



Art Making as Spiritual Practice

by Stewart Cubley



the
challenge
of

CHANGE

I once spent a week painting with Stewart Cubley at Esalen Institute. About 20 of us gathered in a room that literally blasted the eyes with color when you walked in: as the week progressed, every inch of space was covered with the wild dream images of souls set free to express the hidden, spontaneous and often shadowy interiors of the subconscious mind and Being. And Stewart would simply wander the room, gently asking provocative questions that could dramatically alter the direction of ones painting toward a more powerful and authentic expression.

Which could be very challenging. Just when I thought I had finally created a pretty picture and was about to take it down, Stewart would sidle up and ask, “Well, now just for fun, what if you let the wild man loose to paint whatever he wants?” Suddenly fear and resistance would arise, but with a little coaxing and often tears, what was a simple (and perhaps superficial) landscape would suddenly become alive, with skulls growing out of the bushes, snakes in the sky, and alien creatures swimming in the pond!

The making of “a pretty picture” would evolve into nothing less than a personal shamanic journey, unfolding in magical dreamscapes of color and form right before my eyes. No longer concerned about “how it looked” I would instead feel a deep sense of connection to the work as a genuine, archetypal expression of the mysterious, uncharted realm of my inner world.

Over the years, Stewart Cubley has inspired thousands of people to recover their creative spirit using art as a tool for self-discovery. Originally trained as a physicist, he co-founded The Painting Experience in San Francisco in 1976, and conducts workshops around the world. He is co-author with Michell Cassou of *Life, Paint and Passion: Reclaiming the Magic of Spontaneous Expression*, (Tarcher/Putnam 1996.)

—E.S.

For more information about Stewart’s work and schedule see www.processarts.com, or e-mail him: stewart@processarts.com.





*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?*

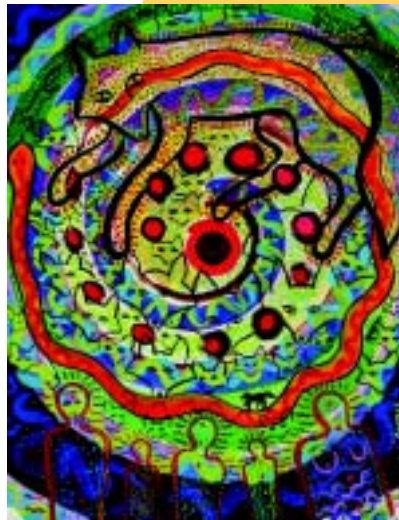
—Mary Oliver
The Summer Day

A student once asked SHUNRYU SUZUKI ROSHI, one of the most widely revered Zen masters to come to the West, “can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?” Suzuki Roshi answered, “Everything changes.”

We know this. But then again we don’t. Buddhist monks spend their lifetimes understanding this statement. To really know that “everything changes” is to live in harmony with change, which few of us do.

Most of us don’t feel truly at home with ourselves in a world of exponentially increasing change. Our net worth as measured by the stock market fluctuates wildly on a daily basis. Relationships form and fall away with greater rapidity than anytime in history. Job security is the relic of a past in which our livelihood was a stable measure of identity. Instant access to information compresses decision-making into minutes rather than days or weeks. We live pressured by time and accomplishment—postponing our lives until after the next hurdle is overcome, the next problem solved, the next career step achieved. It’s easy to experience life more as a burden than as a source of passion and revelation.

The opportunity that the creative arts process offers is to dive into the perpetual movement that swirls around us, instead of trying to control change as we are prone to do. It’s a practice, as valid as any spiritual path, that requires us to fully inhabit our experience right now just as it is, and to drop the insane rush toward our imagined goals. The transformation that occurs when we experience being at home with ourselves is nothing short of miraculous. There is an expansiveness in which the circumstances of our lives are held differently, and our world appears in its potential rather than its limitation. For a moment at least, we perceive the incredible mystery of existence, and we know what it means to accept our place in the scheme of things.



WHERE WILDNESS DWELLS

On the first morning Stewart asked, “What are the questions you are asking yourself?” Mine was, “What is wildness and where does it dwell?” Up until that point all my attempts at painting had been conceived and controlled. Very conceptual, not wild at all! I stepped up to the blank page. I had wanted to paint a fox, but my impulse was to paint a big spiral. I did one and another and then another. What a surprise as dots, squiggles and color filled the paper! The feeling of painting was like being carried along by a river—taking me places rather than me directing it. At the end of the day I closed my eyes and saw a human shape and saw the same thing upon waking the next morning. So I began by painting that form the next day, but I was feeling disappointed that my paper was completely covered and I hadn’t painted a fox. Then, when the last dot was painted on the last person—I

saw it! A huge fox leaping over everything. I risked painting this while feeling daring and electric. Suddenly, the painting didn’t feel full or finished at all! I had so much space even though the entire surface had paint on it. I had an urge to paint a fox face. So I painted one—and then a hundred. This painting was alive, its own wild entity. The less I controlled and the deeper I listened, the more it revealed itself to me. I didn’t feel separate from my experience or from my life—I felt wild and alive. Wildness

dwells in the honest meeting of the moment, in the heart of creation.

—Annie Danberg

*Within us we have a hope
which always walks in front of
our present narrow experience;
it is the undying faith in the infinite in us.*

—Tagore

For the past twenty years I've been exploring the nature of creative change using the tool of painting. When I mention painting, I often get responses like: "Oh, painting - I have no talent." "My brother could draw, but I'm not really creative." "My mother's the artist, not me. I don't have an artistic bone in my body." "I paint houses - does that count?"

If you can hold a brush you can paint. Once it's removed from the strictures of talent, skill, accomplishment, interpretation, competition and awards, painting becomes a medium for challenge and change. The power inherent in painting is that it can awaken a wild vein of passion in you that will not go back to sleep. Through listening to your intuition—the color you are attracted to, the placement of the brush on the paper, the shape, the form, the image that wants to be born—a fire is ignited that jumps off the paper and into your life. Your view of yourself and what is possible in your life transform in the reflection you observe in the mirror of your painting, as you realize that you have nothing to protect and nothing to lose.



ARTIST AS HEALER

*That hurt we embrace becomes our joy
Call it to your arms where it can change.*

—Rumi

In the recent movie, "Pollack", the artist is portrayed in the usual stereotypes of a suffering, dysfunctional and ultimately self-destructive egomaniac. What is the right relationship between our wounds and our creativity? We intuit that the process of creating art can be healing on many levels, but is a psychotic personality the prerequisite for membership? Do we have to endure extreme suffering in order to create? A realistic model for the artist as spiritual explorer needs to be found.

It's interesting that the word passion has its roots in the Latin *pati*, "to suffer." To take the leap into the truth of our own experience and to give it form requires becoming engaged in a holy struggle of sorts, where we must face the actual rather than the idealized.

One of the myths of art is that we have to feel inspired, have endless ideas or feel confident in order to create. But if we truly desire passion in our lives, we must also be willing to experience our emptiness and our lack of inspiration. There may be an encounter with the inevitable pool of sadness that has accumulated from a lifetime of experience. We



will have to revisit those places where we turned away from our potential out of fear—where we said no instead of yes. And our habitual self-judgment will take on monstrous proportions before it retreats into its cave, rendered ineffectual by our courage to look it squarely in the eye.

We'll probably also be tested by the terror of chaos and loss of control. Our tendency to defuse the potency of the mysterious and the irrational through explanation and interpretation will seriously try to deflect us. And then there is the continual desire to quit, to abandon our work midstream, to retreat to a point of safety and immunity.

Meaningful change, although our birthright, must be won. It requires that we take our challenges seriously, seeing them as important, rather than as bothersome aggravations. What creative longings remain asleep inside that we're hesitant to arouse? Where do we feel our ability to express has been veiled or armored? The places where we once turned back become doors we walk through, and with an earned authority say "Yes."

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

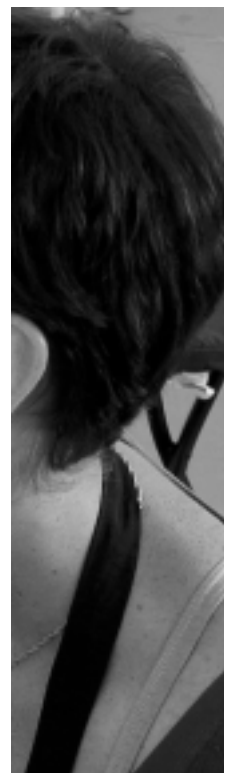
Challenge precedes creative breakthrough. We must literally be at a critical juncture where a path must be chosen—where there is absolutely no chance to stall or turn back—before we have the urgency and energy to take



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that plunge that will determine the next direction in our lives.

In retrospect, we see how decisions made at challenge points often lead to new possibilities that wouldn't have existed otherwise. Yet we instinctively view challenge with abhorrence and dread—we want anything except to enter into the state of immediacy that's asked of us. We will avoid at all costs the experience of stepping across the line without a guarantee, where we will be transformed in ways that we can't predict.



The presence of challenge is a notice from our intuitive self that an initiation is due. We're at a crossroads—we can either pass through the fire deeply altered by our experience, or we can continue to grasp the illusion that we're able to remain fixed and untouched. The fact is that when we truly meet challenge we don't remain fixed at all—the 'I' that enters the experience is not the 'I' that is spit out the other end. In embracing challenge the way opens up from within it like a flower blooming from the darkest soil.

CHALLENGE OF EMPTINESS

*Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen.*

from *Lost* by David Wagoner

The challenge of emptiness is one of the first encounters in the journey of painting. This challenge essentially is saying, "So you think you're creative do you? Well, I've got news for you—there's nothing inside of you."

You stand in front of your painting frozen in your tracks. Any movement would be a failure, so you don't even attempt it. You look around at the other painters convinced that everyone knows what they're doing except you. A deep well of hopelessness wells up from the core, reminding you of all the places where you've run from this feeling, filling it with food that doesn't sustain.

It's a paradox that in this time of such freedom of choice, we often don't know what we really care about. We are taught to do what's right rather than ask what we truly desire. We react according to the pressures we feel around us to conform and perform rather than acting from what's within us. We even lose track of the question, as though it's irrelevant. Painting requires us to listen inwardly on a moment to moment basis to what we truly feel and want—to act not from what we think we should do, but from what is more mysterious and more irrational and less dominated by the notion of achievement.

"The first painting doesn't count," I often announce when we start. This always gets a few laughs, because we recognize how important the painting has already become — even before we've begun.

The remedy for the challenge of emptiness of course is to pick up the brush and step into the creative void. The courage it takes to do this will be returned a million times over—but the task is yours to take the first step. It may feel like your entire life is at stake, but in the end it's just a painting!

WILD *heart* JOURNAL

CHALLENGE OF DISCONTENT

Often I'll approach someone who's been painting for a while and ask how they're doing. With their fist clenched and their jaw set in grim determination, they'll say sweetly, "Oh, I'm just fine." Their body is screaming out with tension and forced effort, yet I know there's nothing I can do until their discontent becomes obvious.

We're trained to be bored, desensitized to our own discomfort. Something is calling out to be recognized, but we're afraid that it means something is wrong with us, and therefore shame, guilt and denial become distracting factors. Creative disturbance is an intelligent voice—it's purpose is to point out to us where we're holding on and what we must let go of to proceed. To bury disturbance is the greatest disservice we can give ourselves, and yet it's the accepted norm of our culture. We're surrounded by ways in which to buy our way out, to consume more in order to feel less, to take the quick fix instead of experiencing the underlying reality. A reorientation to discontent must be achieved, where we view trouble as fodder for change rather than proof of failure.

"I want to quit, the painting is feeling too tight and constricted. I've gone too far," are often the comments once the tension becomes unbearable.

"Instead of quitting just now, what could you do to make it worse?" I reply.

"But I want to feel more expanded, maybe if I had a new piece of paper..."

"Could you trust the integrity of your own experience and go toward the constriction, expressing the feeling you're actually having right now instead of trying to fix it?" I ask.

If a ripening has occurred in a person through the act of standing in their creative process, an explosion will occur at this point. A flood of new energy and wild abandon will catapult them into an entirely different arena that breaks wide open the barrier created by their efforts to control. The way out lies in the very heart of the disturbance. The permission to actually go towards what you're feeling is so simple - yet so radical.

*Only those who will risk going too far
Can possibly find out how far one can go.*

—T.S. Eliot

CHALLENGE OF CRITICISM

Once we've had the courage to enter the fray and commit ourselves to form and color, it's not unusual to get a big dose of self-condemnation. This is the challenge of

criticism. The magnitude and scope of our self-judgment is immense, and it's there looking over our shoulder at every brush stroke.

Once I was working with a woman who had been struggling for days with her own judgment and doubt, disliking her painting immensely. Finally she took a break for a cup of tea, and she was sitting on the far side of the studio, looking through the central glass atrium at her painting without realizing that it was her own. Enamored, she said to me, "If only I could paint like that. That painting is so beautiful!"

The challenge of criticism on some level always involves



THE ROOTS OF MYSTERY

When I show people this painting (*left*), the most common response is something like, "That's so archetypal." They want to know what I was thinking when I put the various images in the painting. The truth is, I have no idea where these images come from, and I try to stay away from knowing too much. I don't want it to influence the journey I'm

taking with the paint and paper. For me process painting is like dreaming. We need to dream to stay psychologically healthy, but we don't need to interpret the dream to reap its benefits. In this sense, everything in the painting is meaningful, because the meaning arises out of the act of painting itself.

The most significant part of this painting happened after I thought I was done. The whole topside of the tree image was complete. "What if you added another piece of paper?" Stewart asked. "Roots!" I exclaimed. I had felt the urge to paint roots earlier, and then forgotten about it. I spent days entranced by painting those roots. I felt as if I was being rooted, in my own experience, in my own expression, in a way I had never experienced before.

What I found in process painting was a way to discover, with grace, a profound awe for the mystery of my own journey. —Sonora Beam



[THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE: CONTINUED]

a self-referencing factor. The filter of 'me' and 'mine' encumbers creative action. We are unable to detach the painting from our own success/failure quotient. We measure each proposed step by the yardstick of our own image. Will I like what I've done? Did I make the right action? Will I be recognized for my contribution? Will I be humiliated? Will I fail?

But I have a better question: What if the painting were not about you? What if there were no measurement, no reward, no comparison, no failure or success, no striving or accomplishment that defined you? Then the painting process could become a medium where a profound connection is made. The "me" and the effort that maintains it are absent when there is absolute absorption in the process of creating.

CHALLENGE OF CHAOS

In the challenge of chaos all bets are off. We've crossed the line, taken the jump, and everything feels up for grabs. It's both frightening and exhilarating. We fluctuate between bouts of self-doubt over what we've left behind and excitement for what lies ahead. The painting may seem wildly out of control, nothing fits together and nothing makes sense in the jumble of interweaving colors, images and forms. This is a "divine chaos" in which we can feel deluged with new possibilities and find it hard to contain the energy. On the other extreme, we may feel overwhelmed and exhausted, needing to withdraw and allow the gestation that's occurring to have our full attention.

We tend to panic in the face of chaos and feel that our state of "not-knowing" is a limitation rather than an asset. On the contrary, chaos is the absence of organizing concepts, and therefore an indication that we've loosened

our control on the situation enough to let the old structures be shaken up. Chaos is the experience of being awash in the tide of new possibilities and directions that have not yet coalesced. It is an infusion of energy that's generated from the essential risk of leaving behind our familiar points of reference, especially our criticism. No real change is possible without experiencing the divine state of "not-knowing" that is the challenge of chaos.

As with the other moments of challenge, the intelligent response to chaos is to dive more fully into it. Chaos is an opportunity to radically trust that there's a support for us in the world much larger than we imagine. Generally when someone tells me that their painting has become too chaotic it's a sign that they secretly want to put even more into it!

CHALLENGE OF MEANING

I have a thousand brilliant lies

For the question:

How are you?

I have a thousand brilliant lies

For the question:

What is God?

If you think that the Truth can be known

From words,

If you think that the Sun and the Ocean

Can pass through that tiny opening

Called the mouth,

O someone should start laughing!

Someone should start wildly Laughing —

Now!¹

There are precious moments that arise in the painting process where we're asked to let go of our concepts of the very meaning of our work itself. No matter how open we deem ourselves to be, our mind begins to wrap around our experience and we subtly form a frame within which we view the painting. Unconsciously we try to explain away the mystery by classifying the elements and images into safe categories where we can deal with them under the veil of familiarity. No matter that the creative vitality of the painting narrows the more we "know" about it. No matter that our conclusions often cause us upset and conflict—prone as we are to negative interpretations. And no matter that we finally end up bored and blocked because we've explained the painting to death.

What makes the painting precious is that it's undefined. There's a feeling of great intimacy in the forms, shapes and images that we so caringly create. They strike at the heart, yet their meaning remains obscure. They disturb us and mesmerize us at the same time. We are fascinated by what comes out of our brush, yet any attempt to interpret seems self-constructed and contrived. The power of the painting cannot be captured by knowing. It's magic lies in the undefined. It's meaning lies beyond any label or concept. Its life is in the unknown, palpable and close, yet ever unnamable.

CHALLENGE OF COMPLETION

*I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.
One world is aware, and by far the largest to me,
and that is myself,
And whether I come to my own today
or in ten thousand or ten million years,
I can cheerfully take it now,
or with equal cheerfulness, I can wait*

—Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass.

One of the greatest mysteries of the process of change has to do with completion. In painting this can be a moment of astonishing surprise and release. You were convinced you were done, you'd been just adding the finishing touches, ready to take the painting off the wall, when out of left field comes a wild color or an image that demands to be painted. You're sure it won't fit, it will certainly 'ruin' your hard work, but—there it is. And of course, once done, it's obvious it was meant to be there from the beginning.

To be open to the moment of completion means to be willing to drop your investment in the outcome and ask yourself in full honesty—is this journey over? Each

painting has a definite destination that is not one of your own making. If you don't follow the journey through to the end, you'll feel incomplete—no matter how much paint is on the paper. Completion is reaching the ground where nothing else is required. It's an inner state of freedom and rest in which there is no running away and no holding on. Being complete with a painting is being complete with yourself, and that's both an ending and a beginning.

CHALLENGE OF PRESENCE

Each stage in the painting process questions our willingness to respect our experience by staying fully present in the moment just as it is. It continually asks us:

“Is this present moment enough, or are you trying to create another, more beautiful, more acceptable moment outside of it?”

“Are you listening to what wants to be born, or are you judging your experience and running away from it?”

“Do you realize that where you are is a moving flow more complete and more intelligent than you ever imagined, and needs nothing more than to be joined?”

“Do you see the insanity of the incessant drive to accomplish in order to be?”

Once it's recognized that real change paradoxically happens by being fully where we are, then the transformational element of the creative process is awakened. Challenge becomes our delight and our play, risking becomes our excitement, that leap into the unknown our desire. Our very weapons in this holy battle are our wildness, our love of truth, our outrageous irrationality, our humor and our freedom—and they want to be exercised. In the end, what's important is not whether we consider ourselves artists, or whether we have any particular product with which to “prove” ourselves. The real question is whether we have had the courage and the audacity to claim our presence by bringing our own voice into the world. The contemporary poet David Whyte sees this as our sacred responsibility:

Our voice is unique and one of a kind, and it's been given to us in order to speak out. And if our voice isn't brought forth, then the world isn't complete. Certainly our personal world isn't complete. But the world at large also isn't complete until we speak out our true voice. And the world is waiting.

¹ from *I Heard God Laughing: Renderings of Hafiz*
by Daniel Ladinsky