

INTUITIVE PAINTING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Chris Zydel, MA

People paint for a lot of different reasons. To relax, to express themselves, to create beauty and meaning, to make money, because they have a passion to create, to gain approval, to stay sane, to make sense of the world, to play and have fun. All of the above are wonderful and valid motivations to put a brush filled with color onto paper or canvas. But did you also know that there is a way to approach painting that can be used very effectively as a form of meditation and psycho spiritual practice?

This type of painting goes by many names. It has been called Process Painting, Intuitive Painting, Free Expression Painting, Soul Painting and Source Painting. No matter what it is called, when you paint in this way your intention is to use the process of painting to connect with your inner life and to journey into the invisible worlds of soul and spirit.

What we are usually taught about creativity is that what is important is developing technique so that we can produce a fabulous product. The spiritual approach to painting does not focus on the outcome or result of the painting at all. Like all spiritual practices, soul painting allows you to connect with yourself on a more profound level and to develop greater self awareness. It teaches you how to use the creative process to expand and strengthen your intuition. You learn how to free up stagnant energy so that you can live your life from your core being where you are naturally passionately and joyfully alive. And painting in this way sends deep taproots into your connection with the source of all that is which often leads to positive experiences of trusting yourself and your own internal guidance.

As we travel further into the lands of great change and uncertainty that seem to be the hall mark of this early 21st century, many of us are experiencing a growing hunger to be living from a place of greater authenticity and a more wholehearted relationship with what we consider to be sacred. We are longing for some larger sense of meaning and a

sense of something that is not so focused on things like money or success. We are searching more and more for a way to connect with what is real and solid and constant. We are needing ways to access a form of counsel and information that comes from another place inside of our beings that is not just linear, rational and logical.

There is a great thirst for spirituality in it's many forms. Meditation, prayer, yoga, shamanism, astrology and various types of Buddhism, are becoming more popular. All of these ways of connecting with spirit have in common that they give the person using these methods a much more personal and direct experience of divine presence and unconditional love. They provide a firsthand experience of healing and wholeness, a palpable sense of feeling less alone in the universe, and a sense of the power and safety that comes from opening to that mysterious greater something that we can call the Ground of Being, the Great Spirit or the Great Heart.

The job of a spiritual practice is to remind you that you are always connected to spirit. We can make our life our practice and try to let each instant be an opportunity to awaken. That moment to moment remembering is a very tall order, and one that we can all aspire to. But it's a lot to ask to be able to just throw ourselves into the busy fray of our lives and to stay mindful in the swirl and chaos of day to day living.

So that's why God and Goddess invented the spiritual practice. A spiritual practice is just that. It's practicing. And it's practicing that very difficult job of being attentive to the realm of spirit by choosing a discipline during which we say, "OK. For this chunk of time and during this certain activity, I am going to devote myself to remaining awake. I am going to consciously invoke my relationship to all that is. I am going to choose to pay attention to the energies of compassion, trust, expansion and surrender. I am choosing the intention to open my heart , disidentify from fear, listen to my intuitive voice, let go of control, be present without judgment, and to love myself and all of life unconditionally." Now sure, this is still a tall order, but when we engage in a spiritual practice, we are clearing out some limited period and space in our lives so that we can just focus on this process of

what is essential without distraction.

In learning to use the medium of painting as a way to develop your spiritual muscle the first thing to realize is that the principles of painting as a way to engage spirit are exactly the OPPOSITE of the principles or rules that come into play when you are painting for a specific outcome. It's like everything you know about art and creating for a product needs to get turned upside down.

When you are painting for the process you are operating from the belief that you are inherently a creative being and that actually everyone is creative. You are learning to say a great big YES to your creative self and to cultivate trust and faith in your creativity separate from things like talent or skill. In the world of art for product the assumption is that only a very few special, rare and gifted people have the right to call themselves artists, and that you should only be encouraged to exercise your creativity if you are considered to have a particular aptitude or "genius" for art.

When you are painting for the purpose of outcome you are focused on what is external. The finished product, the actual thing itself is what has value and is what is considered to be important. You worry about what the painting looks like and are often concerned with other people's perceptions of your work. The questions you ask yourself are often things like "Will this painting gain me approval and recognition? Will other people consider it valuable? Is it something that I can sell?" When you are painting from the soul what is important is your inner experience of creating. You are focusing and placing value on is happening inside of you. The questions you ask yourself are more along the lines of "Am I feeling engaged, energized and alive as I paint?" or "Am I being present here in this moment? Am I allowing the creative process to touch me, move me and transform me?"

When you are oriented towards the product you tend to take yourself and your craft very seriously. There is importance placed on gaining technical skill and becoming polished and sophisticated. In the realm of spiritual art the focus is primarily on allowing yourself to play and to continuously

cultivate "beginners mind" even if you are trained as an artist. When I have a new student come to one of my classes the first thing that I encourage them to do is to approach their painting as if they were four years old and to allow themselves to be childlike and spontaneous. The question here is "Can I let myself paint and create even if I don't feel completely confident in what I am doing?"

Painting with a product in mind usually involves having a goal or a plan. It often means that you have an idea about where you are going and what you want to accomplish. When you are painting as a spiritual practice your focus is on allowing the painting to lead you. It's being willing to face the unknown, to travel into uncharted territory without a map, and to learn to trust your intuition even if you don't know where it is taking you. The question now is "Can I continue to create when I don't understand what is happening? Can I allow things to be mysterious and to not make sense?"

There is a right way and a wrong way to do things when you are painting for a specific outcome and there are rules that you are supposed to follow. For example: make sure that what you are painting looks realistic, never put certain colors together or constantly strive to ensure that every element in your painting is balanced and in perspective. Some other rules are: don't try something unless you already know how to do it, don't risk being foolish, don't make mistakes, always be perfect, don't be messy. Following the rules is a way to stay safe but those rules can also limit you and keep you small. In the world of transformative painting I always encourage my students to break some of the rules that they carry around with them and that limit their sense of expressive freedom. As one of my students so aptly put it, "It's going outside the lines to find the god place."

In the realm of art for outcome there is a constant mental evaluation going on. Your mind is continually asking itself things like "Is this good, is this bad, do I like it, do I not like it, is it beautiful, is it ugly?" When you are painting as a spiritual practice you are trying to let go of judgment and comparison and inviting mercy and curiosity to be your companions as you create. When you approach your creativity with the attitude of holding

everything that comes out of you with compassion instead of criticism you have an opportunity to experience what I like to call Radical Self Acceptance.

Painting to create a pleasing product can be very satisfying in it's own right. Beautiful and meaningful works of art are a much needed source of inspiration in all of our lives. But you don't have to be an accomplished and highly trained artist in order to tap into the power of creativity to open you to a profound connection with that magical place of spaciousness, stillness and sacred wholeness that is the true home of your heart and spirit. When you are painting as a path to spirit you are not so much interested in creating a masterpiece as you are trying to remember that YOU are already a masterpiece!

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