

Chapter III

In the Arts: Creativity and Collaboration

That gift was for *us*,” my companion and I remarked on the summit of Mauna Kea, the highest mountain in Hawai‘i—as the clouds cleared and the light danced between starkly beautiful volcanic forms. It was nothing less than a form of magic, the mysterious voices of an ancient land. On a trip to the Big Island of Hawai‘i several years ago with a close friend and fellow photographer, I discovered the power of collaboration and collective intelligence, and inwardly knew that someday it would be my task to distill our experiences into written form. Frequent synchronous events informed our joint venture of image-making—a serendipity that we intuitively knew was invoked through partnership. We discovered a unity of purpose and a shared search for the infinite through our cameras that took us both by surprise. The depth of our connection echoed the Sufi quote by Hazrat Inayat Khan: “I remember my *murshid* said, ‘There are many forms of friendship. But the friendship formed in the search of truth, in the love of God, is greater than any other in the world.’”

Everywhere we traveled, from the summit of the mountain, to the volcanoes of Madame Pele and the Hamakua Coast near Hilo, we were gifted with the unexpected

experience of being at the right place at the right time, with an uncanny sense of precision that allowed grace to unfold in a grand display for our cameras. Neither of us could take responsibility for this occurrence, yet we both could—together. This went on for over a week, where we were touched by magic, ignited by the daily visitations of power and beauty. Our hearts and minds opened to a flowering of creative realization. It generated a new portfolio of photographs for me, images reflectant of a new maturity and strength I had not yet before achieved with such consistency. At the airport on the way home, my friend said to me in a prescient tone: “Underlying everything you do from now on will be the concept of collective intelligence.”

In reviewing our experiences, we came to the inescapable conclusion that we could not attract such energy alone. The blending of our energies had resulted in a surprising completeness and spiritual force. Both of us were familiar with collaboration, having worked on several projects together in the past. And each of us has our clearly defined strengths that serve to complement the other. She is highly perceptive, open and receptive, knowing how to listen to the subtle energies within and without. Over the years, I have developed a remarkable and strange sense of timing, knowing how to “fit” into the flow of time to find the decisive moment of an activity—especially with a camera. Both of us worked to maintain an inner attention, to strive to be present to the moment in front of us, whether photographing or interacting with each other. Together we discovered a collective power, a magnetic resonance that served to attract revelatory moments.

Collaboration and teamwork are common in the group arts: theater, film, dance, and music. In the visual arts and literature, solitariness is often considered a requisite condition. Bob Dylan writes, for example, about his experience of working on his recent autobiography,

Chronicles: "Lest we forget, while you're writing, you're not living. What do they call it? Splendid isolation? I don't find it that splendid."

Dylan calls into question a fundamental attitude that underlies the visual arts, the literary arts, music composition, and much scientific or academic research. That the artist or scientist, often on the fringes of society, silently retreats to their solitary cave in order to receive their inspirational gifts or suffer the agony of labor and the subsequent birth of their creations. Sometimes both the exquisite joy and inevitable suffering of the creative process are equally true. Those of us that work in the arts will recognize the nearly universal truth in this equation. And without a doubt, some stages* in the development of the creative process require meditation, gestation, and highly individual work. Photographer Edward Weston writes in his *Daybooks*: "Peace and an hour's time, given these one creates. Emotional heights are easily obtained; peace and time are not." Years later, he writes: "Peace again! — The exquisite hour before dawn, here at my old desk — seldom have I realized so keenly, appreciated so fully, these still, dark hours."

Musicians need time and space within their busy lives to practice their scales, painter and sculptors need to develop their craft, their skillful means, and writers seek to engage their minds and hearts, planting themselves on a chair for hours on end. Within our frenetically active lives, finding solitude and clearing the time required to connect with the deeper recesses of one's own heart and mind are hard-won accomplishments for most of us.

But I am becoming ever more convinced that we need to ask and examine the question well: have we carried this attitude to its extreme position? I think, clearly, we have.

* For a thorough discussion of the development of the creative process, please see my previous book: *The Widening Stream: the Seven Stages of Creativity*. Beyond Words. 2002

The entire Cartesian era frames a worldview centered around individual experience and the potency of the individual mind. Our direct experience of the world was split into a duality-based axis, making an absolute distinction between the subject and object, or the brain and the external world. In other words, the subjective realities of the individual are clearly separated from matter and indeed, all other life forms. Cartesian thought, which forms the basis of western education, limits consciousness to individual human beings. For centuries now, and especially within the modernity of western culture, individual artists have retreated to their garrets, on some romantically isolated quest, often savoring their angst and alienation from society-at-large, and struggling with their creations. At times, many artists have felt the need to break decisively from their community—or their own past—severing their bonds and moving to an exotic or isolated location. Look at Gauguin in the South Seas, Thoreau at Walden Pond, Van Gogh in Arles, and Georgia O’Keeffe in New Mexico. And we cannot deny the sheer power and force of their creations. These artists lives are, in fact, the stuff of legend.

Conditions in recent decades have become both much worse and much better. “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Society itself—read, all of us—has spawned an extremely dangerous and unhealthy phenomenon: the era of the superstar artist or musician, superhero sports figure, and the Hollywood-inflated, larger-than-life lead actors and actresses. Massive egos, disproportionably-large annual incomes, and excessive fan adoration prevails. In some quarters of the arts, entertainment, and sports communities such fundamental values as teamwork, compassion, social responsibility, interpersonal ethics, and spiritual balance have been tossed sharply out of the window. Why love God, if I AM God.

Why work together if I AM the MAN. Why give to others if others should give to ME. Why worship the spiritual resonances underlying life; shouldn't everyone worship ME.

We have both allowed and encouraged these conditions of mass worship. No? . . . come on. Don't we go to the movies, support the sports teams, buy the cheesy merchandising, purchase the CD's, and voraciously read about the exploits and scandals of our heroes? I could write an entire book on the dangerous outgrowths of these attitudes and their highly destructive effects on society. Much of our society still worships at the altar of the ego. Enough said.

On the better; many bright lights are on the horizon of our collective consciousness. Many artists are refusing their "splendid isolation" and seeking to transcend their perceived conditions of marginalization from the rest of society. Art critic Suzi Gablik writes in *The Reenchantment of Art*: "Today, remaining aloof has dangerous implications. We are all together in the same global amphitheater. There are no longer any sidelines. The psychic and social structures in which we live have become too profoundly antiecological, unhealthy and destructive. There is a need for new forms evoking the feeling of belonging to a larger whole rather than expressing the isolated, alienated self. The old assumptions about a nuclear ego separating itself off from everything else are increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of our changed circumstances. Exalted individualism, for example, is hardly a creative response to the needs of the planet at this time, which demand complex and sensitive forms of interaction and linking." A very healthy number of artists today are actively seeking ways to encourage collaboration, mutualism, shared discoveries and social responsibility. Collective mind, and its stronger magnetic pull for attracting inspiration and rich transpersonal experience, is an idea which is firmly gaining ground in today's art and

cultural communities. Self-expression, as we have defined it for thousands of years, contains a sizeable dose of narcissism and a large measure of ego.

Gablik completes her thought: “Individualism, freedom and self expression are the great modernist buzz words. To highly individualistic artists, trained to think in this way, the idea that creative activity might be directed toward answering a collective cultural need rather than a personal desire for self-expression is likely to appear irrelevant, or even presumptuous. But I believe there is a new, evolving relationship between personal creativity and social responsibility, as old modernist patterns of alienation and confrontation give way to new ones of mutualism and the development of an active and practical dialogue with the environment.”

In this chapter, I intend to explore both an embodied point of view—and its antithesis. I still do believe strongly in the modernist standpoint of the potency of the individual mind, and its vast creative potential for both self-expression and towards “answering a collective, cultural need.” And I will argue strongly for its opposite—collaboration, dialogue, mutualism, and the development and discovery of the group mind inherent in the creative process. That, in the creative arts, as in most other domains, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

As always in this book, I am not perceiving the individual and the group as opposing or mutually exclusive entities. Indeed, I feel they inform and deepen each other. Merely I wish to shift the balance toward a more comprehensive outlook that embrace equally the contributions of the individual within the broader context of the group. The individual may be viewed as an essential component: a hand, an arm, or leg of the collective body of the group.

I will leave the final thoughts of this section to Suzi Gablik: “I hope the practice of dialogue may become more widely recognized for the special sort of harmonics that it offers: a latticework of thoughts and points of view that interweave and complement each other. Allowing the truth of the subject to emerge not from any one point of view but from many makes any entrenched position open to question: it will always be destabilized by another perspective. For this reason the very process of dialogue can, of itself, transform the worldview of self-assured individualism and radical self-sufficiency, since when individual consciousness breaks out of the limits of its own preconceptions and expectations, it travels out, more freely, in many different directions.”

We know that creativity is a profound force: for individual actualization, for offering a mirror to society, for transmission of culture, for giving a foretaste of the future, for deeply enriching the lives of people, and for healing our world . We have witnessed in past centuries the reverberating impact of individual creativity, as its waves surge across geography and temporality. Now, at the birth of the new millennium, can we attend fully and decisively to this fundamental paradigm shift, a turning of the axis from individual contribution toward the creativity of the collective?



From what source does creativity spring? Psychological researchers and creative individuals have offered numerous theories, speculating on the origins and nature of artistic inspiration. Very often, it is viewed as a single condition rather than something that arises from a combination of, or synergy between, differing sources. Some researchers believe that

it arises from within, from the unconscious or deeper mind, others feel that it descends from an outer or higher source, while others believe that it grows from the energies that pass between us as human beings. A confusion of tongues prevail. We do not yet have a precise set of concepts that explain the creative impulse or that serve to encourage its appearance. I will attempt here to merely point the way and describe several of the numerous theories that abound about artistic inspiration. As the finger points towards the moon, it should never be confused with the moon itself. The beauty and mystery of creativity transcends our attempts toward rational explanation. Yet it is my strong conviction that all of the following factors contain some measure of truth; and that the force of creativity engendered through collaboration and collective insight contains a vastly greater possibility than what is found through mere “splendid isolation.”

In this section we must continually keep in mind that everyone is, or can be, an artist in their respective sphere of activity. Any single occupation is not intrinsically more creative than another. To become an artist of life is an aim worthy of our humanity.

Descent of Grace

In this vast universe, many layers of reality and energy interweave, creating a complex symphony of impulses and manifestations, forces and laws. The great chain of being can be viewed as an ascending or nested scale of energies with substances ranging from the densest to the finest, from the phenomenal to the Absolute. As William Segal observes in *Opening*, “The world is filled with invisible realities. But, if people, do not see or hear, then these realities do not exist.” How then can we see or hear realities that may exist on a level beyond

our current state of being, yet that reflect our spark of divinity and are representations of our deeper potential as human beings?

Throughout human endeavor, the creative impulse has been employed as a means of contacting higher and deeper energies. Whether we call them great nature or god, transpersonal forces surround us and seek their expression through our works. When we are open and receptive, filled with an inward attention, these mysterious forces can speak through us for the benefit of ourselves, each other and life itself. Segal writes of this: “Attention is an animating principle in each living organism which serves to connect and relate energies with systems of higher and lower orders ... a moving entity with possibilities for diminishing or expanding intensity.” Attention is one of the fundamental requirements of the creative act. Through attention, we seek to unify our disparate energies, strive to connect to deeper sources, and refine our outer expression through word and deeds.

Creative individuals often midwife forces and energies through their work that stem from a higher level. This represents one form of what we call artistic inspiration. James Joyce refers to the expression of the higher in a work of art as *radiance*. Beauty is often seen as a manifestation of a divine order. In the huge, dark chambers of his loft studio, Mark Rothko introduced his paintings, glowing with a subtle inner intensity, to an art critic with the words, “These are not paintings” Roger Lipsey has described the tacit meaning of his works as “the silence and solitude of consciousness.” Ken Wilber believes that art has the capacity to arrest us into the present moment: “it is in that simple awestruck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, that spirit shines into this world just a little more brightly than it did the moment before.” And many artists ascribe their inspiration to a source that arises from outside themselves. Many artists claim that they tap into subtle

energies found in the atmosphere itself, deeply informing their works, lending weight and meaning to their efforts, and expressing the archetypal voice of the gods on earth.

It seems a truism that transpersonal energies can flow through artists and their works. The muses speak through human beings. And everyone is potentially an artist in their own respective sphere; we cannot forget this. Our attention functions as a magnet, drawing to us the energies and forces that permeate our works. And here, once again: attention begets attention. Perhaps this entire book could be reduced to this resonating phrase. Through the splendid isolation of artists, their attention can engender in themselves and subsequently others, their audience, deeper forms of consciousness and a larger intelligence. But what is the reality here? Most of the time, our energies are fragmented and our attention disbursed, distracted. Alone, most of us find it difficult to realize a state of inner wholeness through which grace may descend. Alone, our efforts often lack sufficient force and direction. And alone, most of us are governed by the “tyranny of the urgent” in our lives, or dominated by the endless flow of associations and reactions that proceed within us. Moments of grace, though, do occur, where through a combination of serendipity and intentional effort, our internal constitution falls into the right relationship for an open receptivity and inner silence to deeply permeate our being. I, for one, am not usually in full possession of a reliable key, an exact treasure map to the secrets of the infinite.

However, one guiding light has become increasingly clear to me over the years. Group work, the art of association, holds considerably more power for inner work and attracting the higher energies that surround us. Christ said: “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For

when two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” *Mathew 18: 19-20.*

It also seems a truism that we serve to complete and complement each other, filling in the spaces of our own weaknesses and inadequacies. Working with others affords us a greater opportunity for gaining perspective, battling the ego, and allowing for an expanded consciousness. Energy derives from interaction, and the group holds more power than any single individual. In other words, the work of a group contains a considerably stronger magnetic pull for realizing moments of radical realization, discovering stunning insights, and invoking Spirit’s blessing in the form of descending grace.

I am not saying here that this form of creativity should necessarily proceed through group *effort*, per se, although that is one clear possibility. There are many ways we can craft our interaction with a collective intelligence and encourage the power of a group mind. Several come to mind here and you may undoubtedly think of many other ways to fashion a work with others that serves to enlarge understanding and attract deeper voices.

- Simple sharing; working in the same studio or local; the exchange of insights, materials, and energy.
 - Direct collaboration on joint projects; shared efforts and discoveries that build from one individual to another, and back again.
 - Honest response to each others efforts. Feedback and genuine dialogue.
 - Moral support, an understanding ear. Championing each others aims and aspirations.
 - Direct support; giving of one’s strengths, skills and resources when they are called upon.
- Filling in each other’s gaps. Asking for assistance when needed. What is necessary for the

“common good?”

- Deeply considering the audience of one's works. Interacting with an audience through one's works.
- Reminding each other when attention is lacking or efforts move into tangential concerns. Helping to maintain priorities, to stay focused and clear.
- The energetics of attention; working on oneself to become more present and centered is infectious. The quality of my inner work can deeply assist others, and serve forces larger than myself. The silence of inward attention can resonate in the atmosphere, overspread a room, or, indeed, maybe someday a planet. Here once again: attention begets attention.

One Mind, Collective Voices

Can the collective voice of a culture speak through the artist? Can an individual artist become a living cell in an organic whole? Can teamwork and cooperation take the place of individual dominance in a group endeavor? These questions are frequently asked—and earnestly approached—in the group arts of theater, dance, film, music, and new genre performance art. We have much to learn from the experience of both artists and directors of these collective creative endeavors.

Ladies and Gentlemen . . . The Beatles. The Grateful Dead. Martha Graham's or Paul Taylor's dance companies. The Manhattan Project under the direction of Andre Gregory. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The Second City Improvisational group. John Coltrane and free jazz. Examples abound for exploring the complex set of relationships between performers, their individual characteristics and group dynamics, their audience, and the living forces set in motion by certain groups for the culture itself.

In improvisational music, such as that pioneered by John Coltrane and others, one musician will begin to play a melody. The others will listen intently, feeling the music internally and allowing the rhythms to penetrate their bodies. Then, another musician will join in, and another, each hearing and feeling the sounds of the developing music. Slowly, they become attuned to the growing energy of the collaboration, and eventually, the music takes over, the musicians merging with it and each other. It's an amazing experience when it happens, for both the musician and the audience. Mickey Hart, drummer of the Grateful Dead, observes in *Drumming on the Edge of Magic* how the music possesses performers and audience alike. "What possesses our audience, I can never know, but I feel its effects. From the stage you can feel it happening—group mind, entrainment, find your own word for it—when they look up you can feel it; you can feel the energy roaring off of them." And indeed, the Grateful Dead became one of the most popular bands in counter-culture America, taking improvisation and the mutual chemistry between musicians and audience to new heights, seeking the shamanistic merging of individuals with a collective energy that created fewer boundaries and tribal togetherness.

In the article from *What is Enlightenment* magazine, titled *A Kind of Innocence We'd Never Seen Before*, Ross Robertson muses on the phenomenon of the Dead: "And it was while jamming this way—having no idea where they were going but intending to go there together—that they stumbled upon the fantastic sense of a creative intelligence far greater than themselves as individuals, an intelligence that enveloped the group." Jerry Garcia, lead guitarist for the Dead, recalled that their form of improvisation "had the effect of surprising me with a flow of its own.... you suddenly find yourself a new space with new form and new order which are more like the way it is. More like the flow. And we just found ourselves in

that space.” In a 1972 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Garcia attempts to describe this flow: “[It] is to become an understanding molecule in evolution, a conscious tool for the universe.” And, Garcia admitted that the audience played a seminal role. He’d “never experienced the click of the music without an audience. ... We exist by their grace.”

Rupert Sheldrake, author of *The Sense of Being Stared At, and Other Aspects of the Extended Mind*, claims that professional musicians use a combination of nonverbal communication and telepathic links between members of the group, including the players and the conductor. He cites Catherine Baker, a professional bassoonist as saying: “It does seem that when a chamber group orchestra gets this psychic ‘link’ in a performance, the audience genuinely knows that it has been part of something special (as do the players.”

Once again, we find attunement a necessary condition of group work. The artists attune to each other and the music, (or dance, or theater) and allow the energies, the melodies to flow them. The necessary prerequisite: one must learn to stand out of the way, yet use one’s individual strengths and capabilities for the benefit of the whole and the developing piece.

How can we encourage collaboration and participate fully in the art of the group—or in life itself? How does a musician know *the* moment to join an improvisational melody? How does an actor become free and responsive within an unfolding scene? Through teaching improvisation workshops, actor and founding member of Second City Alan Arkin believes that improvisation can bridge the chasm between theater and life. When teaching an improvisational workshop, he describes his “butt theory.” When your butt lifts off the chair and moves forward, it means that something special is beginning—and signifies the right moment to join the developing action. When, on the other hand, your butt settles in the

chair, and you lean back; that constitutes a signal that the chemistry is lacking and it is not yet time. Something in us knows the right moment. Within ourselves, when the right words or the right action is found, we naturally move forward to join the interaction. We need to be sensitive and spontaneous. Let the energy move when it is ready. “What need has nature of thought and care?” reads the *I Ching*. The superior man “attains an unsullied innocence that leads him to do right with instinctive sureness and without any thought of reward and personal advantage.” Effortless effort. Actionless action. Egoless receptivity. Know the craft well enough to forget it. Let the music play through you. Let the Jedi *force* move through you.

Gurdjieff has said that nature casts her artists before her. Artists have finely-tuned antennas, capable of perceiving subtle intimations of what needs to be born into their world. Conscious forces may speak through the medium of the artist. This may happen with or without the artist’s awareness and consent. That is to say, artists may receive and transmit ideas or forces necessary for the evolution of culture without their active intent and conscious participation. While this is pure conjecture, since none of us can see into the soul of another, we can find many examples of artists who show evidence of striving to be conscious instruments of the subtle energies that pass through them. But there is equal evidence in the arts to suggest that often artists are mere mechanical pawns of the forces that are acting and interacting through them.

Let us take the Beatles for example. Massive social and cultural changes were taking place in the early 1960’s. It was a bewildering era, bereft of a clear vision for the future yet pregnant with potential. Young people, who were at the fulcrum of a changing world, needed a symbol for this profound social revolution and a common cultural language to unite them.

Then came along the British musical invasion, with four young boys from Liverpool at the vanguard. They captured our hearts and minds. It became clear that, despite their boyish innocence, they carried a potent message through their unbounded energy that served to unite youth, bringing a sense of hope, idealism, and a humanistic perspective into the common culture. Larger voices may have spoken through them. These four musicians, almost in spite of themselves, became for a blessed period of time, one body, one instrument, and one force that served to reflect and assist the forward movement of the culture-at-large. Given their youth, it is highly unlikely that they themselves were conscious of what was happening. They, like the rest of us, were deeply flawed and had only an inkling of what was taking place; it was an unconscious, collective phenomenon for the most part.

While the music of the Beatles may have deeply energized a culture, did the passage of forces through them also nourish and inform their own being? For many artists, including the Beatles, the passage of finer energies through their system often comes at a great cost. Drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide, failed relationships and broken homes, as well as all kinds of neuroses and pathologies characterize the lives of many artists. Look at Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Diane Arbus, Sylvia Plath, Rilke and Vincent Van Gogh. Their personal lives were a mess. The individual Beatles were almost destroyed by their own success.

And, here we come face to face with one of the perilous dangers of seeking collective intelligence that will be explored in later chapters: the fine line, the razor's edge between group intelligence and the mass mind, the herd mentality. Religious fervor, as found in Fundamentalist sects of both Christianity and Islam faiths, or tribal fever, as found in some contemporary rock concerts, can result in group trance, where we lose ourselves to a mass

energy that is the flip side of collective intelligence. Mass mind is the negative pole of the axis on which collective energy moves.

Did you know that the first Beatle's concert on Ed Sullivan attracted an audience of *73 million* individuals? People lost themselves and screamed themselves hoarse at Beatle's concerts, decisively drowning the music. And that, even in 2000, the recording of the Beatles CD of "1", their popular singles went to the top of the charts. This is more than a feel-good phenomenon. The music deeply captured our commonality, and contained a message of hope, togetherness, and peace. "Come together" and "All you need is love" become the mantras for a generation, or maybe an era.

With the sheer power of the collective energies that get loosed into a culture through music, or the electrical force that can flow through artists and their creations, one fundamental challenge emerges; that of not losing oneself completely to the music or the force of the inspiration. Look at what happened to Van Gogh. Collective energy or transpersonal force can only be harmonically focused through those with healthy psychological/social/sexual integration. We must remember ourselves, and include ourselves in the passage of energies, keeping a focused attention and inner presence in the midst of experiencing powerful forces. We must seek a balanced development, an inner foundation that both maintains a referential self-awareness combined with an open receptivity to the outer vibrations of the music or the inspiration. In Jerry Garcia's words, we strive to be "an understanding molecule in evolution , a conscious tool for the universe" rather than mere unconscious pawns at the hands of cosmic or collective forces. Indeed, a laudable, necessary aim is implied here, one that will be explored in later chapters. Here again, we return to the indispensable condition of balance between individual awareness, or *agency* according to the

Greeks, and *harmony*, according to the Chinese, or an open cooperation and identification with others as well as the whole itself.

Influence and Response

I have long been impressed with an art book that reveals the powerful influence that artists who work closely together can have on one another's work. Turning the pages of the book, *Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, Two Lives: A Conversation in Paintings and Photographs*, we discover startling shared resonances in their respective works that evolve over the entire 30 years of their close artistic and personal association. Certain gestalts of lines, shapes, and forms, shared qualities of feeling, similar worldviews, and a long, rich visual dialogue were evident. Clearly, their work conversed with each other, discovered mutual reverberations of form and feeling, and influenced their respective development as artists and human beings. Roger Shattuck writes in one of the book's essays, "We marvel at O'Keeffe's relation to Stieglitz, almost thirty years her senior, because she resisted submission. In maintaining her personal and artistic independence, she also gave impetus to his work. Their principal collaboration took place during the extended *Portrait* series. For over a decade, she increasingly posed herself for Stieglitz's voracious camera-eye.

I am prepared to concede that there is little new under the sun. Yet I recognize something unique in the ... working union of O'Keeffe and Stieglitz. ... O'Keefe and Stieglitz acknowledged each other artistically in powerful ways.... during the crucial years of their association [they] sometimes worked as close together as mountain climbers or trapeze artist."

As artists working side-by-side, they alternately led and followed each other, in an extended artistic dance. Their mutual reverence for modernist form remained consistent, and they often took on the task of re-interpreting the same subject matter that the other had chosen. Clouds, the myriad manifestations of nature, the human body; all became reduced to elemental forms, tones, and colors in this dialogue of paintings and photographs. Even with Stieglitz's extended photographic portrait of O'Keeffe, we see in O'Keeffe's paintings of the same time, a response to the forms presented by her own body. Like "mountain climbers or trapeze artists," their sustained aerial ballet gave rise to a legendary collaboration that arguably influenced the course of Twentieth-century visual art.

In the guild or even in the tavern, artistic collaboration often takes place through both the sharing of ideas and dialogue with actual works. The Abstract Expressionist painters, for the most part, lived and worked in New York City in a loosely formed collective. Many of them knew each other, met frequently in each other's studios, and hung out in the city's many bars, sharing their many insights and discoveries. Irving Sandler writes in *The Triumph of American Painting*, "they followed each other's work closely, establishing what Robert Motherwell called an underlying network of awareness, in which everyone knew who was painting what and why. ... Mutual awareness, mutual interests, and attitudes gave rise tacitly to a common culture." Through this keen awareness of what each other was up to, and a joint effort to achieve a clean break with what they commonly felt were the stifling artistic traditions of the past—as well as a sense of healthy competition—they collectively evolved one of the most important achievements of western art. From their individual efforts and shared responses, and fueled by their resistance to cultural baggage that no longer served

the art of our times, they developed the potent language of abstraction and its rich open dialogue of pure form and color.

In the guilds of the past, and particularly in the oriental craft traditions, we see two kinds of collective intelligence at work. First, most of the relevant information and aesthetic attitudes of the tradition were held reverently as an important body of knowledge that was transmitted orally from teacher to student, and between its members. The work of an individual had a three-fold purpose: to honor and celebrate the tradition itself, to further its development through one's unique understanding, and to give glory to god. The second form of collectivity took place through conscious anonymity; most craftspeople did not sign or embellish the work with their "individuality." The energies of the whole—the evolving tradition itself as well as the descent of grace—that could humbly pass through them and infuse their works were viewed as larger than the ego of the individual practitioner. The work was then performed for the benefit of the audience or eventual owner of the work.

Western individualism has informed most creative expression of our era. We honor individual accomplishment and celebrate so-called originality. Submission to a larger purpose is noticeably lacking in much contemporary art, whatever its origin. In our ego-driven society, we are deeply suspicious of words like "submit" or "obey." Further, our western worldview lacks the dimensionality of hierarchical levels of being, with some, indeed many levels, proceeding on a scale higher than our own. Ken Wilber calls the many proponents of our prevailing worldview, *flatlanders*, admitting in their attitudes and deeds to no higher intelligence or greater purpose than their own. I would propose that the history of mankind, and the rich, long-standing traditions of many of our respective fields, contain a

collective intelligence, a vast storehouse of knowledge given by many before us that deeply influence our thoughts and creations. We are not, never have been, alone.

In an insightful book, given me by my photography teacher Minor White, titled *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, author Soetsu Yanagi speaks of the Sung pottery tradition: “It is precisely here, in this submissive reliance on tradition, that the beauty of their accomplishment was promised. Tradition, the accumulation of the experience and wisdom of many generations, is what Buddhists call the Given Power—an aggregate power that in all cases transcends the individuals. . . .

We then realize that without the way of grace many beautiful objects would never have been created; to regard beauty as the prerogative of genius alone is too narrow a view.”

In all arts, and in most domains today, we are witness to a global spread of information that takes place in the beat of a heart, the duration of a mouse-click. The highly personal dialogue that we have with our own creations cannot be separated from the many influences we have consumed (that derive from other people) often from sources that we no longer remember. Indeed, most creative works are a complex dialogue between the intentions of the maker, other discoveries in the field, and the works created by others that have influenced us on both conscious and unconscious levels. I too concede that there is little new under the sun (if we view “new” as the state of complete originality). Rather, in most creative fields today, a collectivity is strongly at work influencing one’s own efforts and creating conditions that we work either for or against. In other words, most of us are integrators rather than initiators—a condition which hopefully sets the stage for the ongoing cultural exploration of creative collaboration and collective intelligence.

Seeking One's Muse

What about chemistry, the electrifying blend produced by nature's laboratory when two or more individuals discover that together they can work miracles, move the world, and create stunning, lasting works of art, literature, or music? I am speaking, of course, of finding one's muse, one's energetic counterpart(s) in the act of creation. Of this condition, historical and anecdotal evidence abounds. John and Yoko, Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Anais Nin and Henry Miller, Rumi and Shams, and many others.

The muse, embodied in another person, can be an equal collaborator or primarily a source of inspiration that electrifies one's creative work. If we prowl the annals of art, literature, theater, dance, music and even science, we will likely find many, many more examples than I have listed above. Talk to your artist friends, review your own experiences and look around; you'll see many traces of the legendary muses. It is an extremely common occurrence in all creative endeavors. One person, or both, inspires the other, nourishes with energy, and radiates enough heat to help generate the fires of creation. More often than not, for men, their muse is found in the guise of a woman. And, for women, their muse takes the shape of a male.

What is the role of the erotic in the creative process? We cannot deny the immense role of sexual energy in the creation of art. Many creative individuals speak of a state of inner arousal during the peak moments of their process. Many elements of the creative act mirror sexuality. We are attracted to an idea, a theme, or a subject that contains great juice, where energy resides. Our initial encounters with the theme are often exploratory and

experimental, a kind of extended foreplay. Then passion grows, we merge with the process, the work itself, and its completion represents a profound release.

Dancing with another, we sense their movements, learn their gestures, slowly finding the space of a shared movement and acceding to a growing collective rhythm. Or playing a violin for example, we learn to caress and hold the instrument carefully, reverently; testing the sound, feeling the vibrations, learning to engage *this* particular instrument with finesse. Then, in the fits and starts of playing music, we initiate at first, employing our skill and accumulated knowledge. We continue, and gradually an energy overspreads our awareness and we enter the flow. The flames of passion grow as hear the music with our inner ear, feel it intensely within our bodies, becoming one with the growing melody. We let go, find a freedom and joy in attunement, and ecstatically merge with the surging movement. And, though we have started this movement through our intent, it rapidly takes on a life of its own, and we can experience a radical release from the tight coil of ourselves and our worldly concerns for blessed moments during the act of creation.

Sexual energy is one of the finest energies available to us; the force of Eros that serves to connect us with all of all life. The uprising, overspreading of inner energy, the passion, the ecstasy, the release are all aspects of both the sexual and the creative act. The energies of creation surge through us, opening our chakras, our inward centers, and connecting us to a larger whole. Sex energy and creative energy are not similar to, synonymous with, or suggestive of each other as many would assert; rather they are one and same energy flowing both within us and between us—and infusing our finest works.

Sexual energy enlivens all of our interactions, if we treat it as pure energy rather than merely the force of interpersonal attraction. Indeed, the force of Eros is found in many

human achievements and serves to create an atmosphere of finer energy surrounding a work of art, a book, or any manifestation of human endeavor. It is the energy of connection, of life, of creation.

Seeking the muse in another person is none other than seeking our energetic counterpart, whose very presence helps to make us whole. Yes, of course, we seek inner wholeness of being within ourselves, an integration of all of our parts. But we know, through hard-won experience, that it is in relationship and through partnership that we most effectively seek and find our own growth. A genuinely evolved human being may not need to seek completion with another. But until then . . . and even then, we acknowledge the profound interdependence of all living things. Intimate connection assists the act of creation.

Returning to O’Keeffe and Stieglitz, it can and has been argued that their most mature *bodies* of work—looking beyond the individual paintings or photographs of their formative years—developed during the course of their close intimate association. They inspired each other, learned from each others struggles and accomplishments, and found the joy and passion of working together, both as collaborators in the case of the extended *Portrait* series, and as independent artists creating alongside each other. O’Keeffe speaks of their summers at Lake George in upper New York state: “We work and we work and feel foolish for working, then work some more.” And it is rumored by family members that a consistent, and cherished element of their shared daily rhythms included chasing each other up the stairs joyfully after lunch to make love and renew their intimate connection. O’Keeffe confesses: “You haven’t really been made love to until you’ve made love with Stieglitz.”

Roger Shattuck writes: “Ordinary people as well as learned scholars wanted to find out how much the two inspired each other. Can lovers collaborate? Does collaboration make lovers? Or should we just forget about all that and just look at the objects. ... Those things have made a difference to the way people live. ... The sexual excitement that obviously drew them together at the start deserves recognition primarily because the intimacy it provoked modified their artistic development, separately and together.”

And even their differences sparked energy, created fire that fueled their works. O’Keeffe alludes to Stieglitz in her comment: “There was a constant grinding like the ocean. It was as if something hot and dark, and destructive was hitched to the highest brightest star.” Stieglitz’s extreme extraversion and egoism often grated on her voluminous need for privacy and space. And O’Keeffe’s, at times cruel, aloof independence, her vast need for self-identification which gradually led her to spend chunks of the year apart from Stieglitz in New Mexico, caused much consternation and suffering, especially as he began to visibly show signs of aging. Nevertheless, her consistency of spirit, her inwardly-exuberant creative force, and her ultimate sense of mystery evoked Stieglitz to comment: “O’Keeffe is a constant source of wonder to me, like Nature itself.”

Alfred Stieglitz is widely regarded as one of the originating forces of modern photography. Well into his fifties before meeting O’Keeffe and finding his mature stride as an artist, his two most significant bodies of work were his *Equivalents* series of clouds at Lake George, where oceanic depths of tone revealed the nearly abstract, vital interplay of deep blacks and whites employed as metaphors for the range and depth of the human experience. And in his extended photographic portrait of O’Keeffe, comprised of multiple photographs made over a period of years, he committed a full one-third of the output of his life’s work,

over five-hundred large format negatives. He states, “To demand the portrait that will be a complete portrait of any other person is as futile as to demand that a motion picture be condensed into a single still.” His photographs of O’Keeffe are alternately a portrait of a woman, his wife and artist, and the portrait of Woman, the unconscious archetype that serves the process of realizing one self in the mirror of the other. Ultimately, the portraits offer an intimate glimpse into the relationship itself. Stieglitz claimed: “When I photograph, I make love.” Both of these seminal bodies of work, the *Equivalents* and *A Portrait*, were created either with O’Keeffe’s direct collaboration, or in close physical proximity.

O’Keeffe’s rich language of feeling was established at an early age, well before meeting Stieglitz. After initially encountering her work, Stieglitz exclaimed, “Finally, a woman on paper.” He had complete confidence in her artistic abilities—and her bright future: “I never realized that what she is could actually exist—absolute Truth—clarity of vision to the highest degree.” As a moving force in early Twentieth century art, Stieglitz nurtured her development, brought her into his circle of American artists consisting of Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, and John Marin, and promoted her work through annual exhibits and occasional sales. A rather solitary mid-westerner by nature, O’Keeffe flourished in these conditions of creative collaboration and the rich sharing of work. Her paintings became more direct, vital, electric, and intensely erotic—infused with a reverence for form and color—themes that would occupy the rest of her life’s work. O’Keeffe admitted late in life, “for me, [Stieglitz] was much more wonderful in his work than as a human being. I believe it was the work that kept me with him—though I loved him as a human being. I could see his strengths and weaknesses. I put up with what seemed to me a good deal of contradictory nonsense because of what seemed clear and bright and beautiful.”

Let us close this chapter with Gunther Stuhlmann's description of the lives of two other artists who were deeply connected through their work, Anais Nin and Henry Miller. After ten years of a passionate journey striving to establish a life together, they "resumed their separate lives. But they remained tied to each other by a basic bond, Stripped of passing sentiment, of catering to each other's material and emotional needs, of a sense of adventurous comradeship in the breaking of social taboos, their relationship remained firmly founded on the shared need to create themselves through writing."

Anais Nin made the alternately moving and sad observation "The same thing that makes Henry indestructible is what makes me indestructible: It is that at the *core* of us is a writer, not a human being." Collaboration with one's muse, the electric interplay of enlarged creativity that lies at the heart of the relationship is intense and, though it may be difficult to sustain on a mere human level, it serves to place us directly in front of our deeper possibilities and reminds us firmly of the "indestructibility" of the creative spirit.