

The Artist's

“I”

By Eliezer Sobel

"Art is not to express
personality, but to
overcome it."

—T.S. Eliot

I recently had an argument with spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen. He had been presenting his views on the necessity of one's personal spiritual journey and enlightenment being "for the good of the whole." A young man in the audience raised his hand and confessed that he had finally managed to take several months off from work in order to write a novel, but now that he had heard Andrew's teachings, he realized that his writing dream was just another ego-based ambition, to be surrendered into the fire of true spiritual work. Andrew agreed.

As someone who has devoted many years to the exploration of art as a spiritual path, I could barely contain myself. Without raising my hand, I found myself blurting out, "Why can't he write a novel for the good of the whole?" Andrew dismissed this notion as preposterous: "Who ever wrote a novel for the good of the whole?" Had I been thinking quickly, I might have said Hermann Hesse or Kazantzakis, but instead I reached for the poets: I mentioned Blake and Rumi, and pointed out that even Jesus taught in fictional parables. Andrew was unmoved.

But I remain convinced: the "I" of the true artist is not a personal matter. Rather, it is only when the ordinary, individual "I" of the personality is swept aside in the creative process that the True Self can be expressed. Granted, much, or even most, of what passes for art is mere "self-expression," outpourings of a passionate ego. But the transcendent mystery of true art lies in the fact that it essentially issues forth from the Great Unknown, channeled through a mind "unclouded by longing." The work of the true artist only occurs, paradoxically, when the artist is absent. It is that glorious moment of Nijinsky in mid-leap, when "the dancer disappears, and only the dance remains."

The inner conditions which generate such a moment of non-self in the creative process are identical to those engaged by the spiritual practitioner. One's goal, in both cases, is to vanish, and allow the mystery of creation to evolve through one's own existence, unimpeded by the merely personal in the form of desire, fear, manipulation, ambition, aversion, and so forth. And so, when I approach art as

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a spiritual path, "I" am not trying to make a painting; on the contrary, I am endeavoring to allow the painting to make itself, and in a certain way, to make me in the process! That is, the work becomes evidence of who I really am, and given who I generally believe myself to be, that is always surprising news.

Such spiritual/artistic breakthrough is a matter of coming to a certain edge in oneself, the place where all one knows meets an abyss of uncertainty, across which lies all that one doesn't know. A daring leap is required. Or perhaps simply a quiet shift and relaxing back, into Original Mind, that spontaneous, bubbling creative force that animates our very Being, and which is always just a mind-step away from the rantings and ravings of chattering mind.

On the path of the artist, it is not that these chaotic voices ever finally disappear; it's more a matter of "who's holding the brush?" or "who's writing the poem?" The wrong answer to those questions, is "I am." The correct response is unnameable, but clearly demonstrable through the work itself, the utterly magical and spontaneous realm of enlightened art. And to return to Andrew Cohen's argument for a moment, such expressions can only be "for the good of the whole," for they are being created by that aspect of Self which is in fact identified with the Whole, and communicating with Itself.

What we are really talking about is an "Artist of Being." The particular forms such a person chooses for expression are irrelevant. There is a Hasidic tale of a man who travelled many miles to visit with a great Rebbe, not to ask any questions, but simply to observe how he tied his shoelaces. Similarly, Ram Dass has said that often the real work of his lectures is accomplished in the manner that he walks out onto the stage, places his notes down, and takes his seat. The communication of one's Being is ultimately all we are ever doing; an Artist of Being does it with consciousness, grace, and a will-less intention to serve.

A legitimate problem arises: how is it that even some of our greatest and most inspirational artists were clearly anything but enlightened in their daily lives? This would seem to negate the idea that the creative process itself can be engaged as a spiritual path, regardless of the possibility that art can serve to express the enlightened state. Or at best, it would seem that the true artist has the ability to temporarily transcend personality and allow True Self to speak, but the evidence seems to indicate that when the work is completed, the person quickly reverts to their ordinary identity, fundamentally unchanged by their momentary communion with the Mystery.

But the identical objection could be voiced against all spiritual work. As Andrew himself has said again and again, how many people have been meditating for ten or twenty years, have had extraordinary experiences of revelation and insight, and yet remain essentially and finally untransformed? Nevertheless, the apparent failure of a student to exhibit particular results does not in any way invalidate the spiritual teachings themselves, and neither does Van Gogh's madness undermine the power and possibility of art as a path. In either case, success and failure are fixed, result-oriented terms, and ultimately non-

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productive. An aspiring Artist of Being is engaged in an ongoing process of enlighten-ing, and each creative moment provides it's own inherent validity. For in the instant I manage to step aside from my own limited identity and enter the timeless realm where true creativity occurs, there is no "me" with a past and future, and the expressions of such a moment are permeated by a fullness of life and meaning, quite naturally serving the greater good. If in the next moment I return to my ordinary self-centered reality, it does not detract from what has been given. It only means that my "practice" is to return to the easel, or the piano, again and again, much as the meditator returns to the cushion.

Students of Zen begin their meditation from the point of view that they already are "the Buddha nature" and therefore there is nothing for which to strive. And yet they meditate to attain this insight. They strive for the realization that there is no need for striving. In the same way, when the arts are engaged as spiritual practice, there is both a longing for as well as a present expression of Wholeness. We already are the Original Being, and we are reminded of this when we are somehow able to allow authentic creativity to flow into expression before our very "I's".

Every stroke of my brush
is the overflow
of my inmost heart.

—Sengai, 17th Century Zen Master

A single brushstroke, delivered from empty mind contains the Unfathomable. That we are privy to this possibility in ourselves is itself unfathomable. It implicates us with the enormous responsibility of being who we really are, which is the only acceptable medium for an Artist of Being, whether it be a meditator or novelist, priest or poet.