



## *Stage One: Discovery and Encounter*

### At the Water's Edge

**H**ow do we begin? The writer faces the blank page, the painter the white canvas, the photographer an undifferentiated world, the scientist an obtuse and unproven premise, as all creative individuals face a bewildering array of choices and a multitude of possibilities. These challenges are legendary, and even cliché—but the struggle is very real.

Three central questions emerge almost immediately as we strive toward creative expression. How do we choose the medium suitable for our ideas, our temperament, our capacities? How do we discover what we really have to say; that which arises from our true nature? And, what is the structure and form that give shape to our concerns and discoveries—what is our style?

These questions present us with an elusive and rapidly moving target. They are not static and fixed; they do not assume the existence of a right answer, and they generally evade all of our attempts to find a formula or a crystallized solution. The key is in how we face these questions, and our ability to form an evolving relationship with them. For many of us, this is an uncomfortable and often fearful proposition. To live in the light of inquiry, not seeking immediate answers and simply allowing the process to unfold is antithetical to our typical Western attitudes. Under the constructs of science and technology, and deeply ingrained within our educational system, we are taught to take a stand, believe in our own opinions, and have a definitive answer or point of view about everything

under the sun. The ability to embrace mystery, to stand bravely in front of the unknown, and to encourage the process of discovery is the central need here, a key requirement of creativity and an element we observe in the lives of all highly creative individuals.

If we remain mindful of the dictum "the journey is the destination," then we embark on this path primarily to learn and explore life's many truths, not merely to accomplish something and produce objects. As the poet Rilke advises: "Try to love the questions themselves." The answers are never as important as the questions. What are the questions that grow out of the very core of our lives?

At the beginning, we need a direction, something that gets us out of the door: an interest, a project, an aim, a burning necessity. Our natural enthusiasms and enduring inclinations can lead the way, if we let them. When we look within and seek a relationship with ourselves based on truth, instead of the multitude of siren calls that our desires and ego promote, we find core features that are immediately evident, that have been there all along, that await our attention and represent our chief strengths. What it is that we love to do, that brings both satisfaction and challenge? Where do we find our greatest enthusiasms and our deepest fears? Often, what we want the most is what we fear the most. The opposition between our greatest strengths, often perceived by both ourselves and others, and our deepest apprehensions is a vibrating region of authenticity. For every action, there is a reaction. Vital energy is found in the axis, the diameter between our bliss and our fears. When we discover where this region occurs, we are well on the way toward identifying what we may need to do, where we may gracefully unfold, and where we may make a difference.

## CHOOSING A MEDIUM

In finding a suitable medium—which may change and evolve throughout our lives—the most significant sense of discrimination that we may cultivate is what feels good to our bodies. The shaman don Juan continually reminds his pupil Carlos Castaneda to use his body, to know when it is happy and inwardly at ease. The human body is a remarkably sensitive instrument. All tools serve to extend the capabilities of our organic nature. Some artists love the feel of clay and earth as it wends through their hands, others resonate with the timbre of the human voice or are enthralled with the

power of words flowing from their minds and hearts across the page or screen. Our bodies long for certain styles or forms of movement, to be given a chance to help express our essential characteristics and inherent talents. When we discover these inner rhythms, our entire organism comes into sharp alignment; a focused channel thus opens for our creative energies.

This idea is marvelously illustrated in the film *Pollock*, which portrays the life of pioneer abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock. Portraying Pollock at the moment when he discovers the method of painting that later becomes his hallmark style and greatest contribution, actor Ed Harris's entire body is seized with energy, aligning with an internal force arising from deep within, as he drips and spatters and sprays the paint from a standing position across the canvas on the floor. Our body's extension, our medium, often lies dormant within us as an integral part of our organic nature, merely waiting to be activated. Deep satisfaction, an inner sense of aligning with something right and true, and genuine happiness follow the recontacting of the body's intelligence. The integration of mind and body brings vitality, energy, and a certain joie de vivre, and is one of the first steps on the creative journey.

The mind-body connection and its lucent expression through a medium grow through the climate created by the excitement of working, the ongoing search for the marriage of form and meaning, and the exhilaration of free play and experimentation. The greatest artists I know are the most humble; they do not rely on their own successes or egoistically revel in their gifts, but feel the need to explore anew every time they work. When the impetus is exhausted in one mode of expression, they often shift gears, changing media or voices, depending upon their passions and inner dictates.

As we slowly enter the creative stream, we may know, on the one hand, what we want to express. On the other hand, we stand reverently in the face of infinity, not knowing, questioning what may grow spontaneously out of the moment. The medium we choose is nothing more than an extension, a synthesis, of our greatest enthusiasms and resonating questions. In our quiet moments, we might ask ourselves to what are our bodies and minds magnetically attracted—fully; unreservedly; and sometimes secretly because it is too special to be intruded upon, too close to be impeded. To approach that simple question is enough.

## SEEDS OF MEANING: CULTIVATING WHAT WE HAVE TO SAY

When we identify an initial interest, an enthusiasm for a medium, we naturally seek a way to engage the early steps of the journey, to study the language and learn the necessary tools and techniques. Most individuals choose some type of structured approach, such as taking a class, researching a craft or an activity, or enlisting the help of a friend or colleague who knows something of where one wishes to go. Excitement, confusion, and an overwhelming sense of not-knowing are often typical at this stage. Out of this chaos, an implicit order and shape will eventually emerge, as long as we persevere. The *I Ching* reminds us: "Times of growth are beset with difficulties. They resemble a first birth. But these difficulties arise from the very profusion of all that is struggling to attain form." The point is simply to begin with some degree of intent and focus.

All people are different. While some may need to slow down at this point and temper their enthusiasms with greater care, attention, and diligence, others may need to rev their engines and intentionally engage in free play in order to let go of the inner restrictions that bind their passions and joys. In either case, momentum and clarity build as we enter the stream. Even if false paths—usually fostered by the ego or an impatient desire for immediate success—present themselves at first, we should not be discouraged. We persist with courage and determination, and cultivate our innate sense that we have something to say, that we have our own clear voice and our own real direction.

We are often confident and floundering at the same time. It is important to remember that we all have our place of genius, where we have something to offer that can grow only from ourselves. We strive to discover the seeds of our true individuality. It is often subtle, a whisper from within that needs time, nurturing, and a degree of challenge for its inward potential to emerge. Faint as it may be, we listen for its distinctive, clear rhythm amidst the confusing cacophony of our illusions, stray desires, and wishful thinking. We search for what is genuinely our own and we work to uncover our latent talents and skills.

In these early stages of working on a project, we often must try many approaches, allowing them to grow and expand, without editing and without judgment. We simply see what arises in our search for meaning and direction by working, experimenting, and trying out new ideas or forms of expression. We try them on for size. This is the warm-

ing-up phase. In athletics, or dance and music, or any of the physical activities we engage in, we wouldn't consider running the race, or performing the concert, without this introductory phase. Now is the time to sketch and explore—and forms of sketching take place in all creative activities. Athletics teach us that in running, or swimming, or using our body in some way, there is resistance at the beginning. Our muscles are stiff, the movements are mechanical. But if we keep at it, something else kicks in... endorphins are released, an actual chemical change occurs that brings fluidity and clarity, and a heightened sense of being.

It is the same with creative work. We look for a place to immerse ourselves, a clear path from the shore into the flow of creativity. In the beginning—of a single project, a new direction, even of our life's work—we need a flexible working premise, a framework for our efforts. We experiment and explore until something does take root, and our ideas or evolving concerns cohere to a central rallying point. Our discriminative capacities recognize by "taste," by an unmistakable feeling, when our aim is true and we come close to the target. Rilke writes that "a work of art is good if it has arisen out of necessity." What is it that we need to do? We must look and listen inwardly for the answer. What are our deepest responses to the world around us and our most heartfelt questions? What is it that we care about, passionately and deeply?

For our work and our lives to be authentic, infused with our very being, it is essential that we address these questions. Although we must experiment and explore freely to find our own language and form of expression, we must also resist the approach by formula, the easily found and latched-onto solution, and those stray impulses that do not arise from our deepest nature. Otherwise, we can all too easily find ourselves displaced from our real mission, longing for something more real and true to who we are.

#### AN APPROACH TO STYLE: SEEKING AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION

What prevents us from discovering our true nature and authentic form of expression? Fears. Insecurities. Doubts. We all have them, often in abundance. Don Juan teaches Carlos Castaneda that challenging and overcoming fear is the first step toward becoming a "man of knowledge." In this spirit, we endeavor to live and work fully, in spite of our fears and self-limiting inner dialogues. Sometimes, it helps to search out of the corner

of our eyes and look from an oblique angle. We can be sly and become the trickster. We often have great resistance to taking off our masks. What we fear the most is the very thing that we are called to confront and work with. Where we find fear, where we feel the most inadequate, is where the energy resides, where great potential hides, waiting to emerge into the full light of day. Once we begin, and move vigorously in the direction of our aims, a joyful moment comes when the fear and resistance move into the background and become part of our experience, but not the dominant feature. Our bliss then often emerges from behind this dark, smoky wall of fear.

There are excellent books on "creative recovery," on overcoming these obstacles, such as those by Julia Cameron, Bonnie Friedman, Ralph Keyes, and coauthors David Bayles and Ted Orland. The quick summation of their conclusions: There is no substitute for the simple act of entering the stream. Just begin—even if you are hesitant. It has been said that inspiration doesn't just happen, it needs a branch to light on. How do creative individuals get to work, slice through the sticky, milky mass of resistance, doubt, and fear, and find their unique voices?

Having a regular practice is a must; journal writing, sketching freely, taking photographs casually and spontaneously, or tilling our garden without an eye to the result are the means of proceeding at this stage. The energy is in the trying. Although this sounds difficult, the one sure touchstone that can tell us we are on the right path is what I call the "bliss factor." When we are having fun, when we wouldn't want to be doing anything else, when our actions are governed by an inherent joyousness in the process, we find a sense of "rightness." It is one of the many paradoxes of the creative process; that it is both immensely challenging and demanding, and at the same time, the source of real joy and true satisfaction. When we come into accord with our deeper nature, we are participating in the larger movements of energy in our universe. Some call it "nature," some call it "god," and some simply acknowledge the profound sources of energy and inspiration that exist within and without.



These initial challenges of the creative process: of finding our medium, of discovering meaningful content, and developing our style of expression are, in reality, branching streams of the same river, and come together to form an integrated whole—a single, monumental and fundamental question in three parts: Who am I really? What is my own? And what is my real direction?

In *Toward Awakening*, Jean Vaysse recounts the ideas of Russian sage and teacher, G. I. Gurdjieff, who offers a highly illuminating view of the human being by making a distinction "between what belongs to us, comes from ourselves, is a part of our own nature, and what is foreign to us, comes from the environment and represents only a loan." Gurdjieff refers to this fundamental division in the human being as essence and personality.

Essence is defined as the truth of what we are, what is our own: our latent and innate tendencies, our inherent gifts, our sympathies and antipathies. Essence is what we are born with. There can be no question that small children have clearly defined traits not attributable to their environment, that appear almost at birth, and represent what they have an inclination toward and a "taste" for. This is seen quite clearly in the case of someone like Mozart, who was composing sophisticated music by the age of four.

I can speak here of my own experience and background. At age one, my favorite toy was my father's broken camera, which became my constant childhood companion. And at age eleven, I began to take pictures regularly and passionately, an activity that has persisted nearly my entire life. I don't feel that I ever really chose photography; rather, it chose me. I was simply inclined toward it from the very beginning.

Personality, on the other hand, is what is not our own: it comes from the outside, from our upbringing, from our education. Personality consists of our acquired characteristics. Culture is created by personality, and our personas are formed by the culture of which we are a part. Personality is necessary to navigate though the vicissitudes of life. It is our mask and the necessary intermediary between ourselves and the world we live in. Much contemporary theory in the arts has contributed to an understanding of how our attitudes, beliefs, and modes of expression are formed by the unconscious absorption of the cultural conditions that have influenced us literally from birth. We cannot deny its powerful and often subversive influence as we look outward and reflect on the attitudes, values, and priorities that govern Western civilization.

According to Gurdjieff, and now grudgingly acknowledged by the social sciences, human beings are a complex mixture of both essence and personality. Witness the "nature versus nurture" question debated within such disciplines as contemporary psychology, artistic theory, and gender and ethnicity studies. For most civilized people, the process of socialization focuses chiefly on the development of our personalities and our worldly skills. In the arts, however, we can seize the opportunity to discover and express something of our more essential nature. We cannot define it, but we can recognize essential expression by a subtle, yet undeniable "taste" that we sense in works of art in which something rings true—that is, they resonate with a sense of authenticity and a signatory imprint of the artist.

The process of working in an art form is a distillation, a clearing of the water, an alchemical refinement that reflects our deepest core. When Alfred Stieglitz initially encountered the drawings of Georgia O’Keeffe, he exclaimed: "Finally, a woman on paper!" And despite the stylistic evolution of O’Keeffe’s work over sixty years, many of her enthusiasms persisted. Throughout her lifetime, she returned again and again to an underlying matrix of forms that gave a rich, essential consistency to her language of feeling.

“I have things in my head that are not like what anyone has taught me—shapes and ideas so near to me—so natural to my way of being and thinking that it hasn’t occurred to me to put them down. I decided to start anew—to strip away what I had been taught—to accept as true my own thinking. This was one of the best times of my life. There was no one around to look at what I was doing—no one interested—no one to say anything about it one way or another. I was alone and singularly free, working into my own, unknown—no one to satisfy but myself.”

—Georgia O’Keeffe

Regardless of the content or medium of our creative efforts, don’t we wish to be authentic—to strive to find what is our own—and to infuse our most deeply felt con-



cerns, our very being, into the work itself? Many times, students have asked me: How do I find my unique vision or voice? What is my style? I do not know how to answer that question, except to say: become what you are. Our style is within us, waiting to be uncovered. Our vision or voice, or even our choice of a suitable medium, comes from the inside. It is organic. It grows out of our unique individuality and life experiences. It is our own. It comes from the whole of our character, our body, our feelings, our minds, our genetic code, and every detail of our existence. We have earned it by virtue of our identity and being.

Many times I have stood at the same scene with other photographers and wondered how each individual may see the same subject. And I am always pleasantly surprised at the uniqueness of each person's images and reminded of how differently we each see, how different elements in the scene are emphasized by some and downplayed by others. It is a valuable lesson every time. In finding our own way, we strive toward a balance between a sense of confidence and an attitude of questioning. It is not as if we know who we are—that will take a lifetime—but we can find the courage to perpetually discover ourselves and our real concerns. We embrace both qualities: being and becoming.

Here too, the creative process contains deep paradox. Not only is it necessary to integrate being and becoming—seeing both who we are and what we can be—but we are asked to hold contradictory impulses in ourselves simultaneously. Creative individuals seek to find a balance between playfulness and discipline, initiative and receptivity, confidence and questioning, deep concentration and spontaneity. As navigators of our inner lives, in discovering our own "America," we proceed by setting sail with a direction, yet leaving the destination unknown. In evolving toward genuine creativity, the artist must cultivate the ability to embrace contradiction and not-knowing, to stay with the resulting discomfort, and even learn to appreciate and enjoy the shifting tides of the process. Can we be large enough to contain both our complexity and our incompleteness?

Most creative people feel some measure of a gap, sometimes even a chasm between what we sense to be our potential and the actuality of our work. If we didn't feel this lack, we wouldn't have the drive, the necessary force, to continue. The impulse toward evolution is arguably a central feature of human nature. We often feel that some-

thing is missing, that we are incomplete—and we see this reflected in our creative efforts. The most important feature of this stage in our development is humility and acceptance; to fully embrace and even savor this state of incompleteness. To feel it and to know it intimately, and to allow it to act on us is the key requirement—rather than running away or hiding behind any of the things we use to fill the gap: false pride, self-delusion, alcohol, sex, or whatever our proclivity. To recognize this lack and to aspire toward a deeper participation in life; this impulse leads us toward the creative. The drive toward self-perfection, toward personal and social evolution, is reflected in our role as artists. Many of us aspire to the clean feeling of satisfaction that we experience when we produce something of quality, something that accurately and clearly reflects our enthusiasms, our values, our vision—something that has resulted from giving the work our best attention and deepest care.

I will always remember the impression made on me by the creative evolution of my friend and first photography teacher, Nicholas Hlobeczy. After many years of struggling with two mediums, photography and poetry, something opened up in him, a new vista of expression in which he at once became more himself and allowed something to simply pass through him, purely and elegantly. He writes of this condition:

“At fifty-six I have reached an age when something at last begins to be possible. I do not see how it might have come earlier. There has never been satisfaction pure and clean for what I’ve done till now, but as these poems pass through my hands I feel a gratefulness to be a willing host of transmission. That once, bright ambition of mine, pales in the light of experiencing this.”

In *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, James Hillman proposes what he calls the "acorn theory": that every individual has within themselves the seed of a unique calling, a daimon which accompanies the soul and is the "carrier of your destiny." He believes that every person is born with this inner image of completeness, much like an acorn, which later manifests as a mature oak by following a vague, yet persistent, inner call. But our own inward calling only stays vague and unformed until we work to uncover the meaning found in these subtle intimations from within that mark our destiny and

reveal our true selves.

We have within us an inner measure, capable of separating truth from falsehood. How can the acorn know that it will become an oak tree? It cannot; yet deeply imprinted in its genetic code is that potentiality—and no other. We must remain true to ourselves; we have no other choice. Yet we need to listen and to bring a rigorous sense of discrimination to our inner impulses. The voice of our true nature is unmistakable, though not immediately apparent. We must learn to distinguish this essential call from the many voices of our personality that clamor for attention. We cannot predict its sound, but we can know something of its quality. It has a different resonance, a different ring than all the other inward songs. Our true nature lies within us, waiting to be discovered, or more to the point, uncovered from the many years of conditioning that served to create a tough and inert outer crust over it.

Well prior to the advent of his mature work, Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo: "How then can I be useful, how can I be of service? Something is alive in me: what can it be?" The path of greatness often lies in the early recognition of an unformed call and a life given to deep questioning. The call is there—for all of us. And so is the capacity for inwardly searching and enlarging one's experience through the quest for Self.

I don't know of more useful advice for recognizing the true form of our creative impulses than is found in Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912, in which he describes the principle of "inner necessity." What is it within us that continually demands expression? In striving to identify what it is we must do or try, which our life wouldn't be the same without, which grows out of a sense of inner necessity, we come home to ourselves.

Everything in us has a place, and we discover through our work, our explorations, and by listening for the still, small voice within, what it is we are called to be and to accomplish. We endeavor to hear the rumblings from deep within and follow the path, wherever it may lead. For this effort, we need courage and discrimination.



Why do we feel such a need, such an imperative to be creative? And why does our creative work generally require a physical involvement, of forming something out of raw materials? Isn't this a strange phenomenon? It should be enough to strive toward understanding and insight, to bring a quality of attention and care to our lives, to genuinely communicate and to learn to be with others, and to transform ourselves into something more whole and complete. As G.I. Gurdjieff once said, "the greatest art is that of making a complete human being out of oneself." While his powerful words offer a lifelong aim, most of us will also benefit from objectifying our insights and observations.

I would imagine that for a truly evolved human being, life itself is the great mirror and the great teacher. But then there are the rest of us; those of us still struggling to awaken from our sleep. To actually produce some thing that reflects our values, our viewpoint, our vision, and our very being is to make manifest who we are. The objects we create are our own reflections and an ongoing measure of our attention, of our growth, of where we are and what we care about.

If we sincerely begin work in any creative medium, we must confront and accept that we really don't know what it is we have to say, that we really don't know ourselves, that we are a wide mixture of contradictory impulses and mixed motivations, and our inner world is a constantly shifting amalgamation of states. The search for ourselves and what is our own must be the foremost aim of our initial involvement in any art medium.

Art is both a way of growth and a means of making manifest that very growth—to see it laid out in front of us in the form of images, or music, or carefully crafted words. It is an undeniable blessing and a real help to actually have a medium—represented by physical objects of our making—that can function, in photographer Minor White's words, as *mirrors* (of ourselves and our relationship to our world), *messages* (from the beyond; from the unconscious; from our collective conscience), and *manifestations* (of another world, another order of things; of our intuition and our higher impulses).

## Entering the Stream

If our enthusiasms have informed us enough to get us started, and we have discovered an initial sense of direction, what then? Rollo May writes in *The Courage to Create*:

“The first thing we notice in a creative act is that it is an encounter. Artists encounter the landscape they propose to paint—they look at it, observe it from this angle and that. They are, as we say, absorbed in it. Or, in the case of abstract painters, the encounter may be with an idea, an inner vision... Or scientists confront their experiment, their laboratory task, in a similar situation of encounter... the essential point is . . . the degree of absorption... there must be a specific quality of engagement.”

Now we are faced with the need to have an intention. This "degree of absorption" that May articulates is found primarily in the quality of attention that we bring to an activity. "Haste makes waste," "take care," "pay attention"; there are many admonitions in our vocabulary that pay tribute to this basic need. If the discovery phase of the creative process is essentially receptive and open to questioning, in this phase we become active, we must actually do something. The fundamental effort that allows us to fully engage in an activity is deceptively simple and extremely difficult—particularly since it is no longer held in high regard in the modern world. The relentless torrent of stimulation promulgated by media, technology, and entertainment, further compromised by our educational system, leaves us distracted and drained, in a state of fractured attention. At this stage, it is necessary to cultivate and maintain a primary feature of the creative act: sustained concentration.

In the insightful and elegant guide provided by Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, a teacher of acting and dramatic arts (an elder statesman of the theatre) meets an inexperienced and shy eighteen-year-old student, known affectionately as "the creature," who implores the professor to teach the principles of acting. He begins with the first lesson:

“Remember this word Concentrate. It is important in every art and especially in the art of the theatre. Concentration is the quality which permits us to direct all our spiritual and intellectual forces toward one definite object and to continue as long as it pleases us to do so—sometimes for a time much longer than our physical strength can endure... This strength, this certainty of power over yourself, is the fundamental quality of every creative artist. You must find it within yourself, and develop it to the last degree.”

In spite of our conditioning to the contrary, we must try to give our full attention to the process. We strive to be present. We want to stay in touch with the relationship between our inner energies, those arising from our bodies, mind, and feelings, and the work itself. I have repeatedly seen a dynamic emerge in all forms of creative work. As we begin, it feels flat and lifeless. Something is missing. As we continue and try to bring a quality of attention to both ourselves and the activity at hand, something begins to open, a fluidity emerges, and a deepening connection to the process begins to take place. We enter the flow.

Like the moment in athletics when endorphins are released, entering the stream of creativity vitalizes us with a sharp inner clarity and buoyant feeling for ourselves and our activity. We feel a spacious inner joy, a vibrant inner stream, which as it begins to flow, attracts more of the same much like a river slowly widens its course. Yet, to avoid dispersal of these energies, we must contain them, nurture them, and focus them. Again, like athletics, the great pay-off of entering "the zone," the flow, can only take place through energies that are concentrated in a desired direction.

Unfortunately, in our comfortable lives, we are given few opportunities to practice this quality and to flex our concentrative abilities. So much of contemporary life is antithetical and even opposed to this effort. We cannot engage in the clean, simple tasks of maintaining our life free from stimulation, from being plugged in, from seeking a multitude of distractions. The average American household has the television on for upwards of six hours a day. We have lost something very special, integral to our lives as creative individuals, if we cannot concentrate fully and intensely. The extreme reduction of our collective attention spans will, I believe, have serious consequences to our society over time if we do not move toward changing these conditions now.

Concentration is an intentional act—we must try, we must direct our attention; and it does not always come naturally. It begins in the mind as purpose, toward forming a closer relationship with our bodies, the organic sensation of the present, and as mindfulness, clearly observing our inner and outer conditions. Concentration is a unifying force that gathers our energies toward something, and invites a fuller participation of our feelings. We can take as an example of this state those moments when we are fully absorbed and more deeply connected; at such times we are present in equal measure to

ourselves and what is in front of us. When working, the possibility exists to be here—in this moment. We savor this attentiveness. Our sense of time changes. It slows down as we enter the present, and reverts to a more organic pace and rhythm.

Artists and creative individuals frequently report the experience of losing themselves in the work at hand, being fully in tune with the process, with a heightened sense of being and focus, often emerging hours later as if from a trance. And we do speak of this quality of concentration as being "lost" in an activity; an artist is lost in his or her canvas, a writer lost in the unfolding words, often forgetting to eat or to attend to the daily tasks of life, like an absent-minded professor. However, I propose that using the word "lost" is misleading; rather, this single-pointed concentration is like an hourglass. As we focus deeply on a single task, something opens, deepens, and widens. We are fully absorbed and present to the activity and to the moment, to the exclusion of other elements in our lives. But we are also equally attentive to ourselves: our responses, our impulses, and our creative interaction with the medium.

In an insightful introduction to *The Decisive Moment*, Henri Cartier-Bresson questions how we might employ our attention to see with a camera. His question extends well beyond photography. Isn't it true that all of our responses to the world take place within us, in our bodies, minds, and feelings? Yet, when we look, we do not necessarily see; we generally focus all of our attention on the outer event, the scene in front of us. Seeing is not out there, it is in here, in the very core of our being. Cartier-Bresson has aptly described photographic seeing as having one eye turned outward and one eye turned inward; when the two images converge, a photograph results:

“I believe that, through the act of living, the discovery of oneself is made concurrently with the discovery of the world around us which can mold us, but which can also be affected by us. A balance must be established between these two worlds—the one inside us and the one outside us. As the result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to form a single one. And it is this world that we must communicate.”

There is a directly proportional relationship between our ability to see and know

ourselves, and our ability to see and know the world. The greater the attention we can bring to ourselves, to seeing and knowing, the greater the attention we can bring to outer life: to see the world and others.

Many spiritual disciplines address the need to have a dual attention, where half our attention is directed within ourselves, beginning with our bodies. Here we come aware of our sensations, emotional reactions, and constantly turning thoughts. As we stay within, we begin to find a connection to our deeper mind, the seat of intuition and insight. The other half of our attention is projected outward, toward the world, toward the other. In opening our eyes to the other, we become aware of its reality, its unique characteristics. We potentially see both what is in front of us, and what is within us—and the relatedness of the two, the nature of the interaction.

All creative endeavors call us to be aware of the dual nature of perception. Through our attention, we develop a full and enveloping relationship with the matter at hand and with ourselves. Our evolving point of view (the discrimination of what is our own, of what is our work to do) and the objects that we create depend upon the breadth and depth of our attention. And this awareness expands to include ourselves, our bodies and minds, our reactions and responses. This seminal discipline is known by many names: mindfulness, recollection, and self-remembering among them. The key lies in forming an intentional relationship with our own energies and the object or task in front of us; to vibrantly enter the dance. Sometimes the effort required is simply sensing our bodies, becoming aware of our feet on the ground, or the sounds reaching our ears, or the weight of how we carry ourselves through space. Or we strive to be aligned with the movements between ourselves and the camera, the paintbrush, or the pen; of coming in tune physically with the tool or the object of our attention.

Yet another paradox presents itself here. Although we try to bring an energized attention to our efforts, we must also remain loose and relaxed, rooted within with our bodies and open to the flow of interactive energies. We endeavor to maintain a balance between our sharp, focused intensity and an open, sensitized awareness.

The fundamental task of creativity, therefore, is to be fully present—in this moment, and with all that it contains. In this way, work in any creative medium represents a practice, a discipline, for how we may live our lives, be with others, and bring a



new quality of our innate being into our work and all of our interactions. As Picasso said, I don't develop; I am.

Attention is a gift that we are capable of giving at any moment. We know or strongly suspect that people (including ourselves), animals, plants, and all living things thrive when given our real attention. To bestow this care in our activities, whether it is cooking, artmaking, or being with another person, is the only sure means toward the richness of a true quality of relationship and engagement. It is a means of focusing and concentrating our energy on the task at hand; it is a means of including ourselves in the passage of energies; it is a means of caring about what we leave in our wake; and it is a means—perhaps the principal means—toward the growth and evolution of ourselves as well as our creative efforts.

Dorothea Dooling reminds us in *A Way of Working*: “So if we dare to use the word "creative," we must see that its possibility lies in that mysterious human property of attentiveness: not a mere mental attention, but an attention which relates and mobilizes the sensitive intelligence of the body, the affective intelligence of the feeling, and the ordering intelligence of the mind toward a more total openness to what is... and the real life, the living energy, which that contains.”

We begin.

## Creative Practice

### QUESTIONS:

Look back to your childhood for keys of discovery and insight into who you are. What were you drawn to? What were you passionately absorbed with? Remember. Is this the same today? If not, why? What have you lost or given up in order to make a living or conform to the world around you? Explore the difference between the ideals of your youth and the reality of today.



Ask questions. Try to answer them only from your essence, in the still hours of the morning or evening after sitting quietly. Let the everyday rubbish of the mind dis-

solve; let the dust settle before answering:

What are your deepest interests?

What activities grow out of inner necessity?

What would your life be incomplete without?

What appears for you at every turn in the road, perhaps as a vague, unformed feeling?

Where does magic appear? Synchronicity? What is your "path with heart"?

What are you consistently called toward—from within and without?

What are you most afraid of? Where do you feel most at home?

What provides the greatest pleasure and the greatest challenge?

What would the world lack without your presence in it?

#### TOOLS AND EXERCISES:

Find time for a daily or weekly practice. Time for yourself is essential; make a contract with yourself. Just what you do is not so important; the very act of trying can give rise to revealing insights. Set aside your time, maybe just an hour a day, or an afternoon a week. Enough time should be given to allow the process to unfold, to encourage the process of discovery, and to help your activities gather momentum and eventually, in their own organic time, to bloom.

My experience is that as long as you do something consistently, even for a short time each day, then you will spontaneously begin to spend more time doing it, because you will naturally become more attentive to your inner calling. Be kind with yourself, but be disciplined. If you have a hard time getting started, or your practice slips, learn how to gently encourage your efforts. Maybe enlist the help and support of a friend, maybe replace one extraneous activity for a more affirming one (for example, turn the television off for an hour, or give up a magazine or two), or promise to treat yourself after a successful foray into your creative self.

Experiment, play, do what you enjoy. Sketch freely, write from the "wild mind" as Natalie Goldberg calls it, or take pictures of whatever captures your deepest interest and attention. Do not edit. Do not judge. Do not think about where it is going. Simply allow your impressions to emerge and take shape. Observe and take note of what arises.

Patterns will arise. Little gems will appear within the activity. Pieces of your deeper nature will appear within the random sketches, words, or pictures. Over time, you

may feel called from a place within. Develop a capacity for listening to this inner whisper. A true foundation for creative work may be found and eventually developed, which will grow naturally out of your body, your feelings, your thoughts and impressions.



Experiment with different media or forms of expression. Each medium has its own gifts to offer and its own particular challenges. Try them on as you would clothing in a store, just to see what fits your temperament and capacities. If you lack facilities and skills with an art form that interests you, visit the studio of a friend or of a local artist or craftsman. Try your hand. See what fits; observe where you are drawn in and what inspires your excitement. Art schools, universities, and adult education centers offer introductory classes in a wide range of media and pursuits. Take advantage of them.



Creativity is an encounter. Staying with the discomfort of not-knowing, and continuing in spite of one's fear and lack of knowledge or skill, is one of the keys toward innovative expression. Experiment with this. Cook a four-course meal without knowing what you will cook—an unplanned feast. Use only materials at hand, foods and utensils that are stocked in your kitchen. Let the process grow and expand. Stretch your boundaries. Be open to each moment. What is needed now? What else can be brought to this meal? Do not stop adding to the meal until it feels complete, and nothing more suggests itself.

The first time around, do this alone—you are the principal cook. Then, try again; only this time as a collaborative venture. Share the process with another cook. Collaborate, experiment, and share ideas. Allow the meal to grow from your combined ideas and talents. See where the ideas of another may help, and what is added to the process. Notice your own skills and strengths, as well as your weaknesses. Observe the difference between a collaborative effort and your own individual expression. Remember, some arts are solitary activities; but many others (like theater, dance, and filmmaking) are often team endeavors. With which are you most comfortable?



Be bold and confident. Do something you have always wanted to do, but have put off for one reason or another: not having the time, feeling fear or a sense of inadequacy, or simply procrastination. Perhaps you will take a class, begin a long-incubated creative project, start a garden, or buy a particular piece of equipment (like a camera) or painting supplies. Make no excuses this time. Do it. Try it. Exercise your intention. Let one simple step build on another, and on another ... and so on.



Sit with a pen in hand, or at your keyboard. Ask this question of yourself: What do I wish to accomplish, for the next year, for the next decade, or even for the rest of my life? What remains unfulfilled? What creative activities do I wish to engage in? Just write your answers. Allow any and all thoughts to find their way onto the page. Again, do not edit or analyze—yet. Do not even consider what is realistic or feasible. Simply write.

Review your list. What rises to the top? Can you proceed, one step following another, to realize your aims? Listen to your dreams. Visualize; use your creative imagination. Where do you wish to go? Where do you want to be? If you can wish it, or dream it, then it is already taking shape within you.