

Introduction

This book is the result of a forty-year investigation of the relationship between art and spiritual practice. While any activity, if approached with attention and care, can lead toward awareness, many aspects of the creative process—which will be explored in this book—contain unique capacities to serve our growth and development. And creativity in this context is not limited to artists. All activities—art, business, cooking, gardening, teaching, or simply living one’s life—can be approached as a creative act.

What is the highest and best use of art? Can art be a form of meditation or prayer? Can an active engagement with the creative process assist our efforts toward awakening, toward growth of being and consciousness? And how may art and creativity serve our alchemy of transformation? These questions lie at the heart of this book.

How do we begin?

The Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa likens art to the “Great Eastern Sun.” He explains that the word *great* implies true strength and power, that which derives from genuine realization and wisdom, and that which reflects the goodness and integrity of a higher purpose. The direction East, in the Buddhist matrix, reflects the concept of wakefulness, and our search for our true selves. And the Sun represents clarity without doubt and the “notion of blessings descending upon us and creating sacred world.”

Trungpa further describes the three categories of the nature of the great eastern sun in saying that “they are trying to bring us out and to uncover the cosmic elegance that exists in our lives and in our art.”

Therefore, let us begin with three sacred dictums that are deeply related to the symbol of the great eastern sun and form the foundation of the spiritual quest, representing universal principles shared by all of the world’s great teachings.

Know thyself

As above, so below

Thy will be done

If we truly understood and embodied in our lives the many aspects of these three imperatives, we would have no need for a book such as this. Throughout these pages, we may keep these touchstones in our hearts and minds, knowing them as sacred laws of our being and deserving of our deepest aspirations.

Now we may properly begin.

Why engage the spiritual quest? The only answer that truly resonates and arises from the core of our being is that *we have no choice*. We *must* undertake the journey, like climbing the legendary mountain simply because it is there. All wisdom traditions teach us that growth of being and consciousness is the measure of our humanity and the underlying purpose of our lives. We may choose to accept or deny this challenge; that much is up to us. But this much we know: in order to successfully meet the challenge of our lives we must move toward growth, greater awareness, inner balance, and a greater mastery of ourselves and our conditions. From deep within, we are called to become who we are.

For many sincere seekers, the search for consciousness grows from a sense of lack, a deeply felt inner urgency. Yet the search remains hazy and unformed, as a vague inner call, until we make a firm commitment to some form of practice. In beginning the ascent, we soon encounter the inevitable difficulties of the journey and recognize the need for guidance; that we need a means, a practical method that can help us in the path of transformation and growth.

Where do we look? Most religious traditions today have lost their once widespread relevance. Traditional teachings from mostly Eastern sources have deeply permeated Western society. In a recent interview, the Dalai Lama claims that the smorgasboard of spiritual traditions available to today's seeker is a double-edge sword. He believes that the global rise of information and widespread transmission of genuine teachings can help individuals experiment with different paths to find what is right for their predilections and temperament. On the other hand, he states that a genuine teaching forms an organic whole, and that an individual needs to choose one path, one teaching to inform their awareness, guide their understanding, and provide the means for growth of being and consciousness.

Any well-stocked bookstore is a testament to the fact that we have ever increasing access to legitimate teachings, bona-fide wisdom traditions, and illumined guides. Discrimination and disciplined practice are essential. A growing number of people today are deeply attuned to the search for a lifestyle, sources of help, and supportive conditions to help manifest their deepest potential. Many of us seek a way of working and a way of life—a path—that calls forth inner growth and development. In order to be fully relevant, our path must come from our own culture and take place within our own lives. Most of us do not have the luxury or the inclination to retreat to an ashram or a monastery for years

at a time. What means of working may we find that exists within our own lives and grows from our own particular conditions? What is our own—what path belongs to us?

In the novel *MOUNT ANALOGUE*, René Daumal makes the point about the legendary, symbolic mountain that represents the spiritual quest: “For a mountain to play the role of Mount Analogue, I concluded, its summit must be inaccessible, but its base accessible to human beings as nature has made them. It must be unique and it must exist geographically. The door to the invisible must be visible.”

In other words, we need to find a path that is within our reach, one that we can begin *now*, from where we are in our current conditions of life.

Can creativity be a way of life, a means of ascent?

I had the opportunity several years ago of witnessing a *hula kahiko* (ancient hula) performance on Maui that had not been danced for 200 years. The members of this *halau* (gathering of dancers) practiced this particular hula for years prior to the public performance. The *kumu hula* (dance teachers) were daughters of the legendary Edith Kanaka'ole, the last of the lineage of many generations of great hula masters who preserved the oral tradition of Hawai'i's sacred dance. The resurgence of interest in ancient hula ranks high among the key factors in revitalizing Hawaiian culture—along with reviving the language and renewing the Centuries-old tradition of Pacific voyaging.

From the first moment of the dance, the audience was transfixed. The soul of an ancient culture became visible. Ancestral voices spoke through the performers. Their individual efforts and the communal expression were deeply related. Each dancer expressed his/her own style and initiative within the context of the whole. The entire dance transcended any of its component parts. Each dancer seemed deeply nourished by the

forces and energies moving through them—a palpable energy was in the air. It was art and prayer all at once. A sacred dimension was revealed and evoked in both the dancers and the audience. A finer energy permeated the atmosphere. Everyone felt it—most audience members were in awe, sitting in meditative silence before and after the performance.

The dancers shared a common heritage; it was in their blood, infusing their very being. Hawaiian culture deeply embraces the spiritual dimension of life and offers an esoteric discipline of concentration and prayer through dance. Hula celebrates the sacredness of life and experience and, like most forms of sacred dance, brings participants to a greater sense of inner balance and awareness. The dance facilitates a focusing of energies that serves to magnetize and uplift both dancer and audience, attracting higher energies to pass through them.

The question that lingered deeply for weeks after the performance was: *what is my heritage, my lineage—what is in my blood?* For those of us from Western culture, what pathway does our bloodline, our ancestry offer as a means of growth and inner development? What in contemporary culture serves to magnetize us and attract finer and deeper energies into our lives?

Most of the great spiritual traditions that remain alive, that are no longer just empty ritual and outmoded forms of worship that have lost their essential meaning, arise from Eastern sources. While the tools and methods offered in these wisdom teachings are potent and universal, we must find a way to make them our own. Few teachings are geared to the western mind. Most teachings are related to the eastern traditions of contemplation and receptivity and not the western mode of action and initiative.

I finally realized that what is available to us through our own Western cultural heritage is art, music, and creative expression as a means of deepening our attention, striving toward an inner integration and a balance of forces, and contacting the energies of the whole. Through creativity, we can deeply engage the inner work of spiritual teachings, bringing their tools and methods home, making them our own. This realization came with great force and connected many disparate experiences in my own life. The whole of my involvement in art and creativity, which spans over forty years of study, practice, and teaching, has grown out of the relationship between art and the sacred dimensions of life.

As a high school senior in 1968, I re-engaged my involvement with photography that began when I was only eleven-years-old. I will never forget an afternoon outing with my girlfriend and my best friend, camera in hand, to the Cleveland Museum of Art. After viewing the Western collections of Post-Impressionists and modern artists, seeing Van Gogh, Gauguin, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Georgia O’Keeffe—artists that deeply touched my inner world—long dormant energies in me began to awaken.

We then entered the Arts of India wing of the museum, a collection that is one of the finest in the world. I stood in front of the classic statue of Shiva Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance, Hindu god of death and rebirth, intuitively feeling the force of the symbolism and the many-layered content of the artist’s expression. I marveled that the power of the statue and its meaning could still reach me thousands of years later. I made a ritual gesture of photographing the statue, not only for the sake of memory, but also to acknowledge and honor its inherently evocative forces. The powerful impression made on me by the statue was unforgettable—and I was only eighteen years old and unaware of the range of its symbolic content.

Soon after, I undertook a process of self-education, reading voraciously the material of the world's great teachings: Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, contemporary psychology, Taoism, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, art and poetry. Little escaped my hunger. Carlos Castaneda soon entered the scene with his tales of don Juan, as did many works from the human potential movement inspired by Aldous Huxley, Krishnamurti, and other living researchers and teachers. I began to intuit that art and creativity could provide a means of inner work and function as a pathway towards consciousness, a way of working with the universal methods offered by the wisdom traditions that I was exploring.

In 1970, I met and began to work with photographer Minor White, who attempted through his work and teaching to treat photography as a genuine spiritual discipline. He postulated that the camera could be used as a vehicle for seeing and for discovery of Self and its resultant expression. He was remarkably able to relate photography (an inherently mechanical medium) to the traditional discipline of craft, where a deepening of attention could occur through one's work with the materials of the medium when the photographer, camera, and mysterious processes in the darkroom could be fused into mutually reciprocal elements. His teaching clearly focused on work with oneself toward greater wholeness of being. Following the lead of Zen masters, White employed the camera as a means towards alertness and genuine presence. Influenced by Christian mystics, he used the lens of the camera and the sensitized emulsion of the film as metaphors for a contemplative, prayerful method of looking both inward and outward simultaneously, perceiving the "splinter of divinity" in all things.

My relationship with White lasted until his death in 1976, giving direction to my life and work and nurturing my interest in the world of the spirit. I also began to work with Nicholas Hlobeczy, a photographer and an associate of Minor White, beginning a friendship that continued until his death a few years ago. My years of working with White are detailed in my book *Deep Perception: Cultivating the Art of Seeing*, and my relationship with Nicholas Hlobeczy is explored in the pages of this book.

In 1971, due to the combined influence of Minor White and Nicholas Hlobeczy, I entered the Gurdjieff work, which remains to this day my primary source of influence and spiritual nourishment. One of my long-standing teachers in the Gurdjieff work, and someone to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude, was Dorothea Dooling, the founding editor of *Parabola* Magazine. Her clarity, incisive understanding, and her many questions and challenges contributed greatly to the ideas and explorations found in these pages.

Mrs. Dooling would ask a question frequently to help establish the “right” relationship between inner work and one’s ordinary life activities: *What serves what?* This single question began a path of discovery that has helped enlarge my understanding and open me to many new insights. We are always serving something, related to forces that are either evolutionary or involutionary. The mechanical flow of life is powerful and compelling, pulling us into its currents from life to death. In other words, in the vast majority of moments in our lives, we serve life itself. Yet if used rightly, creativity can serve our higher aims and possibilities. We use the process of living and of creating art to move toward greater understanding, toward greater fullness of being, toward becoming willing servants of that which needs to pass through us.

Opening to the creative in oneself brings us closer to the universal movements of energy and the vast creative forces in the universe.

As above so below.

Artmaking brings us in touch with ourselves and our genuine nature. It reveals our talents and capabilities, as well as our chief limitations and obstacles. Creative work assists our search for knowledge about ourselves and the world—its conditions and laws.

Know thyself.

And finally, the creative process invites an opening to those forces that wish to reveal themselves through us, that are waiting on our doorsteps, that are available to us and separated from us by our own inattention and lack of balance.

Thy will be done.



This book follows as a natural progression from my two earlier books—on creativity and perception—and represents the heart and vital core of my concerns. Though my own background and influences derive from the Gurdjieff teachings and Buddhism, I have struggled with the question of language and terminology, from which standpoint to write of these ideas. I have decided on an ecumenical approach, drawing upon many legitimate teachings and incorporating the wisdom of many guide and teachers. Further, I will strive to lay claim to my own experiences and growing understanding through these pages. Wisdom is universal. The language used matters less than the insights expressed. In this book, I strive to offer perspectives derived from any sincere teacher, artist, or spiritual

researcher. And most importantly, those moments of insight that arise from a deeper, inner source have served to inform the dialogue in these pages. I stand humbly in front of the moments of clarity and inspiration that stem from the deeper mind.

Carl Jung writes in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: “A creative person has little power over his own life. He is not free. He is captive and driven by his *daimon*.... This lack of freedom has been a great sorrow to me.... the *daimon* of creativity has ruthlessly had its way with me... I am astonished, disappointed, pleased with myself. I am distressed, depressed, rapturous. I am all these things at once and I cannot add up the sum.”

This beautiful summation of Jung’s life and work reflects my own feelings. I am touched and amazed by what I have been privileged to experience. The past two and one half years of intense writing have left me with a host of lingering questions, many insights, and a combination of exhaustion and exhilaration. Once again, I experience the deep paradox of the creative process, its liberating insight and its isolating lack of personal freedom in obeying the dictates from within.

This book arose from within myself organically, and I learned deeply from the experience. I did not initially intend it, or plan it. Once it began to emerge, I devoted the whole of my energies to its completion. I tried to focus my life toward this inwardly urgent, necessary task and still do what was necessary to keep alive my other responsibilities, to maintain my relationships, and to address the necessary task of making a living.

What is of clear importance here is that I was assisted in each step of the process by unknown sources of wisdom within. I was quite literally led through this task, as if

something or someone had taken my hand and was guiding me through the process. I felt like a small child being drawn along by my mother's hand and her more mature intent. The concept, title, and chapter headings were given; they simply appeared in my mind one day. I wrote them down in my notebook, cleared my life of non-essentials and wrote the book as if I were merely filling in the outline, connecting the dots that were provided to me. During the period of writing, I felt compelled to take a notebook everywhere since I never knew when these insights might knock at my door. And come they did. At the grocery store, the beach, in my car, and before going to bed, words flowed across the screen of my awareness with remarkable clarity and precision—that surprised and delighted even myself. The work was born, not created.

I have learned much of the topics through my inner guide—or in Jung's word, my daimon—much, much more than I could have ever come to on my own.

Since I am a teacher and the dialogue found in the classroom offers a collective understanding that transcends what can be reached strictly on one's own, I planned a class around the content of the book I was about to write. True exchange with others can be extended to the practice of collaboration and the ideal of a true "collective intelligence." The dynamic, reciprocal relationship between me, you, and we can bring startling new insights and expanded dimensions to the artistic and educational process. The book was written as essays, a chapter a week for the participating students. It is a great way to write. Teaching a class energizes and attunes myself to the topic, and the weekly deadlines keep my back against the wall. Elucidating the conceptual framework serves to verify which ideas and exercises are truly useful to others. Further, the explorations of my students—

and their questions—inspire greater clarity and necessitate expansion of certain ideas on my part. To my students, I owe my deep gratitude.

Many of the core ideas found in *Art and Spiritual Practice* grow from the rich experiences of my own years as a student of Minor White and Nicholas Hlobeczy. Their teaching of photography has helped provide a broad foundation for the dialogue found in this book. Over the years, as a Professor, workshop leader, and writer, Minor White's teaching methods were distilled into two broad streams of thought and practice that became known respectively as *heightened awareness* and *creative audience*.

In *heightened awareness*, we work to quiet the ranging mind, enter the body, and discover the resonances of our feeling nature in order to more fully receive an impression of a work of art, an object from nature, or another human being. Through heightened awareness we can see and interact more directly with what is in front us—with relative freedom from the associative filters of the mind or the distraction of reactive emotions.

The central core of this practice is stillness. We enter into a meditative state to receive an impression more cleanly, directly, and fully. While we may not be liberated from our usual filters, we may become more present and able to witness both: the impression and the inner filters that color our responses. Through this effort, an impression may be more deeply experienced through a state of “presence.” The Buddhist idea of the mind as a still, reflecting pool—taking in all impressions with equanimity—represents the cornerstone of this work.

The second experimental practice that White brought through his teaching is known as *creative audience*. He asserted the necessity of an equal input of the mind, body, and feelings in our responses to anything we might look at. Mind, body, feeling,: each

component in our inner landscape has its own intelligence, its own unique response and contribution to our understanding. Further, most of us are imbalanced, each in our own way, dominated by the mind, or the body, or the feelings. A truly creative response grows from a moment of relative wholeness, where each of our parts offer their respective intelligence to the whole. In workshops with White, we were asked to move beyond our familiar and habitual responses, to incorporate the body and feelings, and to use the deeper parts of the mind in the act of seeing and learning. Workshop exercises were varied and multi-dimensional, often stunning in their economy and elegance—using simple, direct means to challenge our preconceptions, stimulate our growth, and help move beyond the known and familiar. We might make body movements or literally dance to an image, play music, or breathe fragments of poetry or evocative phrases in response to a visual impression. Each exercise engaged the whole person, and asked—or more exactly, required—that we begin to be more firmly planted in the whole of ourselves.

In keeping with White's many insights on teaching art, we are asked to use the fertile material of our lives for the ground of our inner work. Photography or art may be extended to include cooking, relating with others, or any of the activities we engage on a daily basis. Stillness of mind, responsiveness, and the search for wholeness and connection, indeed, unfold over a lifetime. In this sense, art is not unique. In my own experience, these teachings have helped me immeasurably in both making art and living my life. I wish to share them here in this book.

Chögyum Trungpa writes: "Meditation does not involve discontinuing one's relationship with oneself and looking for a better person or searching for possibilities of

reforming oneself and becoming a better person. The practice of meditation is a way of continuing one's confusion, chaos, aggression, and passion — but working with it, seeing it from the enlightened point of view. That is the true purpose of meditation practice as far as this approach is concerned.”



Art can be a form of prayer. By prayer, I do not mean supplication or the prayer of request, where we ask for something mundane for ourselves — usually in the form of a miracle or a gift of divine grace. “Oh Lord, if only you could make my life a better or smoother one.” What we really ask for in prayer is a connectedness, an opening to a deeper dimension and an acknowledgment of the life surrounding us. A prayer of the heart. Joseph Campbell speaks of the Native American attitude of treating all of life as a “thou” — and not as a thing, not as an “it.” When we treat life with reverence, as a “thou,” when the trees and the sun and the winds are our brothers and sisters, an opening takes place. We become a part of it. We recognize our place. Through prayer, we cease to be the center of the universe.

Through creativity, we acknowledge the existence of generative energy—life—in all things. And we recognize that we have an integral role to play. As individual creators, we are microcosms of great nature. As painter Jackson Pollock reminds us: we are nature. Artists are part of the universal flow of energy in their creating. If prayer is a request to help find our place, to acknowledge the life force in all things, to strive toward connection and interrelatedness, then art is also a request. But what do we ask for?

Our request elicits our response. What we ask for is what we will receive.

Humility—an honoring of the forces of life—breeds, over time, the gifts of discovery and realization. Arrogance—a belief in our ego and conditioned personality—breeds over time, being cast adrift with no source of nourishment from the invisible world, with no unseen hands to assist us on our way. To live in humility is to be in question. To use art as a means of asking the right questions brings discovery and insight in its wake. Living the questions breeds ever deeper questions—and, in time, with patient effort and diligent intent, leads toward living in the light and the gradual recognition that there is not one answer, but there are many answers that come to reveal the many-layered dimension of truth.

Art functions as a reminder, as a call toward consciousness and as a means of understanding ourselves and our world. We strive to stay in front of our questions and our not-knowing. This and this alone allows for discovery and growth. Prayer and art are requests to come into accord with the universal energies within and without us. Joseph Campbell speaks of the function of myth, and it might be extended to point toward the function of art as well: “To be in accord with the grand symphony that this world is, to put the harmony of our own body in accord with that harmony.”

In the Christian monastic traditions, a monk will often choose a phrase or question from their morning prayers or Vigils, and keep it in mind throughout the day. This is known as meditation. It is a kind of mantra, a form of prayer that not only informs and deepens the activities of the day, but that serves as a reminder, a call toward awareness throughout the day. And it is a means toward understanding, by placing one’s questions in the back of the mind, allowing them to digest and mature, thus giving the opportunity for increased insight.

What a great practice for an artist, or anyone for that matter. At times the path of learning seems overwhelming. Yet 365 days exist in a year. To take one idea, one question, one meditation to approach in a day, every day, we might actually be able to make sense out of ourselves and our world—over time.

Inner evolution occurs in much the same way—incrementally, and over time. The same with our creative growth and development. If we take as our daily work one idea, one task, one question, we will, over time, come to many new understandings and insights . Patience is everything. If we write several pages a day, in six months we will have written a book. If we paint, or write, or photograph on a daily or weekly basis, and bring our attention and deep care to our efforts, in time we will learn a great deal about ourselves and our interests. Sustained, daily efforts are the principal catalysts that serve our own growth and evolution.

This book is not meant as a definitive or comprehensive text on the topic. How could it be? Spiritual growth is a life-long task. Rather, the book is a collection of ideas and insights—derived from many individuals who have thought and written about the spiritual search and the creative process—designed to open questions, awaken thought and feeling, and to point toward a way of working.

The kind of work that I am promoting and the values that I am espousing are for each one of us and for all of us. Art serves three basic functions in the world. Creative work is undertaken for the benefit of the individual, for our interactions with each other in our communities, and for the positive evolution of today's consciousness—for the society as a whole.

Much is up to you, the reader. This is an unfinished book. The completion of this work takes place in you, and in me, through our efforts toward awakening and the

persistent, daily applications of our intent in striving toward wholeness. Through our request, our prayer, we may come into a deeper connection with ourselves and the world. Through the creative process, we may connect more deeply with the mysteries of creation.

This book is a pact— a sacred agreement between you, the reader, and myself—to work, to grow, to endeavor toward being and becoming, and to strive toward our birthright as conscious participants in the vast energies of creation, taking place throughout the whole of the universe and within ourselves and our own lives.

David Ulrich
December 2011