

**Art, Trauma and Spiritual Emergence: The Expression of Healing**



Ink Painting by Gao Xingjian

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*Every blade of grass has its Angel that bends over it  
and whispers, "Grow, grow."*

The Talmud

### **Art as Transpersonal Expression**

An artist is always in therapy. The dialogue between Artist and Muse and their consummate creative Form is constant, eternal and fruitful in intimacy. Sometimes; a squabbling diatribe, a gentle admonishment, a passionate litany of prayers or the simmering pillow talk of sated lovers. Always; a distinct and original finding of voice for the unspoken, and sometimes unspeakable.

Artistic fluency is a hearing, and being heard, in transformative space and time. Seen in this light, it is the enchanting mother tongue of meaning, the esoteric language of a life story, and the metaphorical expression of the Absolute.

Starhawk, author and pagan visionary, writes "In the esoteric Judaism of the Cabalah, the Deep Self is named Nashamah, from the root of Shmhm, "to hear or listen"; the Neshamah is She Who Listens, the soul who inspires or guides us."

This inner voice spawns personal and spiritual evolution hallmark to engagement in the arts. The skill of the poet is to embody rare and powerful states of mind which are at once deeply personal yet, profoundly common to all who listen. (Synder 117) The visual artist must

also enter the Mystery or fail, using symbol and pattern language to render the vivid confrontation between self and Being. (Frank 151)

This dynamic exchange of *élan vital* is transcendental; helping one shed the acquired and realize the primordial nature, for the primordial is inherent to everyone. (Cleary 96) Thus ego oft gives way to benevolence and humour in the artist's inner portrait of self. Entrusted to the sacred embrace of the creative process, the artist can transpersonalize their world view, resourcing the soulful triad of Self, Source and Subject.

The world stage is quick to rally and reward, to create new stars in the earthly skyscape of artistic merit. One only has to eavesdrop on a Sotheby's auction to realize the monetization of art through social influence and the worldly appetite for popular culture. Like the rapid pronouncement of an escalating price by the auctioneer, our collective greed for the spectacular heightens and overwhelms the basic value of creative currency. It was foretold thousands of years ago by a Tibetan Buddhist master that this on-demand cultural era would excel at the art of diversion. Undeniably, our vehicles for personal and group entertainment are becoming myriad and complex and utterly dissolute in meaning. Alarming, our native outlets are passive, not expressive.

The true merit of art must be measured not by popular acceptance but, by its power of origination and social transformation. Fredrick Frank states, "A true drawing is therefore never a show-off piece; neither is it ever intended to be a public document, and even less a salable product, a piece of merchandise. It has a little ulterior motive as breathing." (Frank 118)

For the artist, the energetic tithing to participate in the act of Creation is also the reward – awareness, growth. And within this folk taxonomy of expression there is wholesomeness, an effervescent, irresistible sensibility that liberates our interrelationship with earth, Spirit and psychic healing.

## **Trauma, Woundedness and Art as Modality**

Within the arts and humanities, and even within the commercial confines of formula pop culture, self-knowledge is culturally celebrated, heroic in and of itself. Universal folklore persists in reminding us that failure to self-actualize on the part of hero/heroine results in their peril. Made immortal through the cultural mandala of myth, the rites of passage of these archetypes are natural phenomena necessary to the maturation of the psyche (Campbell xi). Their journeys serve as guide and warning, paralleling our own intuitive evolution.

It is through the unpredictability of entering into our personal myth that we find resources to overcome physical and spiritual oppression, returning from the Underworld with new meaning, symbols and strengths. Myth is a metaphor for our innate psychic ingenuity and adaptability. Free associative exploration of these inner realms allows us to shape-shift, glean new perspectives, elicit unconscious feelings and memories, resolve conflicts and gain deeper intimacy with self and others. Thus this fertile inscape has expansive social implications.

As a form of expressive therapy, art therapy uses materials, such as paints, chalk and clay to combine traditional psychotherapeutic theories and techniques with an understanding of the psychological aspects of the creative process. Such therapy in a transpersonal setting will place less emphasis on analysis and interpretation, with the therapist managing emotional content through being in the moment, simplifying, and offering grounded, intuitive responses to a client's artwork.

Abraham Maslow defined psychotherapy as "any means, of any kind, that helps restore the person to the path of self-actualization and of development along the lines that his inner nature dictates." (Maslow 270) Those who may not aspire to become artists, who may never have attempted to create artistically, can be therapeutically supported and healed through

expressive interventions. Art as modality has vivifying possibilities within a world as self-destructive as our own.

Artistic expression kindles dignity and self-respect. "Even when unable to control the most basic conditions of our lives, we are able to experience a liberating sense of freedom and power through artistic activity." (Kalmanowitz, Lloyd 14) The art therapist performs their function like the shaman. Through meditative ritual, supportive techniques and profound witnessing, they cultivate the process of creation with a deep belief and trust that the soul has an innate ability to heal itself through immersion in the forces of creation (McNiff 1998)

In many countries the ritual of violence has replaced the rite of peace. Political oppression can forbid freedom of expression and spiritual communion with one's own God. We can cite Israel, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Ireland as just a few of these places where the holy and unholy in human conflict intermesh. When human life is no longer held as sacred, security is brokered through aggression and chronic loss and depression are sad facts of life. People, families, whole communities witness death and destruction which often transcends religion, gender, nationality, age or political affiliation.

These chronic losses are experiences as senseless, without meaning. As a result, the lives of survivors may also cease to have meaning. Through the open gate of artistic mediation, psychic preoccupations are molded into sculptures, painted on panels, scribbled in crayon across precious bits of paper or written into poetic journals. The alchemy of these seemingly mundane ingredients is an extraordinary potion for inner change.

In destabilized social climates, feelings of fear, loss, separation, instability and disruption need guided expression. Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd, professional therapists and authors of *Art Therapy and Political Violence*, worked in the field in Kosovo between 1994 and 2002. They connected with communities in this war torn section of Yugoslavia using portable

art therapy studios. Their innovative concept spawned several international art therapy projects in similar settings. By taking art therapy outside of the clinic environment, these art therapists are pioneering a new means of realizing communal healing in the midst of trauma.

Opening up the processes of assessment and access into the community setting allows much broader cultural sensitivity and flexibility within treatment protocols. Working within carefully timed and tailored-to-the-need themes such as family, journey, memory and transformation, community groups were universally amazed by their own creativity and it was clear that this visual narrative validated each individual's experience. Therapists witnessed how both the results and the process seemed to contribute to the well-being of the victims/artists.

Being on site also intensified the therapist's experience. Often they were compelled by duty to view stacks of images drawn by children of war. These were unbearable to look at, yet the intense empathetic involvement of the therapy team was such in intrinsic part of honouring group recovery that they felt the need to look at each and every one. (Kalmanowitz, Lloyd 87)

Compassion fatigue is a genuine risk to the practitioner in this field of endeavor. Carl Jung speaks of the image of the wounded healer as being core to the therapeutic connection, the necessary conduit for a loving and intimate bond between healer and patient. As the therapist transmutes their pain and trauma, and commits to wearing no mask of protection, an authentic relationship ensues. Art therapists, as mentors in wellness and artists themselves, must be well equipped with the situational street-smarts, disciplined intuition and compassionate detachment their vocation demands.

In the case study on working with Sudanese street girls, therapist Miriam Nabarro emphasizes, "when faced with the most difficult conditions of life, people naturally move beyond self-pity, and dare to take their place within their world, as artists and not as victims". Even when a situation cannot be resolved, community art therapy provides a sense of control

and corroborates the group experience. The telling out of terrors, past and future, can create new means for coping and resilience.

As timeless as human society, these modalities benefit to all ages; and stages of human experience. While psychoanalysis may attempt to cure people by detaching them from society and relationships, art therapy - like shamanism, faith healing, and prayer - brings the community into the healing process, using the interdependence of patient and others as the central mechanism in the healing process. (Veroff, Kulka, and Douvan, *Mental Health in America*)

In her book, *Sculpture: Inside and Out*, Malvina Hoffman speaks of the compelling aspects of creation. "Art is a command" she says and "A real artist cannot be encouraged or discouraged. He will overcome all obstacles to gain his objective...he will not wait for inspiration: he will search passionately and work ceaselessly, finding his inspiration reborn in every problem that he tackles." It is this artistic grit, that instinctive determination to seek and find solutions within the grace of creativity that empowers survivors of psychological trauma.

Reflecting on notable works of personal art created during the World Wars, the poignant story of Charlotte Salomon is worth noting. In her youth, the ongoing threat of Nazi occupation tore her family apart. Seeking to solace pain from suicides in her immediate family, as well as the experience of growing up Jewish in Berlin, Charlotte withdrew and started painting. She created "Life? or Theatre?". Mingling fantasy and reality in this pictorial, lyrical drama, she created over 700 paintings, expositing her inner and outer circumstances. In 1943 Salomon was deported to Auschwitz and killed. Prior to leaving, she gave her gouaches to a friend of the family, saying: 'Take good care of them. They are my whole life.'

## Art and Spiritual Emergence

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said, "It is possible to make a brushstroke that expresses one's whole life." When the ego relents, self involvement abates, yielding the fruit of awareness. Experiences of nonduality, profound peace and joy are well possible within the framework of artistic initiation. In this creative intimacy, we co-mingle our energy with that of the healing hand of Creator, the All That Is. Sustained in grace by "that which we depend on", the restorative power of art supports spiritual emergence, freewill and autonomy.

Chogyam Trungpa referred to uninhibited creative expression as Dharma Art. In his book by the same title, he clarifies, "...dharma art refers to the art that springs from a certain state of mind on the part of the artist that could be called the meditative state. It is an attitude of directness and unselfconsciousness in one's creative work." (Trungpa 1)

Discipline and form are adhered to in the Eastern tradition. There is intimacy within the relationship between student and teacher and lineage. There is a similar, extraordinarily penetrating interrelationship between artist, muse and artform. As a direct experience of intuition, the attitude of dharma art is one of "total confidence" and the message is "simply one of appreciating the nature of things as they are and expressing it without any struggle of thoughts and fears".

Rodin taught sculpture to Malvina Hoffman. In teaching her on realism, he stated "You must add yourself to what you see and infuse the object with the passionate essence of your own thought. Then the result will not be merely realistic, but it will be a merging of the spirit." (Hoffman) His observation is a valid credo for the transpersonal ecstasy of creation and spiritual ascension.

Within the Cosmos, we celebrate the integral presence of Source across cultures, using these perennial forms of immortal expression. Be it painting, dancing, singing or crafting – these acts of making energize us and vivify our experience of life, community and the Sacred. One might say that our cultures are borne on the back of the arts and also that the adventure of self-expression enhances society to the point of subtle and magnificent evolution.

Unity consciousness pervades those dwelling in artistic community. Compelled and impelled, the open souls of both artist and observer experience oneness in the mystical meeting place of art and art lover. It is the co-creative conjunctio of audience and performer. Just as a quark being observed behaves differently from one that is isolated, unaware of the observer, so our esoteric interdependence is ornately expressed, and therefore fashioned, through cultural fascination with form.

Within the confluence of such attunement, culture does not remain static. We experience the eternal continuum of conception, birth and rebirth in all things human and Divine. Just as the therapist must not wear a mask in the arena of healing, so the artist must, by their own sacred means, through the dynamic meditation of their unique process, set aside self-consciousness, striving and affectation in order to unveil, to unforget (Moore 140) and fervently express their deepest truths.

We are all artists creating our own inter-dimensional reality. In this vibrant knowing, it is our imagination which elevates us above circumstance and woundedness, prospering our potentiality and playfully handing us victory over time and space.



Ink Painting by Gao Xingjian

**Muse:** *Would that you could listen well this day. Do you not hear my call? I await you with deep pleasure. Will you join me now, Beloved? It has been too long. I need you.*

**Artist:** *Bitterness. Restlessness. I am pinioned by my despair. I would surrender to madness and melancholy yet; I am not allowed even this egress. In the darkness of this invisible moon, this hidden pain, I am too full. My aloneness knows no end.*

**Muse:** *It is your goodness that is without end. Come to me. I offer you solace, refuge, a point of beginning. We are Origin. Yield unto me your doubts. Bring unto me your dramas. Together, we will fuse these fragments of your human-Divine. Your inceptiveness is a gift. Let us labour together and birth Belonging.*

**Artist:** *In this landscape of pain, my need for comfort is yet another addiction. I am broken, so broken. How I replicate my sorrows. How I amplify my regret. Without means, I ache for change.*

**Muse:** *You are the Change you seek, dear one. You are omnipotence. You are freedom. Whiteness, wind and calm fill your arid vessel. You are truth, hunger and antiquity. Drink from this chalice of Enchantment and look at what has always been available to you. You are skillful at such risks, remember this.*

**Artist:** *This is a dream. Yet, how dare I dream another dream? I cannot conceive, let alone consecrate. May the pall of this darkness hide my shame from the world; my weakness from myself. Verily, if my heart remains broken, then surely it cannot be broken again.*

**Muse:** *Soft-skinned child of the Universe, I implore you to wake up. I beseech you to heal Thy Self. You are the Light of the World. Let us bathe in the living waters of your rebirth. Let us find the means to expose; to recover; to explore; to cherish. You must express your Divinity.*

**Artist:** *These visions are bold! Even in daylight the dream lives on. It is dazzling to feel this collaborative power within me! Blazing Heart, the warmth of this new dawn has melted away my inscape of icy sorrow. My spirit is restored. I know You as me. It was always my purpose to know You as myself.*

**Muse:** *Bright spark, you see! You are no longer eclipsed by your own Shadow. You know your inner day. How rich are these first moments of becoming all you are meant to be. Let us never forget. Let always relive and celebrate this Inspiration.*

**Artist:** *Joy of my joy, I am humbled and exalted through You. In this complete victory, I am learning to be satisfied with small changes, well wrought over time. Whisper thin, yet not finite. A brush, with a single hair, to paint the canvas of this heart full of sky. My tears, I will wet my brush with my tears. And I will express my life in a single line. I will Dignify. I will Reverence. I will Emerge.*

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