

## Art and the Challenge of Change

By Stewart Cubley

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A student once asked Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, one of the earliest and most widely revered Zen masters to come to the West, "Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?" Suzuki Roshi answered, "Everything changes."

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

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



### **The opportunity that the creative arts process offers is to fully**

**inhabit our experience right now just as it is.** It's a practice, as valid as any spiritual path, that requires us to drop the insane rush toward the imagined goal and to experience being at home with ourselves. The transformation that occurs when we touch our home base is nothing short of miraculous. There is an expansiveness in which the circumstances of our lives are held differently, and our world appears in its potential rather than its limitation. For a moment at least, we perceive the incredible mystery of existence, and we know what it means to accept our place in the scheme of things.

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

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

The moment when I first start a class or workshop always has a special poignancy. People of all ages and backgrounds and varying degrees of experience have taken the time and energy to commit themselves to an inner exploration that is totally unknown to them. There's an electric mix of excitement and fear in the air as we gather for the first session. People are wondering what they've gotten themselves into, and whether it's not too late to back out. In one workshop a man laughingly said, "Why do I keep finding myself in groups of such talented and creative people?," meaning, of course, that he didn't think of himself that way.

If you can hold a brush you can paint. Once it's removed from the strictures of talent, skill, accomplishment, interpretation, competition and awards, painting becomes a medium for challenge and change. The power inherent in painting is that it can awaken a wild vein of passion in you that will not go back to sleep. **Through listening to your intuition — the color you are attracted to, the placement of the brush on the paper, the shape, the form, the image that wants to be born — a fire is ignited that jumps off the paper and into your life.**

Perceptions arise that are profound yet practical. Decisions become available that were dormant, new courses of action demand to be initiated, and old places of blockage ready themselves to be let go. Your view of yourself and what is possible in your life transform in the reflection you observe in the mirror of your painting.

There is no formula by which the impulse for change will manifest in any individual's life, but its birth requires a clear environment for exploration. First, there needs to be a safe, supportive space of focused acceptance in which we can begin to let down the defenses we have erected around our own deep listening. Then there needs to be the **encouragement and stimulation** to look at those areas where we are challenged, where we come to the edge. In entering those places courageously and meeting ourselves there, we discover our genuine passion and inspiration. We realize that we have nothing to protect and nothing to lose, and we are then free to ask: What do I really want to do, given who I am and with the tools I have to use?

*"Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?"  
~ Mary Oliver, The Summer Day*

## Art Making as Spiritual Practice

*"Care of the soul appreciates the mystery of human suffering and does not offer the illusion of a problem-free life. It sees every fall into ignorance and confusion as an opportunity to discover that the beast residing at the center of the labyrinth is also an angel."  
~ Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore*

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

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

One of the myths of art is that we have to feel inspired, have endless ideas or feel confident in order to create. But if we truly desire passion in our lives, we must also be willing to experience our emptiness and our lack of inspiration. There may be an encounter with the inevitable sadness that has accumulated from a lifetime of experience. We will have to revisit those places where we turned away from our potential out of fear — where we said no instead of yes. Our habitual self-judgment will take on monstrous proportions before it retreats into its cave, rendered ineffectual by our courage to look it squarely in the eye. We'll probably be tested by the terror of chaos and loss of control. **Our tendency to defuse the potency of the mysterious and the irrational through explanation and interpretation will seriously try to deflect us.** And then there is the continual desire to quit, to abandon our work midstream, to retreat to a point of safety and immunity.

Meaningful change, although our birthright, must be won. It's the fruit of challenge well met. It requires that we take our difficulties seriously, seeing them as important, rather than as bothersome aggravations. What creative longings remain asleep inside that we're hesitant to arouse? Where do we feel our ability to express has been wounded or armored? We should not be ashamed of these struggles, because they are worthy of our engagement. The places where we once turned back become doors we walk through, and with an earned authority can now say... Yes.

## Challenge as Initiation

*"Homesick for moderation,  
Half the world's artists shrink or fall away.  
If any find solution, let him tell it.  
Meanwhile, I bend my heart toward lamentation  
Where, as the times implore our true involvement,  
The blades of every crisis point the way.*

*I would it were not so, but so it is.  
Who ever made music of a mild day?"*

*~ Mary Oliver, A Dream of Trees*

Crisis, which has its roots in the ancient Greek, "to decide" or "to separate," is an inner state of readiness that precedes creative breakthrough. We must literally be at a critical juncture where a road must be chosen — where there is absolutely no chance to stall or turn back — before we have the urgency and energy to take that plunge that will determine the next direction in our lives.

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

Crisis is a notice from our intuitive self that an initiation is due. We're presented with an opportunity to pass through the fire deeply altered by the experience, or to continue grasping the illusion that we can remain fixed and untouched. The fact is that when we truly meet crisis we don't remain fixed at all: The "I" that enters the experience is not the "I" that is spit out the other end. The experience and the experiencer are inseparably entwined in a mysterious and profound relationship that is interdependent and co-evolving. In embracing crisis the way opens up from within it like a flower blooming from the darkest soil.

### Crisis of Emptiness

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

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

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

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

**The remedy for the crisis of emptiness is of course to step into the creative void.** The courage it takes to do this will be returned a million times over — **but the task is yours to take the first step.** Just remember, even though it may feel like your life is at stake, in the end it's just a painting!

### Crisis of Discontent

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

We're trained to be bored, desensitized to our own discomfort. Something is calling out to be recognized, but we're afraid that it means something is wrong with us, and therefore shame, guilt and denial become distracting factors.

Creative disturbance is an intelligent voice. Its purpose is to point out to us where we're holding on and what we must let go of to proceed. To bury disturbance is the greatest disservice we can give ourselves, and yet it's the accepted norm of our culture. We're surrounded by ways in which to buy our way out, to consume more in order to feel less, to take the quick fix instead of face the underlying reality. **We must reorient ourselves toward discontent, so that we view trouble as fodder for change rather than proof of failure.**

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

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

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

"Do you trust what you want or what actually is?" I ask, knowing it's a leading question. "If you trust the integrity of your own experience, then go toward the constriction, express the feeling you're having right now instead of trying to fix it."

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

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

~ T.S. Eliot

## Crisis of Criticism

Once we've had the courage to enter the fray and commit ourselves to form and color, it's not unusual to get a big dose of self-condemnation. This is the crisis of criticism. The magnitude and scope of our self-judgment is immense, and it's there looking over our shoulder at every brush stroke.

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

The crisis of criticism on some level always involves a self-referencing factor. The filter of "me" and "mine" encumbers creative action. We are unable to detach the painting from our own ideas of success or failure. We measure each proposed step by the yardstick of our own image. Will I like what I've done? Did I take the right action? Will I be recognized for my contribution? Will I be humiliated? Will I fail? But I have a better question: What if you were not defined by what you paint?

As long as the painting is entirely about my success or failure, there's no freedom to meet the challenge of creating. **The environment needed is one of no measurement, no rewards, no comparisons, no failure or success, no striving or accomplishment — only permission to become a pioneer in your own creative wilderness.** Then the painting process can become a deeply satisfying practice and a profound connection can be made. The "me" and the effort that maintains it are absent when there is absolute absorption in the process of creating.

## Crisis of Chaos

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

We tend to panic in the face of chaos and feel that our state of "not-knowing" is a limitation rather than an asset. On the contrary, chaos is the absence of organizing concepts, and therefore an indication that we've loosened our control on the situation enough to let the old structures be shaken up. Chaos is the experience of being awash in the tide of new possibilities and directions that have not yet coalesced. It is an infusion of energy that's generated from the essential risk of leaving behind our familiar points of reference, especially our criticism. No real change is possible without experiencing the divine state of "not-knowing" that is the crisis of chaos.

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

## Crisis of Meaning

*"I have a thousand brilliant lies*

*For the question:*

*How are you?*

*I have a thousand brilliant lies*

*For the question:*

*What is God?*

*If you think that the Truth can be known*

*From words,*

*If you think that the Sun and the Ocean*

*Can pass through that tiny opening*

*Called a mouth,*

*O someone should start laughing!*

*Someone should start wildly Laughing --*

*Now!"*

*~ I Heard God Laughing - renderings of Hafiz by Daniel Ladinsky*

Once, in a weeklong session, the quiet concentration of the group was broken by a wild hoot of uncontrollable laughter. Despite her attempts to stifle the eruption, Julia couldn't contain it and she ran out of the studio and into the street. Then we heard the cackling continue, amplified to the point where it became contagious and the whole studio became infected. Soon we were all laughing with her without knowing quite at what, but sure that it was somehow profound. Later, after things had settled down, Julia shared with us the story behind her spontaneous uprising. A respected medical professional, Julia uses the painting process as meditation, a chance to slow down and be with her thoughts and feelings. That afternoon she'd found herself painting something that she judged as trite and unimportant — a cute little poodle. This horrified her sense of the importance of her work, and she just couldn't accept it. But being attuned to doing what the painting demands rather than what she prefers, she continued — this time to paint an equally meaningless monkey next to the dog, in pink, her least favorite color. That's when the hooting started, and she broke open with the insight of her own self-importance and her attachment to profundity.

"I couldn't get over how stupid it was! I realized I'm always so afraid of being perceived as stupid, and there it was right in front of me for all to see." It was a tribute to her maturity in the process that she was able to accept such a poignant and relevant teaching, and to laugh it directly into her bones.

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

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

### Crisis of Completion

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

~ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

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

To be open to the moment of completion means to be willing to drop your investment in the outcome and ask yourself in full honesty: Is this journey over? Each painting has a definite destination that is not one of your own making. If you don't follow the journey through to the end, you'll feel incomplete — no matter how much paint is on the paper. Completion is reaching the ground where nothing else is required. It's an inner state of freedom and rest in which there is no running away and no holding onto. **Being complete with a painting is being complete with yourself, and that's both and ending and a beginning.**

### Change Is Us

At this time in history we have the freedom and the tools to make choices that were never before possible, yet our systems — cultural, educational, organizational, as well as psychological and spiritual — are not designed to accommodate the radical shifts being asked of us. **Fundamentally we are totally unprepared for change.** We attempt to neutralize change rather than engage it. Our attitude is adversarial: We see change as a dangerous intruder in our lives rather than a source of passion, revelation and transformation.

What does it mean to recognize that transition is the one constant in our lives, and therefore to participate with the process of change? What does it mean to stop controlling change as we are prone to do, and instead to dive in and be nurtured by the perpetual movement that swirls around us?

As the contemporary poet David Whyte says, we must be willing "to show up on life's radar screen." This means being willing to take the leap and commit the brush to form and color, the pen to ink (or finger to keyboard), the voice to sound, the body to movement. **It also means being willing to accept fully what comes from our own expression, whatever form it takes -- for this is the doorway to the inner fire.** The very part we're avoiding becomes the point of entry to the next destination in our journey. Once this transformational element of the creative process is tasted, creative challenge becomes our delight and our play. Risking becomes our excitement, that leap into the unknown, our desire. Our very weapons in this holy battle are our wildness, our outrageous irrationality, our humor and our freedom — and they want to be exercised.

In the end what's important is not whether we call ourselves artists. **The real question is whether we have the courage and the audacity to bring our own voice into the world.** David Whyte sees that as our sacred responsibility:

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

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