

The Painting Experience
Therapeutic versus Therapy
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Although the Painting Experience is often described as therapeutic, there are marked ways in which it is vastly different from the process of psychotherapy. People normally choose to go to therapy because they are suffering in some way, and seek a trained professional to guide them along their healing process. There are many reasons people are drawn to the Painting Experience, and many ways in which each individual experiences the process. In these next few pages we will explore some of the ways in which the Painting Experience is not therapy, but can at times feel quite liberating and therapeutic.

I remember when a friend first told me about the Painting Experience. She had been to a couple of workshops and shared with me the book, Life, Paint and Passion: Reclaiming the Magic of Spontaneous Expression by Michell Cassou and Stewart Cubley. She raved about the process and how it *reignited her creativity* and felt so *therapeutic*. I quickly bought the book and tried to dive in by myself, unable to justify leaving my demanding work as a new therapist for a workshop that “didn’t have a purpose”. I couldn’t understand why I would take a painting workshop that didn’t teach me how to paint, and where I didn’t end up with either something to hang on the wall, or at least a new skill? I now know that is exactly the point.

In therapy, we have a goal, or perhaps several, not the least of which is to feel better. Feeling better sometimes gets turned into a project about “fixing” what’s “wrong” with me, and then the search and “figuring out” begins. Not so with the Painting Experience. We are simply invited to show up and discover. We might, on any given day, discover that a previously despised color really is fun to paint. We might enjoy the movement of a particular brush as it spreads color. We might notice how scared we were of the idea of a particular image and

then notice the fear slip away as the image emerges. We might even notice an insight or an understanding about something that evolves out of a painting. If, however, we go searching for meaning or the answer to some question, while we paint, we've just stopped the flow. When the flow stops we are no longer listening to what is happening right now because we're chasing after some future thing. When we don't go looking for these insights in a goal directed sense, we can simply remain open to what is. Herein lies the gift of a workshop without a "purpose".

For those of you who've ever practiced a kind of mindful contemplation or have a meditation practice, you may notice some similarities. One similarity is that we are generally quiet in the studio, as in the meditation hall, which supports our deep internal listening. Differences obviously include that we are not sitting on our cushions, or on our therapist's couch, but rather moving back and forth from the paint table to our painting. More subtle distinctions involve a type of discovery process that is not outcome based.

A few common experiences that tend to show up in the Painting Experience have to do with the fear that the images (and perhaps by association, "I") will appear silly, trite, unskilled, and so forth. We can jump to the conclusion that what "I" produce reflects who I am as a person. As I begin writing this piece, I notice the same tendencies of mind. I can see the desire to sound smart, witty, clever and downright funny while at the same time show depth and authenticity. This noticing is an opportunity. Like with the Painting Experience, this is a chance for me to sit in front of the blank page and observe what the stories of the mind are telling me, and to continue on anyhow, not giving these doubting voices the power to snuff out the energy of discovery.

If this experience of the fear of expressing oneself (sounding stupid, boring, tedious) was being explored in a therapy session, we'd likely dive in to the story. We'd explore how it makes one feel, what triggered it just now, if we know where it comes from; a punitive parent, an abusive sibling, a mean teacher, witnessing too much trauma as a

child, and on and on. If we're lucky, we might be asked to explore where it resides in the body.

In therapy, sometimes we simply need a witness to our pain. The retelling of the stories, to a trusted ally, can be one way to access the pain so that we can begin the journey of understanding ourselves. At some point however, many of us grow weary of repeating the same old stories. We have "figured out" what went wrong, and the reasons for our suffering. We have gone over and over the "why" and "what now" and practiced new patterns wholeheartedly. We have been able to feel seen for who we are, heard and witnessed. After all this, sometimes big shifts occur. Sometimes the stories linger.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that therapy isn't significant or useful. It is. I know that to be true. Having done years of my own work in therapy, and worked as a psychotherapist for a couple of decades, I can attest to its importance. There comes a time, though, when the parts of the brain that govern our observation, analysis, judgments, and even fear responses feel ready to take a back seat to something else. The very human part of the brain that wants to figure things out, make meaning, and be decisive can grow weary and we notice there is a readiness for something more lively and energizing.

This makes it sound like there is some sort of linear progression. Go to therapy, *then* attend a Painting Experience workshop. They are not necessarily related that way. Sometimes in the process of painting something emerges that we want to take into therapy. Sometimes, though, we have a different experience all together. We see what shows up and the mind doesn't have to make a story about it. We feel emotions and we paint from the energy of the emotions rather than needing to explain them. If you've ever meditated, you might compare this to closely watching an itch. Lo and behold, when we really attend to it, observe it, without scratching or moving, it changes or disappears completely. Our emotions when painting can be like the itch. Impermanent. Although most of us are conditioned to try to understand and "figure out" and "fix" every single moment of our

discomfort or scare or unsettled feeling, we have a chance to step in to a new way with the Painting Experience.

Imagine for a moment walking, as Rumi says, “out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing”. Imagine not having to “know”, anything. Yikes! Aren’t we “supposed to” know stuff, and if we don’t shouldn’t we “figure it out”? That conditioning, to “know” and to “figure out” is deeply rooted in our human psyche. We needed to figure out where a Saber Tooth Tiger was hiding.

Rick Hanson, PhD and others talk about the “negativity bias”, in which the brain is continually scanning for that which is NOT working. You never know when that Saber Tooth Tiger might jump out and grab you! Except in today’s world we don’t have Saber Tooth Tigers. The brain’s negativity bias gets reinforced by the constant blaring of bad news, in an endless and easily accessible barrage of information overload. Think of it...internet, email, voicemail, texting, tweeting, television, movies, magazines, newspapers...not to mention crowded traffic, long lines, and all sorts of opportunities to observe humans behaving badly. And notice we do, which reinforces the idea that we’d “better watch out”!

So, does this hyper-vigilant striving to “know” and “figure out” work? Not really. We will always have the innate capacity to sense true danger. In fact, we are perhaps even more capable to respond appropriately if we’re not always tapped out on the stress-hormone driven rollercoaster of hyper-vigilance. When we rest in a place of noticing without reacting, we really feel it when something wonderful happens and we can let that experience in. We also probably have a greater capacity to notice when we actually do need to “do” something versus simply worry and fret.

But I digress. How does all this relate to the Painting Experience? As we pick up a brush and notice what color is calling, and what movement the brush wants to make, and where on the piece of paper it wants to go, we are simply following the energy. These are not

decisions that we need to “figure out”. This is noticing and following along. This could also be called a type of mindfulness. Some define mindfulness as paying bare attention, without judgment, decision making or commentary.

There are times when we get completely absorbed in this process, losing all sense of time and feeling so involved that nothing else matters. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi so eloquently talks about this state as being in Flow. We go with the flow of the color that called us, with the movement of the brush and where it wanted to go on the page. We do this without it being a decision process. The ego falls away, and we are completely engaged.

Sometimes we can just go with the flow. Most of us have at least a small sense of the joy and ease of being in that state. Often, though, this sense of flow, and “not knowing” is usurped by some voice in the mind that says something along the lines of, “Oh brother what a dumb, trite, silly, foolish image that is”. Or maybe a voice says, “You can’t draw that, you don’t know how”. Or perhaps it says, “DON’T put THAT up there, everyone will think...blah, blah, blah”. A major difference, then, between the Painting Experience and therapy is that in the Painting Experience we notice these thoughts and worries and go there anyway. If we were in therapy we may never get to that place. We may explore the whys and where does it come from of each of those naysaying voices in our minds and never dare to step into a new way of being. There is a time and place for that kind of rooting out. The Painting Experience is something different. In the Painting Experience we dare to paint that image we’ve been told we can’t draw. We paint that image regardless of what we think others will think (frankly they’re so absorbed in their own journey that often they are completely oblivious to anything else going on). Perhaps most importantly, we paint that image even though it scares us or we don’t know what it means. We don’t have to know. There it is, the stepping into the unknown. There is a sense of immense freedom that comes from daring to express ourselves from this place of not knowing and not needing to know. This, in and of itself, is therapeutic.

In her book, The Four-Fold Way, Angeles Arrien, American Cultural Anthropologist, tells us that in many shamanic societies, if you came to a shaman or medicine person complaining of being disheartened, dispirited, or depressed, she would ask four questions. When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? When did you stop finding comfort in the sweet territory of silence? She says that when we have stopped dancing, singing, being enchanted by stories or finding comfort in silence we have experienced the loss of soul. We could add – when did you stop painting?