of my discontent became the focus of my art. Nature became the human and physical context of meeting rooms and the way people interacted within them. I started to look forward to the meetings, enjoyed the art making, and the other people in the sessions seemed to enjoy it, too. I called the series “art alchemies,” and it changed my relationship to the creative process and demonstrated to me how art heals.

I find that, for me, art is the best response to disturbing situations. I take the anger or feelings of helplessness and channel them into the creative process. I always feel better afterward and the raw emotions open up new channels of expression that would not exist without them. I usually begin by making visceral compositions corresponding directly to the emotion, and they may evolve into more serene or benign imagery.

The literal representation of the problematic situation may not be as important as activating the currents of expression emerging from it and letting them find their way to completion. I have concluded it is all a kind of action therapy where what matters is doing something in response to the troubled emotions, putting them to use, and enabling them to make something new and fresh from the disturbance. It is a matter of moving on and not staying stuck in the problem, letting action in the present moment give shape to a new form.

Practice: The Yeast Effect

You might try embracing difficult and troubling situations with your artistic expression in varied media. Although it may be helpful to deal directly with the difficulty as subject matter, you can also respond to feelings you have about the problem. You can do the

same with the overall feeling you have in response to a complicated dream, rather than dealing specifically with all of the elements and characters.

Start with a detail or a particular feeling about the situation and let it inform your expressive response. Explore how the feeling activates and motivates expression, how the most seemingly negative things you may have feared become sources of inspiration.

Compassion for the hurtful condition is a reliable way of opening to a different relationship with it. Empathy for the discomfort or tension enables you to hold it and establish an alchemical container where it can begin to change. The bountiful feelings we have about difficulties have a yeast effect on ensuing expressions in any artistic medium. Again, do not make any effort to solve or fix the problem in your poem, song, dance, enactment, or picture, since this is apt to generate control problems and keep everything in your head. Feel it in your body and act with it as a partner, a dark muse circulating in you that wants to be embraced.

Accepting Angst

❖ *Wounds are openings to soulful expression.*

Holding the Shadow

Arguably, art would not exist without angst, so maybe we can approach it here with a respectful smile as a necessary partner, demon and angel, adversary and ally, which either blocks or incites expression. In the large scheme of things art survives with vitality because it has a unique ability to do something productive with troubles.

In my conversations about creative expression people are always most engaged when talking about the angst related to making art—resistance, blocks, vulnerabilities, rejections, fears, and bad memories. When these difficulties are communicated and heard, the conversation tends to become more authentic and reciprocal, suggesting human connectedness is formed by affirming shared struggles, knowing we are not alone in relation to them.

In my work with others I concentrate exclusively on creating a supportive environment. I see repeatedly how wounds are openings to soulful expression. As much as we might like to hide or avoid these features they are with us all of the time. So why not apply them to what we do in a mindful way, especially when this is likely to enhance the depth and quality of expression? The actor Shelley Winters said, “I think everything you are, you show when you act . . . You act with your scars.”¹ And Freddie Mercury of Queen, while doing his best to keep anguish at bay, felt it furthers expression: “The more mishaps I have, the better my songs are going to be.”² Even when people are ready to deal with difficult feelings I concentrate on basic

elements of artistic activity as described here, making elemental gestures, and providing the freedom, safety, and support necessary to hold whatever it is conveyed. The sustained action of art making becomes a scaffold supporting our ongoing reflections and emotional ruminations throughout the process of creation. The structure and purposeful nature of the work holds us.

Paradoxically, I have found these simple and minimalist forms tend to allow people to engage the most challenging things when the space is permeated by a sense of attentive care. Although I never ask people to express dark and difficult emotions, I do make it clear that they are welcome and do not have to be censored. We make sure everyone participating in the studio is committed to this acceptance so that the group can model support, allowing the process to do its work. Most of us need the help of other people to do this before we can do it alone. The group becomes a transitional space providing the care we will hopefully bring to ourselves.

All I have to do is invite people to move in the simplest possible ways as described here, and the emotional and sensory memories of past difficulties with creative expression, sometimes terrors, are apt to permeate the group as well as the individual consciousness—especially when people are asked to express themselves without a plan and preconceived outcome. Thus these shadow qualities have to be engaged in any effort to encourage people to become involved. In the experience of the average person there is a big gap between being intimidated by fears and difficult memories related to expression and using them as a source of creativity and transformative change. Perhaps the exponential growth of the arts and therapy is a response to this challenge.

In a studio group an earnest young woman asked me, “How do I know where my shadow is?” I replied, “For most of us, it is right here. We do not have to go far to find it. It is not necessarily hidden away. It is part of everything we do and feel, like the cells of our bodies.”

Imagining the shadow as a separate and unknown entity, locked

inside somewhere and ready to spring out in a hurtful way when we let down our guard, will make us even more hesitant to take risks and do unfamiliar things. If the shadow is inseparable from our being, in keeping with our discussion of how the depths of experience are on the surface of life unseen, then we benefit from accepting and understanding it. It has to be better for us and for the world to find ways to create with strong emotions than it is to give them negative influence over what we do.

The shadows of creative expression manifest themselves in fears, bad memories, negative thoughts, rigid controls, and a general inability to trust and believe in what we do. They are the scars Shelley Winters described, as well as personal pain still raw, things about us and others we do not like or have not accepted, and ways of acting that have been problematic and apt to interfere with our relationships with others. As Jung said, it is the wise person who knows these inevitable shadow qualities. The arts give us the opportunity to not only understand them better but to actually engage them as sources of our most authentic expression.

The shadows of creative expression tend to be self-created. As Shakespeare's *Hamlet* said, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."³ And in the conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in act 2, scene 2, of *Hamlet*, these thoughts are likened to shadows. Without questioning the existence of good and bad beyond our thoughts and musings, we might agree that the way we think about experience has a tremendous influence on what we do and how we do it.

For some it may be a new pursuit to look at why they are reluctant, hesitant, and inhibited in certain areas of expression. When working with adolescents and adults I find most are acutely aware of the shadow processes that manifest themselves forcefully when people are invited to express themselves in areas evoking vulnerability, shame, fear, and uncertainty. Even experienced artists can be greatly intimidated by working spontaneously and without a clear plan. We might know our history with these forces quite well and understand

their origins, and this may only fortify rather than alleviate the negative influences and thoughts.

“We are what we feel and perceive,” the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us.⁴ Rather than trying to eliminate negative forces and fears, perceive them differently, and learn how to be with them. If we can do this, the fear “will transform itself”⁵ in much the same way as we experience transformation in the creative process. Compassionate attentiveness will help to lessen the hurtful influences.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that if we try to eliminate the shadow, we discard significant dimensions of ourselves. For example, with anger he asks us to give careful attention to our experience of the emotion rather than the person or situation that may have aroused our reactions. We practice seeing, accepting, engaging, and relaxing with the tension, letting it go, all the while reflecting on the emotion in order to appreciate how it is part of our nature. Artistic expression supports the shadow’s capacity to transform itself.

My experience with these fears and shadows, both personally and in leading groups, does not necessarily entail having a lovefest with them. The process of creation is often permeated by angst and emotional wrestling. Sometimes exhaustion and even despair play a role in change, as I see the futility of what I might be doing.

Artistic expression has many parallels to the calming states of contemplative practice, and some forms of creativity keep angst at bay by concentrating only on positive and pleasing sensations. I certainly support these effects when they emerge naturally in terms of situations and the needs of people, and on the whole the great majority of my personal experiences with art making are comforting and refreshing. But struggles with shadows, and especially successful transformation of their qualities into art, hopefully lead to becoming more comfortable and confident with them. Although we may never be totally at ease with discomforts, we can be more productive and creative together, and trust that our greatest satisfaction and relief may result from transforming them into creative works.

Practice: Building on What You Are

In this book our focus on the shadow is concerned with the fears, inhibitions, and vulnerabilities accompanying artistic expression, both in terms of the process of making art and the content of what we show. As I keep emphasizing, I have no interest in directly reactivating past traumas with regard to creative expression, but they reliably manifest themselves when we are given the opportunity to express ourselves in unfamiliar ways in the presence of others. The concrete realm of artistic experimentation will provide a circumscribed and manageable area of practice that furthers understanding of other strains of emotion in our lives.

Do you recall situations where creative expressions helped you understand problems better? Did it help lessen their negative influence?

Artists often speak of how they fear the loss of their angst will eliminate the source of expression. Do you feel angst has a certain positive power?

Review your history with artistic expression from the perspective of difficult emotions. Have you been able to transform them into art? Try to do it now. Embrace the shadow and use it as a source of positive expression.

One of the first prerequisites in creating with the shadow is to do your best to disregard all concerns with making pleasing or conventionally attractive things, which may have their place at other times in your expression. Allow yourself to make things that challenge and provoke you and others.

I just viewed a series of paintings by a young artist who concentrated on disturbing dreams. The pictures were not pleasant, but they engaged the turmoil and fashioned it into carefully designed compositions. They put the discomfort to use, creating life and aesthetically stimulating form from it.

An Engine of Change

☞ *Angst is part of our wiring, an organic call to wake up to the way things are or how they have to change.*

A More Complete View

The shadow can be viewed as the other side of the coin, the dialectical challenge or complement to whatever position we take. It is not always negative but often simply unseen, unappreciated, or maybe suppressed. When I was researching my doctoral dissertation on motivation in art I interviewed many artists. I was working closely with Rudolf Arnheim, and in keeping with his writing on the psychology of art, one of my questions was whether creative expressions were motivated by drives to lower tension and bring order to chaos. The conceptual artist Don Burgy, whom I interviewed for the study, said to me, “My art seeks disequilibrium. That is my motive.”

Burgy’s statement jolted me. It expressed an unrecognized side of what I was doing, and it has stayed with me ever since as a guiding principle against oversimplification, reminding me that there is a flip side to every position I take. It affirmed my early commitment to Nietzsche’s declaration in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “One must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star.”¹

Arnheim believed chaotic tensions are manifestations of a movement toward a more complex order. Although I would not place order as the end goal of my artistic expression, I accept Arnheim’s basic sense that the difficult periods are a way of moving toward something different, with order perhaps being connected to the sense of a finished art object. There is a feeling of satisfaction when the work

is completed, but it tends to be short-lived as I move on to the next piece, and the accompanying tensions.

The angst of art is an engine of change and it can put us through the wringer in serving a deeper purpose we cannot always see. The angst often comes to help us pay attention to things outside consciousness that may have already changed and are at odds with what we think about ourselves, others, our art, or the world. Where psychoanalysts claim a realm called the unconscious, my experience suggests “consciousness” functions in many different ways inside and outside awareness. Angst is part of our wiring, an organic call to wake up to the way things are or how they have to change.

Artists throughout history have done some of their most significant work in response to difficult and disturbing conditions. It is popular today to dismiss, as a new Romanticism, any suggestion that pain plays a necessary role in personal and social change. In addition to dismissing much of the most socially transformative culture of the past two hundred years, from Beethoven to Blake and the blues, these detractors miss the physical aspect of the “no pain, no gain” adage and how our bodies operate. Pain and angst are perennial players in the artistic process and it is better to understand their purpose than to dismiss the productive use of them as neurotic or sentimental.

The Creative Intelligence of Disturbances

I have learned from my practice of art and the arts in therapy that there are intelligences at work in the most disturbing psychic experiences. We distinguish these negative feelings within the sphere of the personal psyche from the destructive and harmful things other people can do to us or that we do to ourselves.

The strong disturbances, those that really hurt or evoke my vulnerability and feelings of helplessness and incompetence, challenge my ability to become engaged, but repeatedly I find they have an innate wisdom, albeit a maddening one, which forces me to deal with

what I do not see. I know from experience that the most agitated times happen in order to further these changes—that the results tend to be proportionate to the degree of angst.

I have no choice but to respond to them, since creative transformation is the only way to restore well-being and release the blocks preventing a more complete circulation of creative energy. I have found my most successful expression, in terms of spontaneity, newness, and emotional authenticity, happens when I am able to put these troubles to use, harness their power, and create together with them. They are packed with energy I have to access. They become partners, cocreators in the service of life.

Practice: Play It Differently

You might reflect, and you have probably done this already in reading this section, about modes of artistic expression that reliably evoke negative feelings and fears. It may be useful to try to recall your earliest memories connected to these emotions and describe them in your journal.

As we do in both theater and therapy, give yourself a chance to play the old situation in a different way. Even if the outcome is not satisfying, you have begun a process of responding to the problem with new variations. As Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, simply holding the memory with interest gives it a chance to transform itself.

Experimentation with new reactions and replaying the past that is still present in you can illuminate how we tend to be locked into the bad memories and in many ways reluctant to change them. It is important to do your best to relax and maybe even bring some humor to the situation, allowing yourself to play with it. Engaging the shadows and demons of our lives does not have to be so heavy and lugubrious, although these states are of course part of the process.

Learning how to play with difficulties, to find absurdity in them, can be the start of giving them a new place in your life. The creative

process offers opportunities to change relationships with the shadows and not eradicate them.

Dance, sing, draw, paint, write, and enact the story of a particular disturbance in a new way. We do not realize how we hang on to and preserve problems and fears by remembering them in fixed forms. If the difficulty has a firm grip on you, experiment with amplifying it if you are able to do this without being overwhelmed in a hurtful way. Turning up the volume, the force of the gesture, or the space it takes, can be an organic way of initiating change. It helps get beyond the feeling of being locked into a pattern that seems beyond your control. Amplifying the feeling tends to free the gridlock and makes it possible to complement the expression with diminishment—lowering and relaxing the emotional intensity, like the *diminuendo* in music.

When disturbances linger, I find they are trying to get my attention. They are a manifestation of an intelligence that keeps bugging me to provoke change. It is as if it says, “It does not have to be this way. You can act differently.” The disturbances are like the tight and restrictive clothes and the conservative clerics watching over the contents of speech in the dream I just had. They are my allies, not to be taken literally, as they magnify an area calling for attention. They are metaphors of tightness and repression. They invert and dramatize the restraints I felt in a particular place during the day of the dream.

Create with the irritants. Let expression take its course and respond with actions that feel right in the present moment. Give the creative process an opportunity to “transform itself.”

Sanitizing

☞ *Whenever something unusual, edgy, or unseemly starts to show in our art, we are likely to curb it.*

Restraining the Unusual

The process of expressing shadow feelings can be invisible to others. We can hide and mask our fears, nerves, disturbances, and dark brooding when moving and acting, sometimes smiling effectively while feeling terrified. Shadow feeling may also generate joyous, playful, and celebratory artworks conveying beauty and pleasure. These dynamics might be revealed to others only through communications about how we feel during the creative act and not necessarily by the work itself.

Faithful engagement of the shadow may also evoke explicitly strange, dark, and discomfoting expression. We see this in the arts from Medea's "fire that diest not" (Euripides, *Medea*) to the tortured imagery of Picasso's *Guernica*. In these expressions the content is permeated by shadow forces visible to all. Arguably, the most honest engagement acknowledges the place of these shadows in our lives, as Mother Teresa did in describing how the tyrant is inside her and this realization moved her to serve others. When we see ourselves as the carriers of righteousness and justice and have others carry shadows, trouble is brewing.

Yet to the extent to which there is truth to the adage "you are what you create and perceive," many people are reluctant to show dark and disturbing contents. We are not necessarily willing to express menacing imaginings the way Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

(1797–1851) does in *Frankenstein*, Francisco Goya (1746–1828) in *Saturn Devouring His Son*, Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and our contemporary Stephen King in *The Shining*.

Most of us do not want to even think these things and give them a place in our lives, since as mentioned earlier the mind is shaped by the company it keeps, positively and negatively. But nightmares and dark imaginings do happen. Thomas Moore explored them in *Dark Eros* (1990) and feels they have to be recognized in the life of the soul and in art, as shadows of innocence and goodness.

Fears of being incompetent in artistic expression tend to be far eclipsed by the dread of appearing strange, weird, or mad. The way in which psychological interpretations of artworks literally identify particular features of expression with psychopathology only increases the reluctance to reveal expressions that might at best be considered unusual. Jung was reluctant to show and publish his great illustrated work *Liber Novus* (*The Red Book*), for fear people would think he was mad. He also did not want to threaten his image as a serious scientist. After his death in 1961 his estate kept the book in a vault until it was fortunately released for publication in 2009.

Whenever something unusual, edgy, or unseemly starts to show in our art, we are likely to curb it. We “sanitize” and censor what we do in line with socially accepted standards. We call in psychic cleaners, like Harvey Keitel playing Winston “The Wolf” in *Pulp Fiction*, to tidy everything up. I do it all the time.

I have painted over some pictures I felt may have been too odd or perverse, too challenging for viewers, and maybe for myself. I have learned to try to restrain my impulse to cover up, or in the least store away the pictures. Artist colleagues have been helpful in moderating this tendency and affirming what I might at first find to be rough, raw, and unattractive.

Revisiting Art and Madness

Thankfully, Jung found a way to keep *Liber Novus* and let it stand as an example of expressive transparency. The images are often strange and even more jarring than the purportedly “psychotic art” of the famed Bern asylum artist Adolf Wölfl, with whom Jung must have been familiar, or the works presented in the classic 1922 Hans Prinzhorn text, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (*Bildnerei der Geisteskranken*).

The similarities between Jung’s work and the art made in asylums shows the mistaken basis on which artistic expressions are associated with madness. For example, long-standing psychiatric interpretations of psychopathology in art maintain that a high degree of ornamentation and detail, such as we see in many of Jung’s drawings, are indications of a fragmented mind. As described earlier, these interpretations make the most literal attributions of psychological states to the contents, structures, and colors of artistic expressions. Just as Munch said that if he paints sickness this does not mean he is sick, we can say that artists who create bizarre works are not necessarily mad or bizarre.

Wölfl was clearly a troubled person, but he was able to create elegantly designed and meticulously executed pictures, drawing on organizational strengths and aesthetic sensibilities existing together with his emotional problems. This was a man whose social persona was apparently disturbed but who also created beauty, perhaps affirming how the different aspects exist in all of us (as Mother Teresa said) and how our lives are determined by how we live with them.

Many notable artists have been overwhelmed with depression and other emotional afflictions to which they have succumbed, and this only furthers the linkage between art and mental instability in the public mind. But arguably the unfortunate outcomes in the personal lives of Vincent van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, Robin Williams, and

others cannot be attributed to their art, which may have helped them deal with more pervasive dissolutions of emotional well-being.

Without idealizing the artist's life, it is clear it involves a commitment to the inevitable struggles of creative expression. Artists are willing to engage—or perhaps more accurately, have no choice but to encounter—the challenges of creating and living, and this is why art has historically been linked to madness and emotional difficulties. The resilient artist lives with and through the angst, not necessarily as a heroic figure but more likely in the more existential mode of a worker with human flaws and imperfections who is willing and capable of persisting with the difficulties of creating. Consequently, the practice of art is a discipline, one involving inevitable time in shadow realms, and requires the use of finely tuned mental and emotional faculties. The artist, who may be afflicted by serious emotional problems, creates despite these impairments—certainly not because of them, as popular notions of art and madness have suggested.

It is perhaps true to associate artists with sensibilities enabling them to feel life situations deeply. Their emotional filters are often porous and open to experiences and sensations other people may block out, and this heightened sensitivity also characterizes various forms of emotional distress. Mental health problems are more apt to stifle and block creative expression, which entails an integration of intuitive sensibility with physical and cognitive functions. Art is thus made by the healthy aspects of the mind and body working together. It is a discipline of communication, aesthetic presentation, and emotional expression and not simply a streaming forth of raw emotional contents.

When people plagued by emotional afflictions and mental disabilities create art, they are exercising expressive strengths. Life crises or emotional problems will bring sometimes buried feelings to the surface, and art offers a way of responding to these conditions, of doing something with them. The arts transform emotions into aesthetic forms. They are not simply channels of unprocessed angst. In this respect artists, as well as people making art in therapeutic situations,

demonstrate how to live with the intensities of emotion rather than be hurt by them or take the more common course of anesthetizing them. This is one of the many reasons why it is so misleading and psychologically naïve to literally equate the contents of an artwork with the emotional condition of the person who made it. The person who expresses violence and danger within a creative discipline is not necessarily violent and dangerous. There is still considerable confusion in psychology and the public mind about the relationship between artistic content and the emotional condition of artists. And this tends to be yet another reason why many people are reluctant to express themselves.

To Show or Not to Show

The way art and madness were, and still are, connected stands as a good reason why Jung did not publish *Liber Novus*. And this raises the issue as to where and when we show shadow expressions. As I mentioned, I have my own hesitations, and the people with whom I work often have no interest or desire to publicly display what they might create within the sanctum of a studio committed to their safety and well-being. Some things are best kept private.

I did show shadow art related to personal difficulties in my 1989 book *Depth Psychology of Art* and I have not regretted it. The showing has only furthered my empathy and compassion for difficult expressions in the lives of others and their place in the soul's purpose.

Showing provocative and challenging images can be used against us and we can perhaps all agree it is OK to keep them in the vault. We are all coming from different places in relation to making and showing soulful expression, and we might explore ways of navigating these realms and keeping their integrity.

There is no artist's commandment to publicly show everything created. There is also the issue of sensitivity to others who are not ready or willing to engage these materials. When my children were young my wife brought to my attention artworks hanging in the

house that might make their friends uncomfortable. The pictures were fine within our household but maybe troublesome for others.

Many of us need to be aesthetically challenged and benefit from it. I recall my own childhood and how intriguing and helpful it was for me to see homes where the art was more provocative than the more conservative objects in our house. The formative influence continued as I moved into the world and into foreign domains, especially the realm of soul music and seeing James Brown live at Harlem's Apollo Theater in the mid 1960s; he became one of my artist role models. His life and art were far removed from my upbringing, a true shadow of what I had known, and I took to him with fascination and respect. He was in contact with something I felt and wanted to access. This aspect of the shadow has beauty and passion, like Federico García Lorca's *duende*—the unexplained dark power of art stirring the soul and never repeating itself.

Artists who challenge public sensibilities and values are more apt to show these shadows. They have made a commitment to the process as a lifework. I believe artists who engage and authentically express the shadow perform for all of us, like the indigenous shamans who act on behalf of their communities where illness is viewed as a loss of soul to be restored to the body.

The average person tends to be more circumspect. This is often a result of inexperience in relating to the materials and showing them. Caution is appropriate, as is taking time to become more familiar with shadow realms.

I repeatedly see how what we might consider strange and disconcerting about expressions may be most effective in opening up new and important areas of inquiry and discovery, arousing emotions and challenges that help us grow. I was at first uneasy with Moore's *Dark Eros*, but I realized this was because the book invited me to look at disturbing things in a different way.

It is natural to self-censor, sanitize, be careful about what we show to others, or simply determine where and when to show different expressions. Sometimes, the process can be practical and related

to making things other people appreciate and use. An artist colleague painted a series of large and candid nudes taking up lots of space in her studio. She was comfortable with them but ultimately she “dressed them up” as part of an effort to move them out into the world, painting clothing on the figures, which resulted in people being more interested in hanging them in their homes.

Society also offers many examples of how imagery is sanitized and made into more neutral replacements. The original 1971 Starbucks logo of the nude siren with lower appendages spread apart, purportedly adapted from a sixteenth-century Norse woodcut, was gradually changed and abstracted via alterations to the siren image in 1987 and 1992 that covered and eliminated body parts. As much as I embrace the original counterculture era logo I understand the changes in terms of the mass-marketing of the coffee.

Shadow art may not be something you show at home or next to the office desk. It can have another place in your psychic household; perhaps the way Jung kept *Liber Novus* in his private office and showed it only where he felt understanding or to people who could benefit by seeing how they might explore personal expression.

Goya did paint *Saturn Devouring His Son* and a series of what he called “*Pinturas Negras*” (The Black Paintings) directly onto the walls of his dining room. They were not intended for public exhibition and apparently expressed his personal losses and anguish about social conditions in Spain.

Each of us finds our way with relative degrees of comfort in what we do and do not express and show. My purpose here is to look at how we sanitize our expressions and to suggest that it is a normal process that might be required in many situations—but that it may also suppress and deny something important that needs to be expressed and within the right situations shared with others. The shadow is in this respect the side of life many do not want to see or engage.

Practice: Easing the Restraints

I am sure it is not very difficult to quickly identify areas of expression you have sanitized and have been reluctant to show. In addition to pictures and writings we are often reluctant to make movements or sounds that might appear unusual. I see this all the time in my studios, especially with the voice, where things are held back that do not fit the norm. Free vocal expression can be primal and unusual and completely contrary to the way we speak in the world. Our experience of these sounds as strange is a good indication of how estranged we are from our most basic expressive instincts.

Find a private space that will support free and unsanitized expression, a place respecting the first amendment of the psyche. Invite distortion and the unusual. You might find they help your art be imaginative, expressive, and engaging. If you tend to be a buttoned-down person, you might try doing something like painting your hands and feet white like a Butoh dancer—maybe your face, too, if you work with a large mirror or another person. Changing your outer appearance is a way to start acting differently. It may elicit a new range of expressions. You begin to move like the new and imagined person. Perhaps moving in your usual ways will start to feel incongruous, like someone else. In my studios doing the unusual soon becomes the norm. The arts give us places to try out different ways of being, sanctuaries keeping it all safe.

Move as slowly as you can with primal and simple gestures, imagining it all as a sacred rite affirming your most instinctual being. Add vocal sounds, too. As soon as the urge to repress appears, welcome it but approach it as a cue for increased commitment. Stay with the expression, maybe even intensify it in a *crescendo* when the urge to shut it off happens. Reverse everything. It does not have to get heavy and serious. Play with it all. Find humor in the absurdity of how we have such a hard time doing the most innate things, being the most essential you.

Welcoming the Strange

- ☛ *When people allow themselves to be a bit strange within their artistic expression in my studio groups, this is not only witnessed by others with support and interest but there is a sense of soul permeating the room.*

Vulnerability and Love of Soul

People instinctively know they will show their less developed qualities, generally perceived to be imperfections, when they start to express themselves in media where they do not have access to well-honed filters and protections. Artistic expressions in these unpolished and raw domains also tend to be unusual, even weird, in comparison to habitual ways of communication. Additionally, most people have an intuitive sense that truly open and spontaneous utterances have links of madness and psychopathology as described previously. They are afraid unknown and unacceptable impulses exist outside their awareness in what some call the unconscious. So of course they resist, vehemently.

Repeatedly I see when people allow themselves to be a bit strange and vulnerable within their artistic expression in my studio groups, this is not only witnessed by others with support and interest but there is a sense of soul permeating the room. The honest showing of expressions tends to create a sense of sanctity in safe and supportive environments, which evokes a pervasive feeling I experience as a love of soul. It is one of the features of the work I do with others that has the most inspirational effect on my life and art.

For some of us doing the unthinkable might be pretty normal. It

is all so relative and tied to our histories. These expressions tend to involve the appearance of something new and very different, maybe in keeping with how the word “weird” derives from the Old English *wyrd*, which suggests destiny and becoming.

Practice: Exploring Repression and the Fear of Being Strange

Can you recall early experiences with repressing your expressions? It might be useful to look more recently at how you are doing this. Do you think something important might be suppressed?

Journal keeping is a good way of exploring shadow contents and expressions. It is essentially what Jung did with *Liber Novus*. The journal is private and a place where you can take risks and be strange. The ability to close the book and put it away safely helps moderate the urge to sanitize. If you show the work to others, they should know it is a sanctuary to be kept and respected. The reactions you receive from others might help you make decisions about what you want to present and develop in your expression. But as important as it is for all of us to experiment with others and receive guidance from them, I feel ultimately we make our own best informed decisions about what to express and show.

As you become more familiar with the materials in the journal they will probably lose some of their strangeness that is tied to being something you do not usually do. It was not strange for Goya to paint the dark pictures in his dining room. It may have been a necessity, perhaps a form of art healing externalizing the torment he felt.

You might approach keeping a free and uncensored journal as a necessity for your soul and expressive life.

Consider times and situations where the fear of being strange may have suppressed what you needed to do and express. How might you act differently now?

I have found strange and disturbing dreams to be important sources of understanding. Dreams also affirm the universal and objective existence of shadow content. They are in many ways the

epitome of the shadow since they are apt to be perverse, confrontational, illogical, and completely outside our control. If you are interested in exploring shadowy domains, engaging dreams might be a good way to begin. They are already present and part of your life. Giving them more serious and quality attention does not involve potentially threatening disclosures. The dream contents are private and they can stay that way. Privacy and intimacy are qualities of the shadow, things we might not show in our usual daily lives but that nonetheless we must know better.

Dreams are strange and weird by nature. This is why some dismiss them as nothing but a discharge of excess psychic energy. Since dreams tend to communicate metaphorically rather than literally, they offer different perspectives on dark and shadowy conditions. The bad dreams or feelings do not necessarily come to cause harm, but they show what seeks attention or perhaps change.

What may have been considered a bad dream becomes a fascinating and brilliant one as we get better in working with the shadows. While leading a studio group where we were experimenting with voice work that became primal for a number of the participants, I dreamed that a bus full of strange men arrived at a private club where I belonged to have lunch with me. A friend who is a jazz musician and vocalist brought them. I said, "Stan, we do not have a reservation for all these guys." The dream shifted to him having lunch and I engaged all of the men in the parking lot, speaking to them and listening from the heart. I awoke and immediately felt how the dream embodied and enacted different roles I play, worlds I inhabit, lives far apart but intimately connected. I felt a great respect for how the madness exaggerated the ways things are. Weird can be wondrous and feed the soul.

Art is particularly adept at healing, understanding, and transforming the deepest and most complex and contradictory problems that defy linear analysis and resolution. Situations that cannot be solved can be transformed into something else, and this is what the artistic intelligence does in giving wings to darkness. Artistic

knowing is thus grounded on principles that are sometimes at odds with more conventional reasoning.

Rather than disregarding disconcerting dreams, practice holding them and giving them attention. It is important to suspend all judgment. As with the arts, allow yourself to put aside the usual moral assessments of what is good and bad or what these experiences may be saying about you. Do your best to suspend the inclination to take the dream literally. The creepy or scary character chasing you in a dream may be trying to assist rather than hurt you, even though the dream is permeated with dread. You may fear stopping and being with the discomfort, afraid of what it will do. You might be running away from your ability to hold the difficulty and let it show you where you hurt, what has to change, how to lighten up.

Try to see dreams and shadowy figures and feelings as both separate and related to your life. Giving the characters more autonomy helps neutralize the overattachments we have to a particular point of view. What we call the “dream ego” is one of many perspectives, and an important skill involves giving more credence to other characters and how they are acting. They may offer counsel we cannot see. I have found the psyche is generally purposeful and in sync with the life-creating forces of nature, always bringing something I need, and this is especially true of its provocations. There is a guiding intelligence at work within the systems of mind and body.

Dreams evoke shadows related to the ability to hold and entertain chaos. For those of us who do everything we can to create order in our lives, the dream world offers a complement and perhaps a correction.

In addition to sanitizing contents of expression in art and dreams, there is a tendency to do the same with media. It might be helpful to look at media you have avoided or have been discouraged from using. Do you detest mess? If you do, are there connections to fears of things getting out of control? Breaking rules? Maybe there can be benefits in working with media where you practice losing control

and holding chaos. We can become so involved in keeping things tidy and correct that we limit discovery.

There are many creators who make a certain chaos in their work spaces. They find the clutter and mess, and even the presence of strange and unusual things, are necessary conditions of creating. If a space is too clean and orderly they are spooked, fearing it may lead to sterility of expression. In my studios there are always people who like to begin by making sure their work areas are disheveled. It makes them feel comfortable. Others prefer order.

I have been intrigued by the variations of work spaces artists make—the writer of precise and organized texts who is surrounded by a chaos of books, papers, and things; the primal painters, dancers, and musicians who create in pristine environments. Order and chaos, control and losing it, familiarity and strangeness and every other combination of light and shadow go together in the creative process.

PART FIVE

Resistance Is a Gateway

Not only is resistance natural but it is arguably one of our most reliable sources of expression and power.

Stalled

- ❧ *Blocks are tied to wanting something other than what is happening in the present moment. There is always something to be engaged as an expressive start-up. The present moment is the door to the next.*

Embrace the Quiet

I liken the intelligence at work in creative expression to ch'i, the life force appreciated by Asian philosophy, that once activated, seeks and transforms obstructions to restore the vital circulation of energy and well-being. In furthering creativity my job is to help stimulate creative energy which invariably finds its own way to where it has to go if we cooperate and respect it. *Trust the Process* (1998) showed how the deep and imaginative work of creative expression is neither planned nor completely controlled. It invariably arouses a discomfort that we learn how to accept as the force of change and discovery taking shape; and if we are able to stay with the process, it will ultimately deliver us to a place we do not see in advance. The book struck a chord, I think largely because it affirmed the purpose of difficult going in the process of creation.

Negative feelings are loaded with energy-fueling expression. They activate streams of emotion and, without appearing too glib, we may say problems help new things happen; they motivate movement and change.

Since difficulties can be such a reliable source of artistic expression, the more threatening condition for many is being blocked and silenced: Henry David Thoreau's "quiet desperation." When streams

are not running, this leads to fear they will never run again and sometimes depression. And since artists generally believe they are only as good as the next work and experience satisfaction in feelings of potential expression, they are apt to feel considerable distress when stuck.

The most reliable way to deal with stuck or inactive conditions is to accept them, understanding they are universal features of the creative process and not something belonging to me alone. Acceptance of what is happening in the moment sets the stage for creative expression to regenerate itself.

As much as I admire Thoreau, we might reverse his adage and embrace the quiet, realizing the *ch'i* does not stop moving as we breathe. It may be calling for rest, rekindling, and change, all of which require a certain stop action. As Rumi wrote, "When the soul lies down in that grass / the world is too full to talk about." And, "Anything you lose comes round in another form."¹

I have found it helpful to shift media or projects when these periods occur. The empty tank tends to follow periods of full immersion, like a postpartum letdown. It is predictable and plays a role in gestating new forms of expression.

Many of us have a need to stay active and to a certain extent avoid confronting the abyss, feelings of loss, and indirection. I cannot say it is better to keep moving or to stay more closely connected to the stillness. Maybe there is room for both. Each of us finds our way in relation to the challenges of the quiet periods.

If you are interested in taking action, the practice suggestions described in the beginning chapters—on making simple movements and gestures, responding to the immediate conditions of your environment, moving things around, building upon a memory, and reviving visions—may be of use; also perhaps useful would be engaging the shadow aspects of being stuck, witnessing it all (as I describe earlier), and allowing yourself to be taken to new places in your expression.

Loving the Present Moment

Fears of being finished as a creator or that the flow of expression will never return are common among artists. Despair often accompanies these dry periods. It is hard when our livelihoods or sense of self depend upon artistic expression, and it is natural to feel loss and discomfort when the process is stalled.

I look at these fears and periods of frustration as being linked to love and a longing for our deepest and most satisfying connections to life. We start the revival of expression by embracing and loving the present moments, even the most difficult ones, trusting they are doorways to the next. Trying to deny them increases their negative power.

In my conversations with artists they have found it helpful to consider how blocks are tied to wanting something other than what is happening in the present moment. As I mention at the start of this book, deep down is here now. It cannot be anywhere else since this moment is all there is. There is always something present and moving within us and our environments, like the ch'i I described.

Expectations can give a sense you have to be somewhere else. They obstruct the view of what is taking shape right now. Blocks may be viewed as an insistence on wanting something other than what you have and as a refusal to do what you can do now.

I do not want to be too hard on the blocks, because as I describe, they tend to have a place in helping us change and move to new things, but they do their work more effectively through acceptance, engagement, and understanding. We might ask to what extent the stuck conditions are connected to control and the attempt to operate according to preconceived plans, an entrenched sense of what we think we should be doing, or inflexible notions of what we do best.

The block might be appearing to help us see things differently, to let go and experiment without a set objective. In Vincent Ferrini's 1991 play *Shadows Talking*, a character says, "You'd be in tune with

your light— / If you could forget / who you think you are / you might catch up with / what you really are / and can't see."²

I find the best way to deal with being stuck is to get involved with other people and pay close attention to them—get out of yourself to regenerate yourself and your personal expression.

Practice: Stillness as an Ally, the Same Is Never the Same

All of us working to help others with creative expression know we cannot ask them to do what we are not willing to do ourselves. How comfortable have you been with blocks to expression and dry periods? Have you been able to accept them? Has this led to new creations? If you have had difficulty doing this, I encourage a more hospitable attitude, a real interest in getting to know the condition in a different way.

If you are able to perceive the still periods as allies rather than adversaries, you have made a major advance in your relationship. Acceptance and a certain curiosity about future possibilities and changes are more than enough to do. I think trying to get to know the conditions is the best course, maybe the only one. Engage what has been your antagonist on a more personal and even intimate level; put aside all of your preconceptions about blocks; ask them to say something about themselves and then listen; try to understand their points of view; and experiment with being together in different ways.

In the creative process we do not just make things: we make ourselves. To do this in the most comprehensive way we have to access the fullness of what is happening in the present moment, maybe even seeing that what we think is bad might be a source for making something really good.

And in creating ourselves we have to allow space for change and for realizing that things might not be as they seem, from creative blocks to what we think we have to do. Try experimenting with the

conditions of the moment as a basis for your expression. Respond to the situation with attention to its details and conditions. There is always something to be engaged as an expressive start-up.

As I keep suggesting, write about what you see before you and what you feel. Do the same with painting, movement, and other media. Although I may be repeating myself with this approach to immediate actions and perceptions, the instants of experience are always changing and the most basic actions are altered in relation to their context. The same is never the same. Even if you feel completely stuck and fearful that there is nowhere significant to go, the present moment is the door to the next.

Letting Go and Forgetting

- ☛ *The discipline of opening to new expression is generally tied to letting go of whatever preoccupies me at a particular moment.*

Exhaling Expectations

Since the most common blocks to expression result from thinking we should be somewhere other than where we are at the present moment or from harboring expectations that expression should be something other than what it is right now, letting go of these thoughts has to happen to prepare for the new. Try forgetting them. Forgetting, as Nietzsche wrote, can be a positive adjustment. It clears the space for creation.

If I am able to let go of expectations and attentively begin to move with art media, the process will lead me to a new place in my expression. I experience an actual passage from one state of consciousness to another, which I have described as moving between worlds, resulting in a more complete immersion in the imagination of the present. The transition can be calm and soothing, but at other times it may be agitated and rocky, when there are things interfering with the shift.

When I begin drawing, painting, dancing, or writing, perception moves. By and large I establish this environment for myself when I start working and concentrate on a particular activity. When I walk in nature with a small sketchbook or writing pad, I am taken aback by the change in awareness when I begin to draw. A distinctly different realm is entered.

On the basis of these experiences and my work with others, I believe creative expression is a spatial consciousness that a person enters, a place both inside and outside. When I think of creativity as a process in the world, this suggests there is always something new to be engaged. I focus on responding to what presents itself and staying in contact with the ever-changing elements of an environment. Of course I draw on inner resources, memories, and desires, but these sensibilities are always working together with the environment.

When I am drawing on a tiny sketch pad, the external world contracts to a workplace of a few inches. I project myself into this space and the imagination of environments growing from the marks I make on the paper with pens and pencils. In addition to the expressive action taking place on the small surface, there is also the participation of the more expansive landscape I am interpreting, which projects its qualities to my responding eyes, hands, and body. Even with the smallest sketches, I am keenly aware of how the position of the body, the movements of the eyes, arms, hands, and fingers, all work together in creating an image. It is this collaborative effect, teamwork between the participating elements, that establishes the more general creative space. The same thing happens when I am writing on small note cards or responding to an environment with a camera.

The discipline of opening to new expression is generally tied to letting go of whatever preoccupies me at a particular moment. Most of us are comfortable with habits and familiar activities. The world might be changing around me, but I am apt to stay locked into my usual patterns of action. This happens in art, work, family, politics, and every realm of human experience. I have discovered how challenging it can be to cast off what might be viewed as tedious or unproductive behaviors, which serve a purpose in maintaining the status quo. We continue these routines because they protect us from change that will happen if we open to a new situation or possibility presenting itself.

Letting go and forgetting is as important to creative expression as

formative action. I have observed how challenging it can be to move from one place or activity to another, from my present appointment with a person to the next. No wonder contemplative practice places such emphasis on the breath, exhaling one and taking in the next.

A decisive factor in creative disciplines is persistence, staying with the process while exploring new and different responses to it, having the ability to go on to the next engagement after a difficult one. I have learned how important it is to let go of things that may not be working. Holding fast to the failed piece blocks a new response and it keeps me tied to it. It is particularly challenging to do this if a project has consumed tremendous amounts of time and effort, but repeatedly I discover how the vitality of the new response is proportionate to the energy invested in what is discarded or transformed.

Letting go, as in breathing, is the basis for a new response. It is remarkable how we hang on to things that are not working and even use them to define who we are. It feels less risky and protects us from the unknown. It can seem better to stay with a familiar affliction than open ourselves to a new one that could be even worse.

Practice: Letting Go to Find What to Keep

In all of the arts we have a tendency to cling to whatever gestures we make or schemes we have. Try doing the reverse as a basis of expression—put all of your energy into freely making an expression and then letting it go. Do the same with whatever attachment you have to it. Practice with body movement, writing, sounds, or responding to your immediate environment with a sketchbook as I described. See if concentrating on letting expressions go furthers fluidity and being more open to the next gesture. Letting go may be the best way to realize our expressive power and make things we want to keep.

Feeling Safe

☞ *If we can begin to look more compassionately and evenly at what we do and create, this might build the most effective sense of safety.*

With Others

The need for safety when exploring new and personal forms of expression has become one of the most validated principles emerging from my practice with others. It is a primitive and powerful requisite that I think brings us close to animals, whose first instinct is protection. People fear appearing ridiculous, inept, and doing things that will reflect badly on how they are viewed. We all carry internal approval ratings that significantly influence what we do.

I have seen that people beginning to experiment with creative expression benefit from help in guarding against the harmful tendencies they have within themselves even more than they need protection from the potentially damaging actions of others. As we see in so many aspects of life, the tendency to “get down” on ourselves may grow far out of line with reality and what people actually think about us or what we are doing.

Our self-perceptions can be dramatically at odds with how we are seen by others. We may be apt to overlook or deny our unattractive traits, but it is also common to miss appreciating the nascent elements of creative expression in what we do. As described in the coming chapter on perfectionism and mistakes, we give away too much power in letting others and our own self-repressive aspects be the exclusive determinants of value.

In my studios we strive to establish a real and unconditional safety in the group environment that becomes a basis for exploring ways to do the same within ourselves. The groups are an empirical and observable context where we demonstrate and see what people do to make each other feel safe. Since most have not done this in the past with the arts, we become more aware of how previous experiences made us feel unsafe and unsure of ourselves in taking creative risks.

We are prone to think others care much more about how we appear or what we express than they actually do. As the saying goes, everything becomes all about us. When we start acting this way toward ourselves within otherwise safe and supportive situations, we give ourselves a good sense of what has to change in relation to pursuing the creative process in a more even and realistic way.

Rather than responding to what we do with curiosity or simply sustaining action and reflection as I have described, we have a tendency to become entangled with hasty judgments and ego vulnerabilities. If people are going to let go and open themselves to the process of responding imaginatively to their gestures, they have to feel safe. This allows them to concentrate completely on what they are doing and not be distracted by thoughts about what they or others think about it.

Creating a safe environment does not necessarily do away with the inevitable threats and processes of judgment, but it might help us be more aware of how we do this to ourselves. Judgment gets out of control when we start evaluating ourselves according to what others are doing, or if we start to project judgmental attitudes onto them, or even worse if this kind of interaction actually begins to happen with other people.

It is strikingly consistent how people appreciate support in making sure they are not caught up in these dynamics. If damage is done, the protective reaction can spread exponentially, resulting in even greater reluctance to participate. Bad experiences can be very difficult to overcome, so making the establishment of safety a top pri-

ority is highly recommended when working alone and especially in trying to engage others in the creative expression.

I try to create safe environments by first telling groups that safety is one of my primary responsibilities in working with them. My goal is to let them know I am conscious of this. However, no matter what I say, safety is something that has to be demonstrated. The most convincing evidence surfaces when people become uneasy, afraid, or aggressive, and aim this toward me. I have learned this is the pivotal moment for establishing safety: by accepting these expressions even though I may not like them or agree with the sentiment. It is always hard to do this and I continuously learn its importance from setbacks. I say to myself: Do not take the bait. Let it go. Accept it as natural and as part of the person's current condition. If I am able to do this with kindness and empathy, the foundations of safety become stronger. The person has the chance to look at the experience without becoming entangled with another's reactions.

With Ourselves

Ultimately, we want to try to do the same things within the context of our own expression. If we can begin to look more compassionately and evenly at what we do and create, this might build the most effective sense of safety within ourselves. We explore ways of doing this through the process of witnessing as a complement to the tendency to judge.

There is also the reality that creative expression does involve risk taking, and what may be considered dangerous expressions. Most of us have experienced what I call "art traumas" in the past, where we were intimidated by failures and disapproval. Growing up in my otherwise affirming family, if you did not sing like Nat King Cole or Kate Smith, then you were encouraged to be quiet. There was traditional musical achievement in the family, resulting in expectations that things should be done in certain ways. It was interesting that this did not occur in other art forms where there was no family

history. The music judgments helped suppress my voice, and one of the things I vividly remember from seventh grade is trying out for a singing part in a school play and being overwhelmed by inhibition and self-doubt—which shut down my voice when I was asked to sing a song. The feeling stayed, attached like superglue. It also put an end to early aspirations toward theater, so I gave everything to sports. But the vision or inner imago, related perhaps to being on stage and expressing myself before others, also stayed, and I am realizing only now how these early setbacks relate closely to what I do today as a person who performs in the presence of others (albeit sparing them the singing). The artistic failures and the repression of childhood longings for expression have informed my work in helping others express themselves.

It took many years for me to get more comfortable and confident with vocal expression, and I have since made it one of the primary features of my practice with others, where I keep discovering the areas of greatest hesitation and fear are often the ones where we might do our most significant work with creative expression because these areas are loaded with energy and potential for change.

In studios, I have been surprised in observing how accomplished artists in one medium might fear another. I recall an experienced musician whose natural body movements in life and on stage were elegant and free, but when given the opportunity to move and dance alone in front of others, she froze. I learned that, like me, she had negative involvements in the past that became part of her.

These experiences have helped me realize that I can never take anything for granted in relation to requirements for safety and that based on our individual histories we differ as to what is considered risky and dangerous. I try to begin by acknowledging the variations and then strive, as I keep describing, to ground whatever we do with different media of expression in the most essential actions a person makes; from there we build upon them in personal ways. Safety is thus encouraged in the structure of the particular medium as well

as in the group process. As mentioned earlier, making declarations of safety is never enough. People have to be able to sense safety not only in the environment but within their engagement of expressive activity.

The incremental building process gives us the freedom and control to advance according to our own inclinations. In my role I try to encourage and invite rather than coerce. It is interesting how even when I do this in the most welcoming and apparently safe way, some people feel pushed, which affirms the tenderness of art and creativity wounds. This is the time to acknowledge and accept them, to stop blaming others now that those wounds are so much a part of ourselves, and perhaps most of all, start to establish safe places within our own self-expression.

Practice: Establish Your Safety Checks

Review your history with artistic expression in different media. Where did you feel safe? Unsafe? Are there connections to particular media? Periods in your life? People? Has there been change over the years?

Are you apt to feel threatened before, during, or after the process of expression or throughout every phase?

As much as I value providing safety for others who experiment with creative expression, I realize that daily life for the most part is not going to offer this, especially if we are going to present our creative expressions publicly in situations we cannot control. Our goal in this section is to explore how to minimize threats to safety within ourselves and then do what we can in dealing with the unavoidable vicissitudes of creating in the world.

Do you take risks in your expression? Are you able to do this in places not necessarily safe and supportive? What gives you the ability to do this?

Try describing all of these conditions in a journal with words

and pictures. Acknowledging the challenges and expressing your thoughts and feelings about them can be the beginning of a new relationship with them.

In my studios we learn about the nature and importance of safety by having it provided for us but we understand the process more completely by exploring how to offer it for others. People generally need what Carl Rogers called “unconditional positive regard” to feel safe and risk new expressions. Technical tips and observations can be helpful to all of us who create or who strive to perfect a discipline, but most of us do not need lots of advice. We benefit more from sincere interest and nonjudgmental compassion for what we are doing, from having another person committed to being present with us.

When an artist is willing to take a risk in my presence, I feel a moral obligation to be as attentive and supportive as possible, understanding it would be insensitive and harmful to do otherwise. You can practice offering safety in working with a partner by having one make expressions and the other witness in the way we have described here. People report that the provision of this kind of safety, as much as the satisfaction felt about an artwork, is a primary outcome within our studio sessions, that they need it and miss it in so many other places in their lives. You can also practice alone, relaxing all judgment while improvising with an artistic medium. Give all of your attention to perceiving as closely as possible, accepting and maybe viewing yourself as a guardian of a sacred rite of imaginative reverie. Safety is perhaps a prerequisite to letting go and being as present as possible, and this may be why it is such a valued experience in the art studio.

Using Resistance

- ☞ *Resistance has an active aspect that makes energy. . . . It can be frightening when the restraints burst and produce a momentary and overwhelming release. The reluctance to let this happen reinforces the pattern of restriction and holding back.*

Resistance Is Natural

In the safest environments I find resistance to creative expression is a natural reaction. It is a reluctance to begin, an organic condition of inertia involving a refusal to move from one state of being to another, to change. I experience it all of the time. It happens with things I hold in high regard and know I must do or want to engage. Rather than starting with anxiety or trepidation, I more often feel disengaged. The condition is especially common when I am working alone or beginning anything totally unformed, even though I know I do not require a guiding idea or composition at the beginning. This sort of thing also happens when we question the value of creative activities.

As with physical exercise, I have to get myself moving and then things inevitably start to change. If the first steps are sustained, expressive contents emerge from them. Once I start a project or an activity I am likely to get “hooked” and be carried by it. If there is something concrete taking shape, this helps establish a sense of direction and action.

If I am reluctant to work with a group waiting for me in a room, I let my body carry me to the door, and then I do my best to pass

through that door with a sense of commitment, knowing I must be fully present. Invariably, I leave the session energized and grateful.

As I like to say, resistance is normal. It can actually be beneficial—as Heraclitus said about tension. Resistance has an active aspect that makes energy. Apathy and more depressed reactions generate different kinds of challenges, but even these more passive and debilitating states have qualities that may be engaged or reversed to direct and inform expression as we explore here.

Experience with resistance and being stuck validates the movement basis of expression. Artists characteristically say that they have to “show up” and start working before anything can happen. As described earlier we see this all the time in the realm of physical work, where we build upon the momentum of our own actions and those of others. The process carries us like the slipstreams I mentioned—what we may imagine as psychic pelotons of expression.

A Gateway

I believe resistance is an invitation to action, a gateway, and a source of expression that may be used and applied—and it is especially potent when infused with fear and other dark elements. I do not think about fixing or eliminating the resistance; instead I try to know it better, understand its ways and purpose, and play with it as a familiar partner that is often with me at the start. Like many others I am apt to procrastinate by doing just about anything to avoid the first stage of undertaking a new creative activity, a tendency with positive outcomes when I clean a space or organize other things demanding attention.

Working with others might shorten the time of resistance with the give-and-take of interactions helping to circumvent all of our thoughts. Groups and relations with other people have a gravitational pull and the beginning of a creative project can happen like the start of a game where the clock controls the action.

For many, the presence of others and the social dimensions of

creative activity may intensify resistance; it may evoke unpleasant memories, prior art trauma, and feelings of inferiority. Thus support and encouragement together with the relaxation of judgments create the safety needed to become immersed without excessive doubt and distracting preoccupations.

Not only is resistance natural but it is arguably one of our most reliable sources of expression and power. Physical fitness training furthers muscle growth through contraction in relation to a source of resistance. In physics resistance provides traction that creates torque that in turn generates power and fluidity. In throwing a ball and other athletic motions like the golf swing, the upper body turns while the feet and hips resist, which creates a slingshot reaction when the bodily tension is released.

When we transfer the application of these resistance principles to creative expression, one concern becomes how to use resistance consistently rather than in impulsive and sporadic spurts. It can be frightening when the restraints burst and produce a momentary and overwhelming release. The reluctance to let this happen reinforces the pattern of restriction and holding back. In studio training we practice putting the resistance to use in a rhythmic and sustained way, again in keeping with the breath. In contrast to the blurting out of expression, this more mindful use of resistance, together with timely pauses, engages it as a shaping process.

Practice: Resistance Training

You might practice creative resistance training by tensing muscles in a bodily position, holding the position for five to ten seconds, and then releasing the tension gradually, using the force of release to direct movement in space until the gesture feels complete. The same thing may be done in other ways: with voice; with holding a tension in the breath and then letting it go; or by keeping tension with a pencil in the hand and then letting it shape a form when released on a surface.

It may help to intentionally increase tension, which makes the process more conscious and playful. The keeping and building of the bodily force might be an interesting expression in itself, a form of creative strength training through deliberate resistance. When we concentrate on creating tension, it (almost literally) takes the pressure off the ensuing artistic gestures we make. Where art making in group and individual sessions often begins by encouraging relaxation, breath, shutting the eyes, and moving slowly, it might be interesting to also do the reverse. Amplifying tension in a deliberate way may invite a comforting repose as a natural reaction.

Encouragement of actual physical resistance demonstrates how the resistance creates expressive torque and power, which may generate more spontaneous forms than those established purely in the mind. Something we characteristically approach as an obstacle may be flipped into a source of original expression. This in turn analogizes to everything we explore in creating with the shadow and with what are at first perceived to be the negative features of our lives.

Quality Matters

The gestures we make carry an intrinsic purpose to manifest themselves as effectively as possible.

Unique Character

☞ *Quality is a drive that never ends.*

The Urge for Quality

Within certain sectors that encourage artistic expression for all people, it is provocative to raise the subject of quality. Some even consider it off limits. Considerable personal and social damage has been done by the way quality has been approached. Rather than avoid the subject, I believe it has to be reframed. It is possible to integrate innate drives for quality expressions with quality process.

In keeping with the perception of creative expression as a force of nature, quality may be approached within a context recognizing the infinite variations of things defined by their unique characters. We might ask, what is it about a particular expression that is unique to it? If we further this uniqueness in our expression, does it achieve greater distinction?

Through every phase of my experience I see that quality matters. In addition to how each of us innately tries to do the best we can with our expression, I believe the gestures we make carry an intrinsic purpose to manifest themselves as effectively as possible. The hand painting wants to “get it right,” and the same applies to the body moving, the voice singing, or the words taking shape on a page. The psychologist Robert White believed that humans are motivated by biological urges for “competence,” which are tied to the “organism’s capacity to interact effectively with its environment.”¹

Egalitarian values committed to the application of creative expression to the whole of life do not have to be viewed as advocating

“art light.” Although I encourage the notion of “good enough” art to help in circumventing the harsh inner judgments that block many of us from participation, I believe every artistic discipline involves an inherent perfecting process, an inner urge to make the expression as well as possible. This tendency is in fact so strong that I have found it has to be relaxed in order to let expression emerge without being overly controlled and restricted by it. Accomplished artists perfect the ability to do this. When asked where he gets his ideas, Duke Ellington said, “It’s all I do is dream, all the time. I’m not playing, I’m dreaming. This is not piano; this is dreaming.”² But Ellington also said, “My attitude is never to be satisfied, never enough, never.”³

Extending our observations on impermanence and the way in which nature and creation keep making new relationships, we can say that quality is a drive that never ends. It is a pursuit manifested in every perceptual act when we do our best to appreciate the particular features of each moment and let it go as it passes into the next.

The belief that personal and social change can emanate from modest physical acts and emotional states has always informed my practice. It offers a concrete and reliable way to address intractable problems. The commitment to quality artistic actions can stimulate corresponding effects in larger spheres of our lives. But I must confess that the most effective course for me is to simply concentrate on the particular process of creating, with a faith in the outcomes taking care of themselves. It is like the coach who says to a team, “Concentrate on playing as well as you can together and do not worry about the outcomes you cannot control.” And in theater, the director Constantin Stanislavski told actors that concentrating on “results” interrupts how things progress naturally and on their accord.⁴

Some of us will take particular artistic disciplines farther than others, give them more primacy in our lives, and become more versed in the respective traditions of practice. But nevertheless I am able to report that universal desires for quality expression exist at all levels of involvement. No matter what a person’s expertise may be, I encourage assessments of quality based upon authenticity, unique

character, and perhaps most importantly the ability of an expression to stir the soul. Infinite variability of outcomes distinguishes art from disciplines seeking replicability, and it accounts for why art cannot be reduced to standardized values.

In the arts quality always trumps quantity. As much as I strive to generate a certain volume of work, if given a choice I will opt to make less if it is better. James Joyce, who wrote relatively few but all carefully crafted works—the collection of short stories called *Dubliners* (1914); the novels *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939); and the play *Exiles* (1918)—exemplifies this. But Picasso's spontaneous and prolific genius offers a counterpoint.

Judgments of quality in art can take on quasi-religious dimensions and to some it may sound almost sacrilegious to suggest “good enough” standards. I use the term to take aim at the impossible ideals we often apply to the assessment of our own art and as a way to change patterns of perfectionism, to be discussed next, which deter so many. There are also the trend-bound and institutional standards determining what is worthy of attention in contemporary art. And the same applies to canons. Where I respect the consensus about great works that have been validated by time, history can miss—it tends to be more of a point of view than an absolute measure. There has to be room for what emerges outside these frameworks and values.

As someone who strives to make good art I have had my own hesitations with the goal of being good enough, and I am still “in process” with the idea. If we want greater participation in the creative process, “good enough” may be a key factor. It might also be a more realistic measure for all of us who strive to excel—doing the best we can and feeling the work of art and the process of making it as completely as possible may be more than enough. The good-enough standard protects against judgments based upon things beyond our control that arrest the process of creation. The survival of creative acts—like the survival of creatures in nature—requires protective instincts. Good-enough art may be one way of holding hostile and

threatening forces, inside and outside of ourselves, at bay. The social assessments of value are ultimately going to be made by someone else, and we have to find ways to keep working for art, ourselves, our communities, and the soul of the world.

Within the artist community, there is a history of lively debate about the nature of aesthetic value and who determines it. In his iconic 787-word 1957 paper “The Creative Act,” given at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Marcel Duchamp said spectators set values for art, maintaining that artists have “no role at all in the judgment”⁵ of their work and their explanations have little significance. Spectators not only determine aesthetic import but they bring artistic expressions into the world by experiencing them in keeping with our emphasis here on the role of the witness.

In his 1961 comments for a Museum of Modern Art exhibition of his “readymades,” in which he presented objects themselves as art, Duchamp described how he selected objects with no consideration of “good” and “bad” and with what he called a “complete anesthesia.”⁶ Where I agree with Duchamp’s effort to protect creation from conventionality, I would revisit the idea of completely eliminating the artist from the process of attributing quality. The artist is a participant in the value-making process if only in relation to the physical acts of creation carrying their inherent aesthetic sense as described earlier.

Distinguishing Features

We might consider two different and complementary aspects of quality: (1) *a standard*, either categorical or relative, according to which things are assessed and compared and to which people aspire; and (2) *an essential characteristic*. These features support one another in making determinations of quality and there is often creative tension between them.

It may be helpful to complement the traditional sense of artistic

standards with close attention to distinguishing features. An artistic expression, like a human being, may be viewed in relation to qualities unique to it. As with people, artworks also have archetypal features shared with others.

James Hillman felt the definition and affirmation of character, the unique aesthetic and thoroughly individuated style of a person, one's image and form, are a driving force of life.⁷ When the often peculiar, unusual, and perverse qualities of persons run contrary to more categorical standards of society, we are apt to have conflict. The same applies to the perception of art. Since few aspire to low quality, the creative tension motivates us to critically assess, change, and expand both personal and more collective values.

Thus other people can both inhibit and enhance our views of our creative expressions. We sort it out in going forward, maybe not being too attached to any of the viewpoints, just realizing value is a complex we cannot fully control. When asked to give a succinct characterization of "artistic quality" in my studio sessions, which involve people from all sectors of life, I acknowledge the incompleteness of any definition—in keeping with the Zen saying that "words are like a finger pointing at the moon."

I mention features such as genuineness, expressive energy and impact, uniqueness of style and subject matter, degree of risk and challenge, the transformation of difficult material into something new and life affirming, and lasting power. There is also merit to the colloquial response—it is hard to describe, but we know it when we see it.

Although technical proficiency can contribute to quality, it is not an exclusive measure. Competence with materials paired with little inspirational effect may not compare well to the reverse. My colleague Paolo Knill frames this as "low skill—high sensitivity."

Both quality assessments by others and categorical standards, neither of which are necessarily true in an absolute sense, are a reality in terms of any effort to move our artistic expressions into the world. All who struggle for attention might take solace in how

Herman Melville's books were out of print at the end of his life and *Moby-Dick* never entirely sold the original printing of three thousand copies. Art can be cruel and the judgments of what is good, terribly misleading. Emily Dickinson had only seven poems published during her lifetime, and her poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you—Nobody—too?" models what art can do with difficult circumstances.

We might all be boosted by how frequently the trends of artistic judgment are prone to get it wrong. The power to determine who should and should not make art cannot be given exclusively to the artistic corporate complex. I advocate good-enough art as a way of furthering participation across the social spectrum.

My major quarrel with the elitist strain of the so-called art world is its tendency to restrict access. Drawing categorical lines around quality is the most commonly used deterrent, so thoroughly internalized we inflict it on ourselves. The very notion of an art "world" serves as a not-so-subtle mechanism to keep art and artists metaphorically operating on another planet from ordinary people. Art is a discipline that, like any other, carries standards and involves a perfecting process. But the standards are tricky. I am as driven by them as anybody else and they can be a source of art angst; in keeping with the theme of this book, however, standards are thus one of my closet partners in creating.

The more experienced I become in showing my art to the public, the more aware I am of the variability of response even within the context of people who appreciate my paintings. Many of the artists I admire are attracted to what might be called my more spontaneous and *brut* paintings. As I mentioned earlier I benefit from these responses because I know how easy it is for me to get caught up in refinement and control—things that might actually be called the shadow elements of my expression, perhaps originating in childhood and the desire to make more conventionally attractive pictures. I am concerned with beauty, and I want to please viewers and make paintings that have a broad appeal. But I also seek an individuated

and spontaneous way of expression. I emulate artists whose paintings convey a visceral power that verges on what may be considered visually challenging.

Recently a friend who makes more refined and carefully designed (albeit elegant and popular) art was in my studio and he commented on how much he liked a delicate pencil drawing I did on a canvas as a preliminary step before going at it with oil paint in my characteristic style. The studio was full of finished paintings but he chose this sketch to admire; clearly it was more like what he did than the others. I was taken aback and I confess a bit intimidated about losing something in the image that might have value, and at the same time I experienced the inevitable doubts about the direction I have taken in my art. I liked the sketch but felt it was preliminary and a base for something to be made from it. Painting involves considerably more risk of loss than writing poetry or music, where one version may be saved while another is explored. During a period in my life when I was making digital art, I enjoyed being able save early versions and compare them to completed works. In making a physical painting, the early versions are covered and lost.

I decided in this case to follow my original purpose, using the sketch as a suggestion for the composition emerging on top of it. If the new image was a failure, so be it. I think the painting did work and I like it better than the faint drawing, but the overall experience underscored the differences in artistic judgment in the world.

Practice: Nature as a Model

Good enough, within the context of trying to do the best I can, becomes a very important standard in relation to sustaining involvement. It helps to think every gesture I make is innately trying to do the same. If we perceive ourselves as manifesting universal forces of nature, a kind of artistic biomimicry, attention shifts to striving to be as natural as possible, moving in sync with our biological and animal sensibilities, and most of all following instincts. This way of working

reliably furthers more organic and personal ways of expression and then allowing them to perfect themselves.

The transformative forces of the natural world offer a model for artistic quality. It is doubtful that nature (like Marcel Duchamp) does a lot of thinking about high and low art, good and bad expression.

I try to mimic the process of how nature shapes forms rather than attempting to replicate the actual things. We might act like Jackson Pollock, who, when asked by Hans Hofmann if he painted from nature, replied: "I am nature."

Try to relate as naturally as possible to your bodily and physical sensations and let them move innately in your expressions. Approach quality according to how well you do this. It is a new way of making art from nature.

Have you experienced gaps between a personal expression you valued and the way it was received by others? Did the experience influence your subsequent involvement with the creative process? Have you given thought to the way personal assessments of quality may be determined by social standards?

Have there also been times when another person or group perceived value in your expressions that may have been disparaged by you? Others may help us see things we do not appreciate. For those who have low self-esteem about their creative expression or who are constrained by narrow ideas about both quality and art, the perceptions of others may be liberating.

Imagine yourself moving or writing like an organic process of nature—wind, waves, an animal jumping or digging, anything helping you release instinctive actions. Do not be afraid to be unusual or distinctive. Remember you do not have to leave your body to engage and imagine these forces—imagine the pulsations, circulations, transformations, synapses, energetic charges, reflexes, and micro dynamics as conductors of expression. Nature is a wonderful model in that so much beauty is created via inherent processes with no thoughts or deliberations. Do your best to connect with the

intelligence of physical forces in the body and the images emerging spontaneously from what you do.

It might be enjoyable to do this with others. It helps to be as automatic as possible, building on the gestures and words that appear. In groups we sometimes exchange expressions by passing them spontaneously from one person to another. The experimentation with others establishes a base for creating more fluidly when alone. It is often necessary to let go of filters and hesitations to access new contents, styles, and ideas.

Shift all of your quality concerns away from conventional standards and toward being as unique as possible, in keeping with how previous sections of this book approach artistic significance. Concentrate on rhythmic utterances and gestures rather than the formation of outcomes. You may discover that this relaxation of thoughts about final products paradoxically makes them better and more authentic. Your goal is ingraining more instinctive and individuated ways of expression.

Skill

☞ *All artistic disciplines involve a perfecting process.*

When the Rivers Flowed Freely: Feel It and Not Think It

Skill is a factor in determining what a person is able to do with materials. Within a context philosophically oriented to engaging all participants in significant artistic expression, interesting issues are raised in relation to skill, especially when saying creative expression is as accessible as breath and manifested though rudimentary gestures.

Skills cut two ways—there are expressions not possible without them and at the same time highly trained techniques may block access to authentic and new creations. In relation to the former point, music perhaps more than all other artistic media is apt to require skill in order to use many instruments. The degree of media skill is immediately apparent on a sensory level as sound permeates the surrounding spaces.

Where composing a symphony or singing an aria may require media competency, other art forms allow beginners to use more elemental and untrained gestures in aesthetically significant ways—expressive movement, painting and drawing, percussion, poetic word play, photography, collage, ritual expression, and the making of personal assemblage, shrines, configurations in nature, and anything that takes preexisting objects and places them in new arrangements. Where our focus here is more on the latter, I recognize every artistic discipline involves a perfecting process and the development of skills.

Vocal expression is generally considered to require skill. How-

ever, in my studio sessions beginners have often expressed themselves profoundly when they fully commit to releasing their voices in the most direct and personal ways. At a recent community performance a novice vocalist stunned the audience with her pure, deep, and sincere expressions, transmitting soul and vibrational qualities not always present in more facile and technically controlled presentations. Perhaps a key element in the success of this particular piece was the sensitivity of the audience and their interest in authentic personal expression rather than more routine and schooled proficiency. They were closely attuned to the risk the performer was willing to take. Creative expression at all skill levels benefits from reaching to new and challenging dimensions.

I approach skill with a belief in universal access to creative expression in every medium of expression. Years of experience offer considerable evidence that this is not only possible but also that broader and varied participation generates more interesting artistic outcomes. My colleague Norma Canner, who taught creative movement, often said that she found it more artistically gratifying to work with beginners than trained dancers, whose ingrained techniques got in the way of making natural and unique existential movements. The average person needs support and guidance, as I have described in previous sections, in making a commitment to movement exploration, but once they start to move, they tend to be capable of distinct and authentic gestures.

In my own early experience I observed how young children moved naturally while painting at easels and how this contrasted to more constricted drawing and painting styles of older children and adults. The standard developmental explanation is that change happens when there is a shift from pure movement, color, and formal exploration to the schematic representation made possible by increased control of fine motor abilities with the hands, together with a more general orientation toward representing pictorial ideas and preexisting mental images in a technically proficient way. When the older child encounters frustration and an inability to

represent what exists in thought according to prosaic notions of artistic skill and ability, the process of drawing and painting tends to be arrested.

One of the popular ways of dealing with these challenges has been to devise exercises within a framework based on the functioning of different hemispheres of the brain. Even though the underlying concept tends to be cerebral, as I mentioned previously, the practical outcomes—whether or not ultimately tied to the now-questioned “right brain–left brain” theory of mind—often further spontaneity and imagination. The designer Peter Lawrence spoke to me about how the key to the Betty Edwards application of neuroscience ideas to drawing involved what is recommended here: “shutting down” as he described, “the overly critical aspect that says, ‘No, you are doing it wrong.’ We are very good at this type of self-criticism.”

I concentrate on the body and feeling, with the whole mind integrated as a necessary partner that encourages the ability to follow rather than lead. During the process of expression I try to feel it and not think it. Analytic thinking may happen before the act, and for me always afterward in the process of reflection, but when creating I try to let the intelligence and thought of physical action take the lead. I experience this especially in dance and movement, where the impulse and feeling together with a physical sense of rhythm lead and thoughts take a break. I try to transfer this felt sense of expression and an accompanying perceptual sensitivity to all of the other arts.

I encourage returning to early years and the type of spontaneous gesture that characterizes all of childhood. We go back to the place and time when the rivers flowed freely with the goal of revival. As we begin to experiment with creative expression, we reframe ideas about skill and concentrate on how it develops in infinitely variable ways from the movement base. We essentially return to the source of the flow and give it all another chance.

I encourage asking what it is about your way of moving that is distinct and unique to you—an innate ability, style, and expressive

intelligence? So rather than trying to mold ourselves into an external idea of what is good, we find it within what we already do and develop it.

For me this whole process involves a return to what we call the “sensorimotor knowing” of early childhood. We stay with the mode of experimenting through movements, sensation, and feeling and let the process grow naturally from the particular sensorimotor capacities and inclinations of the person—again, following the underlying principles of nature where everything is unique and nothing is exactly the same.

Beginners might even have certain advantages in developing these skills since they are not always as constrained by artistic habits and controls. Henri Matisse would draw with long sticks so that he could circumvent the small muscle and mental controls of his fingers. The method encourages gross motor expression, again giving the whole body a chance to lead and create new forms.

In my studios it is standard practice to begin painting and drawing on large paper surfaces. I try to reverse the usual mind orientation by not only encouraging the use of the whole body but also concentrating on lower body contact with the ground. I suggest painting as much with the thighs, torso, back, shoulders, and even the feet as well as the arms, fingers, and eyes. This can be challenging for those accustomed to controlling expressions on small surfaces.

This approach tends to be absolutely reliable in generating a basis of unique and spontaneous expressions, on both large and small scales, and the challenge, as I mentioned earlier, is sustaining them and letting them unfold. Skill development involves learning how to let the rivers run and access the most natural gestures of the body, to build upon them while keeping the essential forms and expressions. So many people struggle with the process of overpainting and losing the character of an expression. Skill often involves knowing what to keep and when to stop; it is not only learning how to make a creative expression but how to appreciate when the things you do cohere into an object you want to keep and hold.

Nature Does Not Bifurcate Process and Product

In the community of people committed to universal creative expression, there are many who advocate pure process with no regard for artistic outcomes. I think this goes contrary to acts of creation emerging as forces of nature generating new forms of life. Quality is an instinct at the heart of aesthetic experience. Rather than try to disregard it, redefine it.

We need a larger perspective on process and objects and how they are forever intertwined in the reciprocity of what we do and what we make. In every art medium we are in constant dialogue with the emanation of forms, which even in the most process-oriented situations guide action toward its most complete expression.

For example, musical group expression might not only help to engage people at various experience levels but it may also develop skills through partnership with others where there is continuous sensitivity to the resulting sounds. Group music-making has unique abilities for starting from wherever the person is. If a clear and simple instrumental rhythm is established and sustained, usually by leaders and others with an ear for the beat and the manual ability to repeat it, others are carried by the strong and clear pulse. In this way, the group experiences a collective sense of quality achievement in relation to expressive release, the contagion of creative energy, and togetherness, all of which have a corresponding influence on individual participants. The same applies to vocal improvisation with others.

Elemental music uniquely merges people with varied abilities into a single communal expression, a shared pulse that both calms and invigorates. Dance and drama combine both individual and group expressions, but collective expressions in these media, as significant as they are within their own right, cannot compare to how many people become one with a vibrational and aural poignancy in vocal expressions gathering every sound into an immediate and relatively constant presence truly carrying those contributing to it.

There is no question the primary objective of these group ses-

sions is the creation of quality sound experiences. Disharmony, confusion, dissonance, and jarring sounds often play their part in the improvisations that do not exclusively define quality as harmonious and orderly. Someone who wants to express discomfort through music tries to do this as well as possible, searching for the sounds that most completely convey the emotions.

Partnership with more skilled players often helps to motivate, carry, and accommodate the abilities of the others. Group musical expression establishes leading rhythms and sounds bringing the contributions of other less-developed participants into their flow, which enhances all elements.

These principles of collective expression may be applied to individual skill development if we view ourselves as a gathering of different abilities and qualities. We allow particular aspects of expression to support others.

Practice: Slipstreams of Rhythm

Identify strengths in a particular mode of your expression that may have a positive influence on others. How might you concentrate on relative areas of comfort and competence and trust they will draw less-skilled and perfected modes of expression into their orbits?

Thinking about the sequence of expressive acts we make in a single artwork as a group process might help lighten the load. For example, in group rhythmic improvisation, a foot stomping or vocal utterance merges into the common pulse of the communal expression. The unifying sound depends upon all of the parts to realize its full effect. If we view solo creations in this way it may help to relax the tendency to be overly deliberate with each mark we make, sentence we write, or word we say in speaking to others.

When we express ourselves more freely, again imagining the distinct acts of creation as part of a larger group expression requiring different elements that do not have to be perfectly crafted, we allow the overall flow of expression to occur. The constituent parts become

the slipstream we have discussed, the collective force carrying elements within it. The particular gestures are integrated into something bigger. Excessive involvement with details alone is likely to diminish the animation of the whole.

View the gestures you use in making a painting or poem the way you approach elemental footwork, hand clapping, and vocal utterances in a group rhythm exercise. Let the different things you do take their place in a collective effort of expression. Trust that the different actions will proceed toward the same kind of common stream you experience in musical improvisation. Concentrate more on entering this unifying current than on making something special. Let the artistic expression take its own shape.

Drumming practice connects the discussion of skill to the movement basis of expression, simplicity, responsiveness, sustained involvement, and building sensitively upon a sequence of actions. Percussion quickly reveals both the fundamental competencies required to perfect the process of expression as well as impediments to be addressed.

As accessible as the medium appears, I observe that people tend to approach drums randomly, hitting the heads either forcefully or tentatively to make sounds without appreciating the importance of rhythmic repetition as the underlying source of expression as I have emphasized from the start.

Careful listening reveals the quality dimensions of drumming; primal as it may seem, it is more than process for its own sake. The sustained and resonant drumbeat elicits corresponding bodily movement, furthers trance, and transports us to altered states. Drumming in groups where there is an established pulse furthers entry into a common and all-encompassing beat that holds all of the sounds contributing to it.

Practicing alone provides an excellent opportunity to understand how skill development involves being able to repeat gestures with clarity and precision. I encourage the process of breathing as a model for keeping the sounds simple. They will progress on their own

accord as we learn to submit to the rhythm and constancy. Drumming furthers appreciation of the way in which careful listening is as important as making sounds. This corresponds to the process of looking in other art forms. The arts engage all of the senses in mindfulness practice.

When experimenting with any new artistic medium, and especially musical instruments, the quality of materials have a significant impact. It is important to have a resonant and well-tuned drum that will sound properly. Part of the skill is to know when the instrument and not the person is the source of dissonance. I present Native American drumming as the archetype of simplicity and constancy and also emphasize how challenging it can be to maintain the consistent sound and tempo. Skill becomes learning how to let go, a submission to something beyond yourself with constant sensory awareness and responsiveness. Like meditation, drumming is an immersion in action that grows of its own accord if we can submit to it and become more effective partners in helping the sounds and rhythms emerge.

Drumming, like other movement-based art forms, is universally accessible. As with the practice suggestions I have given in other sections, it requires the ability to sustain gestures and allow them to unfold within the context of their own inherent nature. We become their vehicles of expression.

The loss of rhythm and the making of discordant sounds are natural, again like losing and regaining breath and balance; they help us become more attentive to the beat and steady pulse. If through your practice you attain the ability to repeat gestures with precision and distinct sound quality, the rhythm will take you. As I have emphasized throughout, the making of sounds has an innate drive toward quality.

In my group studio sessions I drum and use other percussive instruments to help people move freely in painting. Participants consistently describe how simple and consistent rhythms help them to relax, let go of inhibiting thoughts, and access the movement basis of expression in the body. The same principles can apply to drumming

alone before making art as a way of preparing the body to move instinctively and rhythmically.

Drumming is a baseline practice potentially supporting all of the arts. Perfecting the process of making distinct and repeatable sounds can be transferred to other movement based art forms. Percussion demonstrates how we can make gestures and then be transported by them.

Perfectionism and the Role of Mistakes

☞ *Fixation on controlling small things interferes with the movement of the whole. There tends to be an inability to let go and give expression a chance to take flight. . . . The creative process is significantly informed and perfected by dealing with and transforming mistakes. . . . We cannot get better without them.*

Process Perfects Itself

Perfectionism tends to deter the overall flow of expression with its hypervigilance, control, and judging of micro elements. It loses the ability to engage parts as characters in a dynamic play where quality is not necessarily determined by perfect steps along the way but instead by how creators stay committed to the whole process as it takes shape.

The idea of being perfect involves exactness and the absence of mistakes or flaws. It tends to be an absolute and even transcendent standard, which raises questions about how close it is to reality and how far it is from creative expression—which requires risk taking, fallibility, and inevitable mistakes. Even when people understand that these expectations are impossible, many nevertheless apply them to life situations and themselves.

As previously described, people being introduced to creative expression often start with mental images of what an outcome should be. This reliably establishes gaps between the preexisting idea

and what they do. Consequently, the fixation on ideal forms rather than on what emerges organically through creative acts blocks the ability to accept and appreciate expressions that do not fit the expectations, and this ultimately deters risk taking and doing new things in areas where faultless performance is not possible.

And yet art making in all media, as I have mentioned, does involve a more general perfecting process: trying to improve and fashion the most complete and effective expression possible. This perfecting is based on working with what we have, with what emerges often via mistakes and outside the scope of expectations, and then shaping it. Effective expression requires a sense for how all of the various participating elements are gathered together into whole compositions and performances that are able to do something significant with imperfect or ordinary ingredients, which have been transformed by the structure and flow of the whole.

Working with people from different regions in the world I find the challenges of perfectionism, like all of the other obstructions to creative expression discussed here, to be universal. My own history with perfectionism manifests itself in being overly involved with trying to get details right in a painting, text, or movement, which invariably disconnects me and the artwork from the more general flow and movement of expression that has a way of letting parts spontaneously contribute to the whole effect. When we concentrate only on making details perfect, the work is fragmented and we lose the more all-encompassing movement capable of carrying us with its momentum.

Approaching individual acts with a good-enough sensibility gives them a chance to help us move toward a goal. It is important to pay attention to the various details of an expression, try to make them as well as we can, and perhaps practice various elements, but there has to be a realization that when we are in the midst of creative action, the details are subsumed by the overall movement.

The perfecting process may involve revisiting spontaneous gestures or parts afterward and revising them, but always with a sense

of how they contribute to a more general pattern. In my own painting I have ruined pieces by becoming overly involved in one or more details, resulting in them standing out too much or being at odds with the whole or creating a busy effect. Successful expressions have a continuity of gestures. In my own experience I am often surprised when I look at completed paintings and see a consistency and compositional coherence of brushstrokes emerging instinctively.

Fixation on controlling small things is connected to an inability to appreciate the complete composition and give expression a chance to take flight. It blocks fluid movement and results in tight and mechanical qualities in painting. The same applies to writing, music, dance, and acting, where perfectionists fuss over things in a more general effort to be in control, not realizing artistic skill requires the ability to act intuitively, with a low threshold of judgment and a more comprehensive feeling for what is moving spontaneously through the process of expression in particular moments. The skilled artist is able to stay with the expression as it shapes itself and “happens” in ways that may improvise on preconceptions. Process perfects itself through creative acts. It requires sustained commitment and sticking with it, especially during moments of doubt.

The perfectionist, a close cousin to the pessimist, has a hard time appreciating incremental progress. There is a tendency to focus on negative features, on what is not right, rather than allowing expression to unfold spontaneously with a more accepting attitude. Perfectionists do not see how they are caught in ways of thinking about right and wrong with little room for variations, changes of perspective, and a more comprehensive sense of expression.

Simply stated, perfectionists tend to be overly involved in obsessional thinking about what they do, judging it, and usually being dissatisfied. They cannot make use of what I described earlier as the “soft hands” holding the process in a more flexible and responsive fashion, giving the creative impulse room to find its way in a given situation, trusting its intelligence and ability to do things that require relaxation of our directive inclinations.

There are forms of artistic expression suited to the perfectionist spirit: design, architecture, fine carpentry, porcelain objects, precision mechanisms, or the intricacies of jewelry. Exactitude has an important place in many forms of creative expression and construction. The ability to refine and continuously improve an artwork is another feature where the spirit of perfection is a basis for excellence.

The perfectionist aspect of expression is effective when it is able to partner with fluidity and spontaneity, when it lets unexpected and new material emerge. But in helping people begin an involvement with creative expression or access different and new ways of expressing themselves, it is generally necessary to relax the desire for flawlessness. The perfecting process works best as a response to the formative acts of expression.

Introducing many hundreds of people to the process of creative expression in drawing, painting, poetry, movement, performance, and voice each year, I encourage automatic, repeated, and what might be called natural and uninhibited expressions. Most people tend to be hesitant about these expressions as a result of a more general disconnect between their thoughts and physical actions, with the former being in charge, and this is apt to generate self-conscious and tight expressions. People need support in relaxing, letting their expression emerge spontaneously, and rediscovering instinctive and confident gestures.

Models of Fluidity and Grace

It can be helpful to look for illustrations of fluid expression outside the fine arts to reinforce the movement basis of creativity. Watch skilled housepainters at work. They show how the painting process involves a steady and still hand and brush, with the body moving and generating strokes rather than the tentative, fussy, and overly controlled strokes that tend to characterize the beginner. Their hands are integral parts of whole body movements, as contrasted to how

most of us tend to focus on separate hand, finger, and wrist movements. The graceful gestures of experienced housepainters, integrating large and small muscle movements, also show how these fluid actions are more precise. The body acts as a compass, stabilizing the fine movements of the brush. Similarly, a master furniture maker concentrates on breath when painting lines and makes one steady and smooth brushstroke.

The same thing is demonstrated by the gestures of a plasterer, where it is necessary to make bold and smooth applications of the material and allow it to take its shape evenly and naturally. Once the work dries, the plasterer returns to refine, smooth, and perfect the overall effect. When watching these craftspeople I see the elegance of the gestures and their dance-like qualities, which contrast to applying the material in more tentative and restricted ways—once again focusing on detailed control rather than fluidity and letting the actions and materials shape the whole surface. Those of us with tendencies to obsess over details and move in constricted ways are apt to make a bumpy and sticky mess that is difficult to refine when it dries.

After many years of practice I am still learning how important it is to commit to a free gesture when applying the material and most of all to accept the imperfections and return to them later to sand and cover with another coat. If I try to fix them while the work is wet, I make things worse. I have to allow the movement to be “good enough,” and this will in turn further the more comprehensive perfecting process. Good-enough gestures really can be part of getting the best quality possible. The same principles apply to every art form.

There are disciplines where it takes considerable practice to even approach the good-enough standard. Again analogizing to physical work and skills, I have yet to master the art of applying seams of grout. I know I have to move confidently and fluidly but I tend to get stuck in hesitating and trying to perfect applications by touching them afterward, which inevitably creates inconsistencies and interrupts the rhythm and flow of the whole. Grout has taught me

a lot about the movement basis of expression. Ongoing practice is required in order to trust the gestures. An emphasis on natural, confident, and fluid expression does not mean it comes easily.

Putting Ego in Your Pocket and Conventional Standards on Their Heads

Perfectionists tend to have difficulty letting go of what they do in preparing and then embracing the live conditions of the actual performance. The work stays in their heads, with them alone, and never truly takes shape as a unique new entity in constantly changing situations. The same flexibility and acceptance of the unexpected applies to making art in response to visions and intentions as described earlier. If the process is not allowed to mix with the present moment, it is isolated and does not develop. We can again liken the artistic perfecting process to nature, where unpredictable threats and challenges are necessary in order to improve. As with immune systems, creativity cannot operate in complete isolation. Vital organisms are exposed to risks and imperfections, which stimulate them to change, adapt, and create.

Maybe the most important lesson nature offers is how the mind tends to interfere with organic processes and intelligences. The pressure to perform is tied to ego, impossible expectations, assessing ourselves according to standards set by other people, and fantasies removed from what happens in the world and how life experiences and things are perceived by others, all of which are described in our discussion of quality.

In my studio sessions I encourage artists at all levels, beginners and experienced professionals hoping to renew their expression, to put ego in their pockets; keep it safe and close, because it is an important part of our interactions with the world, but let it learn to accept and respond to what happens spontaneously.

As a professor who has been systematically evaluated by students and faculty members for many years—and as difficult as it

can sometimes be to confront differences between how I view a situation and how others view it—the process has taught me how my vantage point is one of many within the context of what might be called reality. The personal ego is a perspective on what happens and what is created. Sometimes it gets things right, but often it is off base from what might be called the more consensually validated perspective on value. As mentioned earlier, the contrary positions of others sometimes help us see that what we do may be more effective than we think. The point is that we do not always see things accurately. Perfectionists tend to be locked into their assessments and not flexible about how what at first seems to be good or bad might be viewed very differently by others. They might consider a more critical assessment of their standards of perfection.

Participants in my studios also describe the reverse condition: of giving too much attention to how other people perceive them and how this makes them feel, rather than being attuned to their own core expression and what matters to them, and discovering how they can share this with others. In addition to making art, a primary feature of our group studio sessions involves showing the work to others, paying attention to it, and responding to it in various ways as described here.

Without giving away our own assessments of value, these methods allow us to learn more about how our work is perceived and experienced by others. We consistently see how honest and authentic expressions have a strong aesthetic impact. The studio experimentation tends to turn conventional standards of being perfect on their heads, but most of all I think it reveals the egocentric and misleading dimensions of perfectionism. Without giving up or in any way compromising what we believe, and in staying faithful to what feels right to us, we can still accommodate and adjust these standards by opening to what others see and feel. We appreciate how people really do care about our idiosyncrasies and what is unique to us, what matters to us, where we struggle, and hope to change. We discover how expressing these personal things is not self-centered and egocentric

but, paradoxically, effective in communicating to others and giving of ourselves to them.

Accepting Mistakes and Failure Is Necessary and Not Easy

In keeping with the transformative core of the creative process, learning how to embrace failed efforts may be one of the best ways to practice creating with the forces of nature. I might try something and invest considerable time, only to have it fail, but repeatedly I discover how failed works, much like unsuccessful experiments in science, provide the basis for something else to emerge from them. Some of the most important creations are transmutations of flawed materials and bad situations, within us and the world, holding the germ for something very new.

These experiences with failure are never easy, no matter how well I might appreciate their larger purpose. Self-doubt is a formidable barrier. I know it well: the feeling that I cannot perform as in the past, that I am losing the ability to create, or the more sweeping sense that my expressions lack value. When consumed by this condition, I have learned to trust that something will emerge if I keep at it.

It is often helpful to pause and walk away for a while when I am immersed in doubt, and fortify myself by contemplating the physical environment and perhaps remember how I have dealt with this problem in the past. Again, other people can be crucial in repairing self-confidence: they can help us see things differently or notice what has been overlooked. When overcome with doubt, I tend to lose the ability to see what is really happening before me.

It is even better to get beyond ideas of success and failure and just try to be responsive to what emerges; practice letting the process take you, suspending all judgments about the outcomes and the value of the experience. This is related to what I described earlier about witnessing and the movement basis of expression, the idea of starting a creative work by simply moving in an instinctive and sustained way, or playing with something new.

Try to give as little attention as possible to details and concentrate on the overall momentum of the expression. But if you have trouble relaxing your assessments of value, and most people do, it may help to invert the perfectionist habit and welcome what seems like faulty efforts. The main problem may be your inability to truly see what you do—so as you embrace imperfection also keep in mind that it may not be so bad after all. Maybe it presents a new genius outside your current sense of good and bad.

In fostering creative discovery and change we try to move as freely as possible and (as mentioned earlier) with an appreciation for how natural gestures carry an innate perfecting process within themselves. The perfectionist facets of ourselves can take a break, sit on the bench, watch carefully, and allow the game to unfold. As with sports, systematic work on particular features and skills happens in practice, not necessarily during the game, match, or meet where we have to respond instinctively to what happens outside the realm of plans. Even with the most skilled and prepared athletes nothing is ever perfect and subject to their control. Successful outcomes are determined by how they respond to mistakes and opportunities on a field permeated by the unexpected. Imperfections manifest themselves and provide the basis for the next practice sessions. The problems become indicators of what has to be addressed. We cannot get better without them.

The discovery of new forms and significant changes in expression require risk and experimentation with unfamiliar situations, which reliably generate errors and setbacks. The ability to embrace these features is perhaps the most distinguishing difference between the successful creator and the perfectionist who does everything possible to avoid circumstances where failures might occur, and especially in the presence of others. Successful creators are able to accept these difficulties and use them. They are distinguished by their ability to stick with the discipline, realizing that error is inevitable.

Accomplished athletes also model how it is necessary to let a mistake go, at least in the present moment, and then concentrate

completely on the next action or phase of the process. There is often natural anger and frustration attached to the error, but these have to be cleared away so that the mind and body can be ready to do as well as possible in the present and next moments. I have dealt better with these challenges in fast-moving and continuous action sports as contrasted to endeavors where there is time to stew after a mistake and get down of myself.

With the skilled person who is able to fully concentrate on the present moment—the next shot, stroke, carry, catch, kick, pitch, pass, game, or race—the mistake is not forgotten. It is simply put aside within the present context so that the overall performance can continue as effectively as possible.

I have a tendency to easily forget successful engagements whereas the serious mistakes and failures stay with me, and the really bad ones are never forgotten. Ideally the blunders and missed opportunities become guides and helpers. They test my ability to sustain commitment rather than give up.

I have had a more difficult time with accepting the pain and defeat of sports than I have with the arts—maybe because in some way I am ultimately more committed to the latter as a lifework and vision. But I have certainly learned and continue to receive humbling and important lessons from the former.

Accepting defeat and mistakes is hard for most of us—great artists, too. Experience helps but it is never easy. Barbra Streisand was so devastated by forgetting the words of a song in a 1967 Central Park concert that she did not do a live concert again until 1994: one of the most accomplished singers of her era was arguably too hard on herself and developed a paralyzing stage fright. She reported that when the lapse happened, she could not improvise with the words and respond with humor to the flaw. She gave the mistake power over her life; and like many of us, she says she only remembers the bad reviews. When Streisand returned to the concert stage, she had a new appreciation for live engagement, what she received and gave to audiences, and how to be more effective in the present moment.

I have learned that audiences can give energy that makes it possible to do things I could never do without them. In reply to people who want to speak before groups but who have difficulty with their self-confidence, nerves, and fear, I describe how I have learned that audiences are there to hear from speakers and performers and that in most cases they want them to succeed.

In my personal practice I have to truly “want” to engage the audience and present something to them. If I am doubtful about this or feel overly intimidated, I lose the ability to be present and merge with the slipstream energy of the moment and be carried by it. I focus at the beginning of a talk on establishing a flow of expression, building momentum by addressing areas where I am confident and committed. But most of all I have learned to engage whatever is moving through me and through the setting at the particular moment, realizing this will create a sense of aliveness. Robert De Niro described a similar process about how what happens on stage or on camera takes shape in relation to unplanned elements, saying that the expression is different from the “bedroom perfect” practice he might have done alone before the mirror.

When I was talking to an artist about the “bedroom perfect” syndrome, she laughed and confessed to practicing school picture smiles as a child before the mirror. I remember doing that, too, and then experiencing the awkwardness of trying to repeat the just-right expression in a different context.

I knew a man who was camera shy and always felt his ears were too big. This is a classic trait for most of us, thinking some facet of our perfectly fine expression is flawed. It usually comes from comparing ourselves to some external standard of perfection and sometimes it can be implanted by remarks others make about us. We isolate the feature and obsess on it and cannot see how it is part of an overall gestalt creating the appearance of a person. As the man aged, he became increasingly photogenic, but I do not think he ever relaxed in front of cameras. Whenever someone tried to take a picture, he moved into what must have been a practiced position. The

best pictures of him were candid, catching him unaware. If the process became conscious and intentional he adopted the pose to help make a good picture: but this involved trying to control the outcome, which resulted in an unnatural expression. In every sphere of the arts we have to lower self-consciousness, maybe even forgetting ourselves, in order to be more expressively present.

I spent some considerable time photographing my children in their childhood. I think they grew to dread the sessions, because they were not quick. I learned it was important to take many shots, and as the process continued and if I was successful in keeping their anger at bay, their facial expressions and bodily postures became increasingly relaxed and natural. At the same time I had to keep them engaged and looking into the camera. Photographing human subjects taught me how planning and design have to cooperate with what happens and presents itself in the moment. The preparatory efforts gave a certain frame or stage for the composition, which then emits itself spontaneously in a relationship to the camera, which does its best to capture the fleeting experience. The flawed pictures were a major part of my learning. When comparing them to the occasional successful one, I developed a better sense of how to approach the process. In my own experience as a subject I have practiced relaxing the body and the face and doing my best to perceive the camera as a partner capable of catching the soul of moments.

Practice: Playing with Errors and Imperfections

Young people who are viewed as highly successful within accepted channels of social achievement may gain from experimentation with mistakes. It might help them see how absurd it is to give themselves completely to meeting superficial standards of success that might not reflect their own innate sense of what is right, what has to be done, or who they are. High achievers can be acutely afflicted by fear, anxiety, and stress related to controlling everything threatening their status. They may benefit by playing with their errors and imperfections

and may even learn how to be more resilient and successful in doing something useful and creative with them.

Recall situations where you learned by mistakes. Were you aware of this at the time? Were there times when your fear of failing held you back and prevented you from moving forward with an area of interest or taking on a new challenge? Are you risk averse? Do you tend to limit yourself to activities where you have control? If so, is there a cost in relation to your creative potential?

As with the illustrations I gave of the fluid movement of artisans where micro actions are anchored in the whole of the body, try to make gestures with the hands that feel connected to the core of your physical presence and to your breath. Put your whole being into tiny things too. Reverse the usual perfectionist viewpoint by concentrating exclusively on physical ease with absolutely no regard for outcomes. The idea of a mistake should not exist. It is a mental value judgment and construct not present in nature. Inverting ideas and especially repressive ones is one of the fundamental features of imagination. Give your attention to enhancing the naturalness of your movement and I predict this will, paradoxically, further your eventual satisfaction with what you make and it will be closer to nature.

It may be helpful to experiment with applying the “touch it once” principle of executive practice to artistic expression. The urge to keep shaping and perfecting may enhance certain media and ruin others such as watercolors or classical Asian painting and calligraphy that rely on spontaneous gestures as mentioned earlier.

In painting I keep relearning the importance of stepping back to appreciate the unplanned and fresh gestures that I lose when fussing over a picture or trying to have it submit to my will. Try to withhold the urge to modify: try to let expressions be, with the understanding that this way of working can be used together with more deliberate shaping. We need them all.

As someone whose primary modes of artistic practice in relation to what is presented to others are painting and writing, I have

great respect for artists whose work occurs totally within the present moment—musicians, dancers, and actors who do not have the option of touching anything more than once. The present moment in these disciplines is all there is. Those of us who integrate all of the arts not only try to understand these differences and complementary qualities, but we do our best to let them influence one another—painting or writing with the grace and trajectory of a dancer, the rhythm of a drummer, the timing of a vocalist, and the contagious emotion of the actor.

Let Nature Act through You

☞ *If I can keep my balance, the flow of movement carries me over the obstacles.*

The Process Will Carry You

James Hillman studied animals as a way of understanding the human soul. He said to me once about dreams, "We want the angels but it is the animals that come." Walking through his large Connecticut farmhouse for the first time I was taken aback by how this great psychologist had rooms full of books organized like a library, with insects in one room, birds, large animals, and different species in others. He felt these creatures teach us how to deal with afflictions of the human mind.

Animals, reptiles, insects, and fish also offer models for making expressive gestures unencumbered by restrictive thoughts. We can imagine ourselves shape-shifting and adopting their sensibilities, getting out of our heads and into our movements and their connections to other forms of nature. Hillman describes how we can return to animal sensibility when we are caught in mind cages. He said the animals "must go on" and thus they can help with our defeatism and tendency to become head cases when confidence is challenged. They show how sensitivity, grace, and aesthetic presentation are inherent physiological qualities from which we are estranged.

A friend told me a story about how her horseback-riding teacher encourages learning about oneself through the horse. She related an anecdote about how when she lost her balance and felt uncomfortable

starting to trot, she pulled on the reins and the horse sensed she was not confident and stopped. The teacher said, "Stop being such a perfectionist and push through moments when you feel you have lost control of your body and the horse and think about the whole experience or picture getting around the ring."

The beginning rider was intimidated by feeling out of control when her foot slipped out of the stirrup or when her weight fell back or forward. She realized that her lack of confidence and fear blocked the ability to let go and allow the momentum of the horse to carry her and give her a chance to adjust while moving. The teacher had her practice trusting her ability to do this, taking her foot in and out of the stirrup while moving and always looking ahead to the next point where she was going. "You need momentum," my friend said. "You think you are losing control when you are going faster but the momentum gives you more control." I have learned to do the same with cross-country skiing or mountain biking in difficult terrain. If I can keep my balance, the flow of movement carries me over the obstacles. Increasing tension extends the ability to maintain balance.

We learn to let go and interact with the forces of creative expression and "their" flow, especially the situations we fear. It tends to be our fear and lack of confidence that cause significant damage. It is like what happens when fighting against a rip tide and becoming dangerously exhausted rather than letting yourself be carried by the superior force and then moving away from it when it calms. Although it is an important protective instinct, fear cannot take complete control. We practice riding the horses and tides of artistic expression, lessening our fears by knowing them better, developing an ability to move more effectively with them, and realizing the futility of trying to oppose or dominate them.

The drum, called the shaman's horse in many cultures because of the way it propels movement, offers a good example of how the visceral energy of expression can carry us. Kate, the protagonist in D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), reflects on the "nuclear power"¹ of a circle of drummers, "how the living beat . . . soared and

fell, ebbed and ebbed to a sort of extinction, then heaved up again.”² The drum transports everyone willing to feel it.

We learn to ride the rhythms of the body moving in all of the art forms. Group rhythmic expression, as described earlier, has been a significant teacher for me, especially in relation to ego afflictions and perfectionism. The communal pulse integrates and transcends any one part. Success results from contributing with sensitivity and a willingness to be carried by the momentum of the expression.

The continental philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer also engaged nature as a way of approaching art and human understanding. He felt the “self-renewing play” of nature and animals, and their lack of inhibiting self-consciousness, is an exemplar for art. His classic statement in *Truth and Method* (1960) about play is consistent with the idea that rhythmic expression requires letting go and surrender: “Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play.”³ Play and (by extension) artistic expression are processes of nature existing independently of players and artists. As Gadamer suggests, the play plays the player; the dance dances the dancer; and we express the structure of the medium and not just ourselves. When immersed in the rhythm we express its qualities. We are part of its process.

Gadamer was striving to show how artistic processes and objects, and their capacity to convey “truth” through their independent being, are not exclusively tied to the subjective experiences of artists and audiences. Artworks convey expressions within themselves. Martin Heidegger described how green greens and the table tables. When we become overly involved in attributing conceptual meanings to things, we miss their sensory expression that is their being.

Without going to the extreme of denying the existence of self-expression, as some do within this line of thought, we can consider how there is more happening in the creative process than our own consciousness and judgments. In my view, the person works in tandem with the autonomous media and natural processes of expression.

The rider and horse work together, the paint and painter, the dance and dancer, the rhythm and the drummer. The maker of art

further the expression of the medium. The necessity of losing oneself in the medium with Gadamer's "seriousness in playing" is a wonderful antidote for perfectionism. The problem is reversed and we try to become better and more perfect at letting go and allowing movement and other forces of nature to fulfill themselves and help us do the same.

The friend who discovered the importance of momentum in riding a horse is applying this to her challenges with public speaking. She said, "When I get to a hard spot—where I lose my thought, can't find the right word, or someone in the crowd looks confused, then I get worked up, it seizes me, and I can't move on." She realized how important it is to relax and not let her fears take control. Humor helps, as does believing we have something to say, staying attuned to the purpose, trusting it, and then letting ourselves be carried by the impetus of what we feel has to be said.

I find learning how to move with these forces like the horse, rip-tide, current, rhythm, or movement is the key to successful expression. There is an intelligence and purpose in them that transcends what we can do alone, and yet our full presence and involvement is necessary too. Every aspect of creativity is reciprocal. We act with our horses and currents. The same applies to the energy of tensions and difficulties, as we explored earlier. They are partners that enable us to do new things. In my own experience I have discovered the importance of activating these forces and then riding and shaping their momentum. The outcomes are always formed by the interplay, which is endlessly variable.

Perfectionists who try to harness these elements in conformance to their expectations—what they want, what they perceive in their minds, or what they think is correct—miss the whole dynamic of the process: the physics, the horses, the currents, the rhythms, the movements of creating. Those who have to exercise complete control do not tend to do well in situations that depend upon the ability to contribute to more comprehensive forces of creation, where the individual ego and expectations have to adapt to a collective effort. When I

am creating alone a similar process happens since as described earlier, there is an inner group dynamic occurring in creative expression. Ego certainly contributes to the process but it is also carried along and informed by it.

It is unsettling for perfectionists when what they do is not exactly as they want it to be. A lifelong perfectionist in her mid-fifties described it this way: “It becomes a drive. I am plagued by it. What I realize as I age is that it used to come from a place of wanting compliments and approval. Now I realize it has become part of me and that people really do not care if I do something perfectly or not. I cannot just confront it and get rid of it. It is in my body. It holds me back from creating because I am too controlling. Perfectionism is all about control for me. If I can perfect it, it is under my control and I have succeeded in mastering it. I am not as afraid of losing something. It is exhausting. I do best in situations where I have to deal with elements outside of myself that are more powerful than me within the context of the activity—like wind, water, animals. It is exhilarating probably because they take me out of myself. I am more involved in responding to them. You have a feeling of being swept away by the movement and speed. You can also get out of control when doing this, so I have to really stay involved with these elements outside of myself.”

This example of being taken outside ourselves by forces of nature and becoming one with them mirrors the Buddhist emphasis on transcending duality—that is, the mind and the object of its thinking. There can be a feeling of “exhilaration” and being “swept away” when the mind fully integrates itself with the activity and is moved by it. We get out of ourselves to find and be ourselves.

As Alan Watts described in his 1957 classic *The Way of Zen*, when we act instantaneously, without hesitation and deliberating, this enables us to function at optimal levels in complex situations. If we stop to think whether we should do this or that, the situation passes by us. We do the thing we are doing as completely as we can.

In the Shambhala tradition of Buddhism the idea of *drala*

emphasizes the magic and energy happening when we connect our own being to the power of things as they are in the world. The loss of this reciprocity leads to the solitary Sisyphean effort of the perfectionist. Creativity, as emphasized earlier, is outside and inside us. It is a force requiring a transcendence of duality in which we become part of a larger work.

Practice: Expanding Areas of Fluidity

Where do you exhibit the most consistent strains of perfectionism? Has it held you back in expressing yourself freely and discovering new things about your creative potential? Does it permeate every aspect of your life? Or is it restricted to specific domains? Do you think it is a part of your DNA or can you trace it to past experiences and influences? Or is it a combination of both?

Is your expression free and spontaneous in some areas and not in others? If so why? If it is, spread the more instinctive way of expressing yourself from one area to others.

I observed as a young painter how my tight and mechanical expressions when working with a brush on canvas or drawing contrasted with the fluid and free-form style of my handwriting. My Palmer Method childhood penmanship had morphed into a unique and often illegible style of writing characterized by a freedom of movement.

It occurred to me that I could start to paint and draw like I write and the process has been continuing for over forty years. I do my best to make each mark innately and with the same consistency and lack of constraint I saw in my handwriting. A slash of cadmium yellow or alizarin crimson acts alongside a person. Figures, objects, trees, sky, water, land, and rocks originate from spontaneous gestures and give a glimpse of nature where every feature exists interdependently on the same plane.

All of us have areas of fluidity in our expression that can be transferred to other more confined domains like a medicine. Are

you an athlete and think you cannot dance? Try taking a familiar and confident move or series of moves from a sport you play, where you express yourself automatically without too much thought, and develop it into a dance.

When you experience a freedom of soul, is this connected to being transported by an activity? Being one with it and transcending your self-consciousness? Are there connections to self-confidence when you are able to let go in play and action? Support you received from others? Or was it because you just enjoyed the activity?

In the areas where you are free and fluid you are probably feeling the whole of the process and the gestures you are making, and you are not thinking too much about details and whether they are correct or not. You probably do not hesitate to do things because you are committed to the overall experience and enjoying the feeling it gives you in the present moment. The immersion in the whole carries you naturally. Think critically about it afterward and how you might enjoy it even more.

Paradoxically, an emphasis on fluid gestures rather than meticulous rendering of micro elements has a way of furthering the quality of details and their capacity to stand alone as autonomous units of expression. What we initially see as a detail can become a new composition by zooming in on it and vice versa when we zoom out and create a different relationship between parts and wholes.

When I was working with the design team on the cover for this book, they cropped a section of an already small painting I made and magnified it into yet another composition. As they experimented, I had to search carefully to find the sections in the painting. The process opened new worlds of form, color, and perception. It was as if someone else made the picture, or I was acting as a vehicle for a force beyond my sense of what I thought I was doing, just where I want to be in terms of relaxing controls and letting nature act through me.

Experiment with this process by taking high-definition photographs of paintings and drawings and then cropping them into new compositions. You can make numerous pictures within pictures, and

perhaps the details will carry even more fluid expression than the originals and show you what you are capable of doing if you simply change the scale of perception. You can do the same with details from movement or musical improvisation and creative writings, selecting parts and then amplifying them into whole compositions, imagining your inner nature and movement as the artist and yourself as their agent.

Make the Commitment

☞ *Practice without goals may reveal your deepest purpose.*

Keeping the Creative Process Alive

Art in all of its forms is a discipline perfected through practice. Since practice is fundamental to every feature of artistic expression and creative action, as demonstrated in the practice suggestions accompanying each of the sections of this book, and because the methods are endlessly variable in relation to media, goals, and personal styles, the focus here will be a reflection on the dynamics of practice: Why is it essential? What does it do? And how can it be approached?

Practice is itself a creative activity, and for some of us it is the ongoing process of making art—not necessarily preliminary and separate from art. Other artistic disciplines require preparatory work, drills, and exercise involving the refinement of technical skills, training, and rehearsals. Although practice is characterized by universal features such as repetition, perfecting, confidence building, muscle memory, learning by doing, relaxing mental controls, activating imagination, and developing the ability to achieve a natural flow of expression, it is also a distinctly personal process permeated by invention and variation.

So rather than attempt a comprehensive practice guide, this section looks at practice as a subject unto itself and examines how practice relates to principles and suggestions discussed throughout the book—especially the movement basis of expression and the responsive nature of creativity.

Practice is most essentially a commitment to active doing. I have

to get myself and the process of expression moving in order for things to connect to one another and create new forms, to transfer energy from one place to another, a transfer that can be likened to what physics describes as “work.” *Artworks* are made by these transformations and movements.

We keep the creative process alive through practice and repetition is the most basic element of practice in perfecting every art form: repeating and improving gestures until they become automatic and instinctive. The repetitions are endlessly variable and never the same. These actions grow more intelligent and sensitive, counterintuitively, by transcending conscious mental control, as with the percussion and rhythmic exercises described earlier. Physical and bodily expressions develop an ability to find their way to the best possible form.

The emphasis given here to natural and spontaneous movement as the basis of expression does not preclude development and improvement. Practice furthers confidence together with concentration; as the modes of expression become increasingly fluid and reliable, this allows us to place more emphasis on what we have to bring and give to the process. We get better at being more comfortable moving with the forces of creative expression.

Relaxation of control is a basis for inspired expression that gathers and concentrates our emotions and sensibilities. Ironically, we are doing our best thinking when we are not consciously thinking about what we are doing. We become so completely engaged with sensing and feeling what is taking shape during the present moment that we are able to put everything we have into the process of expression.

As I relate to a particular thing, links are made to other things. One movement leads to another and they converge to make new forms. The connections and transformations do not happen unless something is placed in motion, and practice is the way we sustain the more comprehensive movement of the creative process in our lives: the overall discipline incorporates all the engagements and individual works.

Artistic discoveries emerge from the process of creating, often in

most unexpected ways. If we want the insights and new connections, we have to stay active. Practice without goals in every sphere of creative activity may reveal our deepest purpose.

There are different opinions about good and bad practice. The novelist Kurt Vonnegut said, "To practice any art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow. So do it." I align with this position. Good and bad and everything else tend to mix in the overall effort and make their respective contributions to the whole ecology of action. Many teachers and distinguished artists maintain that enjoyment may be the single most key to effective practice. Enjoyment keeps the overall momentum of the process moving: as so many artists advise, follow your instincts about what you feel you have to do, and let other people make their determinations about how they perceive its value.

Slowing Down

Within certain areas practice does not always move us in a creative direction. It ingrains whatever is repeated. Some musicians suggest that too much time can be expended in practice, resulting in a loss of freshness and vigor. Therefore, mindfulness is encouraged in pursuing quality practice. By repeating expressions we learn how to pay careful attention to their subtle qualities and how to work with areas of weakness and strength.

One of the best ways to do this is to move slowly and thoughtfully while concentrating on the action to be perfected. With movement, vocal expression, and percussion I encourage slowing the process of expression with the goal of perceiving and feeling what you are doing. We tend to rush with everything. I encourage sensing the essential rhythm, the pulse of the action, and letting new expressions and different speeds, tones, and qualities grow from this base. Try your best to let the movement happen naturally, as emphasized throughout the preceding sections, and to focus on awareness of its qualities rather than control.

In my studio sessions people given the opportunity to read poems or other pieces of creative writing almost universally read quickly, even experienced writers. I encourage reading the poem more slowly and letting yourself feel the passages and hear what you are saying. Fast reading tends to result in a blur and is motivated by an urge to finish rather than to experience the work. Comfortable breathing is important too. We do not realize how, when we act too fast, breath is constricted.

I encourage reading a piece more than once, and I tell the readers how repetition gives the audience, as well as the reader, the chance to feel and reflect upon the words and images. Again, the repeated expressions are never exactly the same. They complement one another.

The same quickness tends to happen when I suggest that studio participants repeat a single word or phrase. I have concluded that, in addition to stemming from nerves and habit, this rushed expression is due to how people are both unaware listeners truly want to hear what they say and unfamiliar with the range and nuance of vocal expression and how it affects the aesthetic impact of reading and speaking.

Nerves, however, tend to be a reliable cause of moving too fast and losing a sense of tempo, power, and groundedness in the present moment. This loss of balance happens universally in sports and all of the performance arts. Great actors have a way of slowing everything down, clearly and confidently articulating, and using the voice in sync with the subtle movements of the body to transmit expression and emotion and, most importantly, engage the audience and hold their attention.

I invite participants to repeat a word slowly, enunciating the different syllables and making variations with each iteration, exploring many different emphases and tones in uttering a single word, and permeating it all with breathing. If possible savor your practice in the most mindful way, for its own sake.

Repetition tends to be essential for all of us in relation to get-

ting beyond our habitual ways of saying words. It also helps us work through nerves and be more comfortable with the process. The results have been remarkably effective and consistent, perhaps because the structure is so elemental and tied to how speaking can be one of the most habitual, unmindful, and frequent acts we do. Working with words in this way offers a simple and compelling example of how we are apt to be totally focused on what we are thinking and the content of what we want to say and not at all sensitive to tone, cadence, breath, vibration, rhythm, feeling, and other sensate qualities of speaking and the voice.

Since the urge to control can become an embedded drive (as emphasized in the discussion about perfectionism), practice is the way of change. As important as it might be to alter attitudes and the way we think about things, significant transformations in the realm of mind and body integrations require physical practice within a structured context involving the repetition of fundamental actions.

A Reliable Base

How we practice makes all the difference. Rituals help in providing structure and continuity. They support finding ways to enjoy the process, which is a prerequisite to putting in the necessary time. Talent matters in artistic expression but commitment to sustained practice is the only way to realize potential and some degree of consistency.

I see talent as inseparable from interest, desire, and a sense of purpose. It is as if the physical skills emerge to support these drives and the discipline of practice is experienced not only as a path toward objectives but as a fulfilling and multifaceted artistic experience in itself and not just a mechanical drill session.

Practice can be likened to a reliable base acting as a source for expressive variations and explorations but also serving the purpose of continuity. We practice bouncing off from the base and returning to it, like the spring force in physics that is propelled from the source

but regains its original form. Artistic experimentation generates new forms and directions that change, expand, and improve the base and its generative power.

In all of the arts there is a metaphoric base player keeping the steady rhythm. We practice venturing into new directions with an underlying beat holding the forward momentum, preventing fragmentation, and supporting the new additions and variations. We are returning here to the essential movements and gestures introduced at the start of the book as the basis of creative expression.

In some forms of practice we might make the same element movements hundreds of times each day until they become as comfortable as breathing. It is especially important to do this with actions that feel unnatural or difficult. There may be certain aspects of artistic expression that always remain challenging, and in this case practice helps us be more at ease with the discomfort, accepting it as part of the process, getting to know it better, understand it, and develop confidence in our ability to do something creative with it.

Patterning Gestures and Expressions

I have never been one to encourage practice gimmicks and techniques in my work with others as per what has been said about simplicity, moving, repeating, and letting the process take you. Complicated and highly directive practice strategies confuse me and say more about the system being encouraged. If practice methods are formulaic they are apt to yield results where the work looks the same. In keeping with recommendations in all sections of this book, I consciously introduce the most elemental acts for practice because they are not only a universal basis of expression but they can be individuated and developed in many ways. Concentrating on a basic routine helps spark our more comprehensive expression and bring satisfaction generated by practice for its own sake.

There is a plasticity to physical practice of fundamental gestures whereby if we do something in a sustained way it becomes part of

us. Therefore practice does benefit from a sense of direction, even if we might not know what it is, like Danny in the film *The Karate Kid*, who did not at first understand how Mr. Miyagi's "wax on, wax off" chore was a foundation for the moves he had to perfect. As his proficiency and skills developed only then did he see how the car-polishing movements became part of an instinctive and more holistic response happening spontaneously and outside the sphere of his conscious mental directives.

We cultivate essential movements and develop confidence in their ability to perform without thinking. Difficult and intimidating actions become the norm through practice.

The education of young people generally overlooks the most essential practice elements of problem solving, interpreting experience, reading, expository and creative writing, and speaking to others. Practice and repetitions happen on the athletic teams, in the weight room, and even in relationships, but not enough with creative expression in classrooms.

Writing in particular requires sustained practice, physical and mental patterning, and coaching. And again in relation to good and bad practice, school experiences are mixed; they instill both positive and negative habits and attitudes.

Teaching Yourself and the Importance of Affirmations

I am one of the people who had to teach himself how to write. I received instruction in school about mechanical elements and whether or not I was using them correctly, but I did not receive what felt like empathic attention until I was in college and a professor affirmed what I wrote—one person, Ewert Cousins, an authority on world and indigenous religions, in what could have been a forgotten moment gave a spark reversing years of doubt. Perhaps this experience offers evidence of how change does happen through small acts and how creative expression for most of us requires some form of reality-based affirmation. The same has applied to my persistence

with painting. Although some are able to sustain their art in complete isolation, most of us need support from others to build the confidence required to make practice commitments and believe creative expression will act through us.

If we are overly self-conscious about whether or not we are doing something correctly, we never access our personal voice and style; writing and speaking have to be automatic and extensions of innate movement in order to realize maximum effects. The process also involves reading and experiencing inspirational artworks that we internalize. Talent in this respect exists in the world and we integrate it as part of ourselves.

For me the most formative influence is having something to say and then figuring out how to do it through practice. This urge for expression, a universally accessible basis and reframing of talent, is the ground for every art form. Overly technical instruction potentially obstructs the drive and its movement base that shapes expression.

Artistic skills are not selectively bestowed by genius as per general misconception. Even with the most gifted artists, skills are built upon continuities of practice and the callings of aspiration, as described here and in earlier sections. Johann Sebastian Bach attributed his musical achievements to “industry and practice” and felt others with natural artistic sensibility could do the same if they made the commitment. Similarly, Irving Berlin felt talent is nothing more than “a starting point.” Interest and commitment to particular forms of artistic expression, often linked to innate abilities and personal passions, are the foundations more likely to determine how far we will go.

Alone and with Others

We practice alone and with others and each offers its particular qualities for improvement. Many gestures and facets of artistic expression require a personal daily commitment, as with contemplative

disciplines, but other dimensions benefit from the support of groups and the slipstream dynamic I have described. Creative practice with others helps us move beyond resistances and personal limits. We are inspired and motivated by what others do. We also help ourselves by helping others since the giving of energy is always returned to the source. Group work operates like a retreat where the things we do are applied to personal practice.

When I was involved with helping adults living within a mental hospital draw and paint, what we did together had a profound impact on my own expression. My empathy for the bold and fluid lines they made had a corresponding effect on my artistic gestures. It is like what the neuropsychologists describe happening with mirror systems—watching something may generate the same or similar effect as doing it. But it is much more than a mechanistic process. The work of other artists has a contagious effect. It acts on us as both a spirit force and physical modeling. As I assisted hospital artists, I internalized their natural expressive styles. In addition to observing, I physically helped them make their gestures, sometimes mimicking them so they could see how dynamic they were. The time in the hospital studio stands as one of the most significant influences in learning how to paint and draw in my most natural way.

I had similar experiences working with young children, ages five to seven, who helped me discover the movement basis of expression and a natural form of abstract expressionism where figures from life and free forms made on a painting surface could merge. As the painter Lucian Freud said, as we look more at an object it becomes increasingly abstract and real. Children do this naturally by associating things from their lives with suggestive gestures, colors, and shapes and by representing figures and landscapes with bold and abstract gestures.

People generally polarize abstraction and representation and do not appreciate how they are complementary in every form of artistic expression. In my studio sessions participants who are committed to a more controlled process of representation sometimes think

encouragement to paint from movement means I am only interested in “abstract art.” I reply by showing how movement is the basis for every form of representation and that I am trying to encourage expressive release and spontaneity—which not only makes the process more accessible but in my opinion furthers the quality and imagination of figurative painting.

For those of us who want to access natural movements and gestures, improvement may involve a return to a time in our lives when this happened naturally, usually in childhood, as I discussed in the section on skill. We practice returning to the “base playing” of the early years, when sensorimotor exploration was instinctive. Childhood is not without its expressive challenges, but it is universally a period when movement was more spontaneous and less controlled by mental directives.

We restore and rediscover the free gestures that were arrested when mental controls and expectations began to dominate as we started to think too much about what we were doing. Picasso commented that all children are artists and that the challenge is how to remain an artist as we mature in age. He underscores this insight with his often-quoted statement: “It took me four years to learn how to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.”

A practice focus may be a return to fluid expression based in the body that helps the muscles remember what they could once do. Muscle memory is real, as documented by the way athletes can restore previous levels of physical ability in a relatively short time of conditioning. It is not necessarily a matter of starting from scratch. With artistic expression the body may also be able to retrieve periods when we moved more fluidly with expressive media.

Are there physical disciplines where you returned after many years away from them? Did you find that the skills you previously developed were easily accessed?

For most of us practice is necessary to restore prior skills and sensitivities to their former condition, but it tends to more of a revival process rather than starting all over again.

The shamanic process of “soul retrieval” can be applied to creative practice, as a metaphor for restoring the lost soul of artistic imagination within the mind and body. Repetition of simple and essential gestures helps us re-pattern and groove the expressions of the body and imagination and restore them to a time when they were in sync.

The Body Base

Spontaneous expression in painting and drawing is especially tied to physical practice. I emphasize the dance elements of painting and drawing in my studios and demonstrate how bodily and tactile qualities are as fundamental to the process as the visual. In this respect the term “visual art” is misleading and obscures the primacy of the body and its gestures, which work together with vision and the mind.

The physical and motor qualities of painting and drawing receive considerable attention in my efforts to help people practice, because they are often overlooked and not even addressed within more cerebral approaches to creation. We also use our bodies and their memories as ways of understanding what we see. For example, in my work with others I find that responding to and interpreting paintings through spontaneous body movement often helps us get closer to them than by using words. The movement responses are more attuned to the physical acts making the picture.

Visual art, like so many other disciplines, subliminally encourages mind over body as well as matter. It may be worse today than ever. As much as I admire the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and the history of conceptual art, and although I identify with the importance of art ideas and thinking about the nature and function of art, this does not have to set up dualistic notions about thoughts, things, and physical action. “I think therefore I create” has its place and can also be pursued as a practice discipline but not with an insistence on its hegemony. Artists, even those immersed in concepts, understand

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's assertion: "In the beginning was the Act."¹

We want to preserve the autonomy of things as distinct from the ideas of artists, and the making of physical expressions, their beauty, provocations, and mysteries. But even traditional forms of visual art tend to be estranged from the body. Considerable practice is necessary to reverse this conditioning. We discover how important it is to relax the mind and help it move out of the way, lighten its grip on the controls, and practice being a responsive rather than directive intelligence as described earlier.

A Building Process

The attention given to different facets of expression in practice can be likened to Susanne K. Langer's theory of all human creations being based on a series of acts, often at the micro levels of life, which then converge into new forms. Vincent van Gogh said, "Great things are done by a series of small things brought together," and this statement gives an insight into how all of the brushstrokes and swaths of paint in his pictures blend into a whole while also keeping their spontaneous individual forms. This style of painting did not simply appear; it emerged through continuous practice and experimentation. He described how the method developed "as practice makes perfect" with each drawing and study contributing to progress.

Basketball players take the same shot hundreds of times in practice sessions. Through repetition the moves are more likely to be automatic in competition. They practice and pattern pre-shot routines for foul shooting like players in other sports who move alone from a still position. The routine furthers focus and confidence by instilling commitment to the shot.

The repetitions of practice and the perfecting of pre-shot routines and guiding thoughts help the player concentrate on being in the present moment during competition, being focused and positive, relaxing mental controls, and allowing the body to realize what it has

prepared to do. Thinking about technical elements reliably distracts attention during the actual shot.

Structure and repetition help us become aware of subtle and fine qualities of expression. They enhance “feel” and provide the basis for improvisation and spontaneous reactions—informed, paradoxically, by discipline and confidence. Many artists are goal directed and systematic in their practice, focusing on specific aspects of expression, taking notes and charting the overall process over time. They find that tangible structures, systems, and assessment processes help move them forward. As important as these practice sessions and drills are, they have to be combined with playing the sport and being able to execute the shot under pressure.

I have mixed feelings about the trendy emphasis on positive thinking and willpower as a way to enhance performance. Confidence is unquestionably important. Growing up playing competitive golf, I had moments before a key shot when I have tried to protect myself from disappointment by thinking I will probably miss and it will be a nice surprise if it is successful. The permeating consciousness in this case is negative and not recommended to further performance. It is better to be accepting of the mistake and learn from it. A more even emotional reaction, fully committed to the process, gives some positive energy to helping the shot succeed. Although it is hard to do, a present-centered dedication, neither excessively positive nor negative, but willing to accept both, may be the way to sustain involvement and improvement in relation to the creative process.

Predict the Unpredictable

As I described in *Trust the Process*, and I mention again here because it has worked so well for me, it may help to think about the vicissitudes of competition from the perspective of Homer’s descriptions of battles in *The Iliad*, where unpredictability presides. Although each combatant may have gods with them, the gods fight among themselves. Hector throws his spear as well as he can but Zeus decides

where it goes. Even the objects have an autonomous purpose: “the keen arrow leapt eager to find his way amid the throng.” No person can control this.

Homer’s portrayal was reassuring in showing how impossible it is to direct complex and sometimes chaotic confrontations, characterizing both individual and team sports, where in addition to all of the players, gods, actions, and things involved, I cannot even control all of the elements of my own play. The mishaps and disasters are unavoidable parts of the process. I have determined that all I can do is concentrate as best I can on what I do in the present moment and take some solace in the “enduring soul that the Fates have given” us.

It has not only improved my emotional condition during competition to liken the game to *The Iliad*, but I find I perform better by letting go while staying engaged with every aspect of what is happening and not just how I feel about what I am doing. Learning how to accept losing while still caring about the outcome takes perpetual practice.

Practice: The Significance of Every Gesture

As I look at my history with the arts I see how the different forms of art making are themselves the basis of my practice. Unlike many musicians and dancers I do not do exercises or drills with the goal of perfecting skills. My writing improves by writing, drawing by drawing, dancing by dancing, and drumming by drumming. It is also intriguing how practice in one art form tends to cross over in positive ways to others. Thus the perfecting process does not always have to be direct and head-on. Indirectness may help us circumvent blocks and access new dimensions of expression.

During an extended period in my life I furthered my drawing abilities by drawing all the time. The discipline of “doing” was the key. As a teacher I admit to a perverse preference to teach myself—and maybe, more accurately said, to let my practice teach me—while welcoming comments and tips that help develop new horizons and

practice directions. This is what I try to give to others, but I also say: Please do not try to practice the way I do. Create your own methods and I will do whatever I can to help.

In my formative drawing practice I looked carefully at the drawings of artists like Picasso and Matisse as sources of inspiration and guidance. They embodied the fluidity wanted to achieve. Tight and mechanical drawings by other artists reinforced what I did *not* want to do. And even though I have always appreciated colorful and spontaneous brushstrokes where every mark on the surface becomes a distinct part of the overall composition, I keep striving for this grace like a grail. As Miles Davis said, "You have to play a long time to be able to play like yourself."²

With experience I saw how what at first might be a flawed line became the basis for something new growing from it. So there may be something to how many artists insist there are no mistakes, no accidents, but only necessary acts in the whole process.

When musicians miss a note, they can often cover the error by using it as the basis for the next one. Errors may suggest new directions in expression and discovery inaccessible when we stay within familiar territory.

Through practice I learned how every gesture can make a contribution to the whole. It was important to practice moving freely and learn to let the forms emerge without too much control. I discovered how valuable it can be to repeat the same composition in quick sketches, doing it multiple times and comparing the outcomes. Sometimes the later pieces have more life, while with others I caught it better in the first draft.

My practice with writing involves similar processes. I taught myself how to write poetry by writing poetry; to write essays by writing essays. With both art forms I carefully studied the work of others and identified qualities that appealed to me, and perhaps the influences are ingrained outside consciousness. Practice for me is an immersion in the art form, concentrating on what I do and see in the work of others.

What is your history with practice? It might be helpful to think about experiences where practice helped you perfect a particular discipline together with times when it did not. What do you think made for the difference?

Identify aspects of expression where you consider yourself to be unsuccessful. Is there a correlation with the degree to which you have practiced? Were you discouraged by others? By your own experiences with these disciplines? To what extent have your attitude and your commitment influenced outcomes? Why do you have these tendencies in some areas of life and not others?

Where do you feel most competent in your expression? Did you perfect these skills through practice and learning by doing? If other people have had formative influences as teachers, mentors, and role models, what did they do that had positive effects on you? How did it influence and inform your practice? As mentioned earlier, you might also consider negative influences from others and how those affected your practice.

Bad teaching has shown me what does not work, which can be a major step toward discovering what does. The same applies to ineffective practice. It is part of the trial-and-error process. I try to look at it all without attachment and use whatever occurs as a way to move in a creative direction. But frustration and annoyance, together with disappointment, can ignite my practice commitment and motivate me in productive ways corresponding to their emotional energy. I often need these irritants to change.

Have there been incidents where ineffective teachers have encouraged you to take things into your own hands and implement your own practice and learning methods? What motivated you to do this? Were there teachers who you feel misread your ability to perform and who in this way inspired you to demonstrate what you can do?

Practice: Everything Contributes

In describing how I have been shaped as much by bad teachers as good ones, I do not mean to encourage toleration of bad teaching, but there is an innate resilience enabling us to learn from negative experiences and put them to use as incentives to transform our lives. The same applies to experiences with leaders and other relationships. My observations of what I consider ineffective or simply wrong have a tremendous influence on my practice. The motivation and drive that creative people have to persist through challenging conditions often comes from a desire to correct an injustice or to show they can rise above adverse conditions and excel where others felt it could not happen.

As a general rule many people are discouraged from participating in creative disciplines because of their own reactions to the initial exposure. I am an advocate of the “try again” principle—and if this does not work, maybe again, and again.

We so often make judgments based on one or two tries and never give the process a chance. We may have to practice relaxing, being more sensitive to the situation, not trying so hard to control and perform.

As I look at my own history I see that there were considerable environmental influences in relation to what I did during the formative early years of my creative expression and even to this date. Much of it was positive and I was fortunately never pushed too hard as a child to do things where I had little interest. Many are expected to commit themselves to practice disciplines they neither chose nor feel an attraction toward. This can have a significantly negative effect on attitudes toward practice and perfecting skills. Optimum performance requires interest and total engagement, which have a way of carrying us through the process.

Were you expected to practice disciplines where you had little passion? How did this affect your more general attitude toward practice? Were there positive aspects? Did it help further your

commitment to areas of creative interest? As a child I took classical piano lessons *sans distinction* and was ineffective at teaching myself. I think the years of practice did, however, lay foundations for other disciplines where I had a natural affinity, ability, and most importantly an interest that helped me learn independently. The practice taught me how to practice.

Serendipity and Endless Possibilities

☞ *"I never imagined it would happen like this."*

At Least One Step Ahead of the Reflecting Mind

We are generally led to believe we should try to follow our dreams about pursuing appealing areas of creative expression, but I am intrigued with all the areas to which I was never exposed and where I did not have the experiential context on which dreams are based. There is a certain destiny and fate beyond our control in relation to these exposures, but it is something to consider seriously when thinking about what we can and cannot do, what might be the creative disciplines fitting our interests and sensibilities. It is important in this respect to try new things whenever possible and relax judgments as to whether or not you are good at them, which can be a way of avoiding further contact and taking risks. Do your best to let go of the controls, and experience whatever presents itself or interests you. If you do not go back to try it again, and again, you will never know what could have been.

Sometimes we literally fall into new areas of creative expression serendipitously. They find us. Has this happened to you? I found my work of the arts in therapy in this way. It happened by complete coincidence but yet it was also aligned with the vision I had about art serving others. I encourage young people to seize opportunities that come across their paths unexpectedly. Although there may be no apparent relationship to what has been done in the past and what might be imagined as a future objective, the process of creation can often be a few steps ahead of our thoughts and intentions. We are not

always prepared to think of lifework in this way, how it can happen on its own accord in keeping with what we are discussing about the creative process. We are overly conditioned to establish strategies and plans for everything we do, and industries of vocational counseling and organizational development have been established in this mode. Yet at the same time the process is a paradox—making our best efforts to design a future is ideally paired with the flexibility to welcome the unexpected and commit to a new direction.

Exercising too much control about the future can block access to what happens unexpectedly. In keeping with our descriptions about creativity, what matters is how we respond to life situations, and what we do with them. I confess it is challenging to give away so much control, but for me it is simply aligned with how reality works. It does not mean we stop practicing our respective disciplines, which may be helping us be prepared and ready to respond when a new opportunity appears. Everything practiced in the past has a way of contributing to the new direction.

Hurtful setbacks have had a major effect on my creative practice. In addition to testing my ability to persist, they have taught me many unforgettable lessons about what works and does not work. To the extent they do not simply occur and leave, but stay with me, they motivate me to keep trying to perfect the process.

Many of us actually need these difficulties and challenges as a way of focusing attention and reaching toward goals. When things come easily, they have a tendency to keep passing through. The difficult and problematic experiences have a way of sticking to us. The same applies to fears. Rather than avoiding them or being paralyzed by their hold on us, we engage them as the only way of transforming their power into something good.

Complex human problems are best studied and researched through the process of engaging them. As Aristotle (c. 384–322 B.C.) said, we learn “by doing.” In the realm of human experience we know credible performance and understanding are based on practice, which is unending.

I have the good fortune in my studios of seeing people do what they once thought was unthinkable. They say:

"I never thought I could do this."

"I never imagined it would happen like this."

"You cannot know it until you do it."

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SHAUN McNiff is internationally recognized as a leading figure in the field of Art Therapy, and he is the founder of the graduate program at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from which the field of Expressive Arts Therapy emerged. Now a university professor at Lesley, he is himself a visual artist as well as the author of numerous other books, including *Art As Medicine*, *Trust the Process*, and *Creating with Others*.

Cover art by Shaun McNiff

©2015 Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Printed in U.S.A.

 Printed on recycled paper



Shambhala

BOSTON & LONDON

www.shambhala.com

ISBN 978-1-61180-201-6

5 1895



9 781611 802016

US \$18.95

CAN \$22.50

