

Wielding the Shield

The Art Therapist as Conscious Witness in the Realm of Social Action

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Art therapist as witness

Here is what I imagine as the ideal role for an art therapist in community art projects related to social action, social justice, or in the language of the Rockefeller Foundation, “cultural work” (Adams and Goldbard 2001). First, she moves in, takes up residence in the problem. She joins with the experts who are working on the issue at hand, the scientists who understand the biology of the die-off of the reefs, the political scientists who have tracked the tribal warfare, or the economists and sociologists who are working to redefine the role and power of the corporation in daily life. She sits with the research oncologists, environmentalists, and public health physicians who are aware of how we are creating conditions favorable to cancer in our everyday life. She joins with the priests and rabbis, the ministers, monks, and imams as they design rituals to support this work of facing and understanding what the true state of the world is today. She sits in meetings with the grassroots workers who provide shelter for the homeless or with those citizens who seek to address teenage drinking or toxic waste dumps in the neighborhood or other local issues. She puts her ear to the keyhole, sleeps on the floor, and dreams her way into things. She listens to the silence between the sentences spoken by those in every field, to those who are angry, to those who believe they know the answer, to those who are seen as culprits, to the victims as well as those who are designated recipients of service. She takes account of all stakeholders.

She herself has no agenda, no preferred outcome, but the highest good for all involved. She has swallowed and digested all her knowledge and training; she leaves the names of diseases and the cant of social problems outside the door. She takes no rhetoric, no ideology, only her paints and her canvas and her naked soul. She listens, watches, and has conversations. She makes no plans, no interventions, no diagnoses, no grant proposals, no ten-point programs. She makes marks and she waits patiently for them to speak. She lives in the midst of the problem as an artist, a visionary, a conscious witness, a mendicant. She does not come to change things but to get to know them. She does this by creating images in response to her experience of the conversations around her. She midwifes the images that the soul of the world, *Anima Mundi*, sends to her.

Maybe she paints portraits of children who have been labeled delinquent, and these reflect back to them and to their community how, when the light falls on their faces, she sees God there. Maybe she walks slowly through a violent neighborhood day after day and photographs details of beauty. Maybe she creates an exposé of miracles. Maybe she collects found objects and installs them in the center of town, inviting others to join her and meditate on the items that have been discarded along with their stories. With the neighbors in an affected area, she creates a ritual for a park after the utility company cleans out the toxic chemicals found in the soil. She is a companion in the journey, a mirror, an informed witness. She receives images that offer commentary, bread crumbs marking the trail. She offers these gifts alongside the graphs of the scientists, the reports of the experts, and the charts of the doctors. And when these people are finished speaking, she invites them to join her to make images with her in the studio where she has hung the paintings that their work has called forth from her hand. She reflects back to community members in color and form the nature of their beliefs about the state of the world. And she receives images that tell her what *Anima Mundi* wishes to share. She makes those available to the others working alongside her. She initiates a call and response with *Anima Mundi* and all of us who are engaged with it.

Advocacy

Mary Watkins (2005), archetypal psychologist and disciple of James Hillman, has said, "Advocacy – what in other contexts might be called 'activism' – flows from noticing and the erotic connection it engendered" (p.6). In other words, the job of the activist is to connect with what needs activating,

with what has been pushed outside the margins and silenced while listening carefully to the silence that is charged with unspoken truth and giving it form through the image. Watkins continues:

From the perspective of archetypal psychology social activism can be grounded in noticing, reflecting, seeing through, in reveries and in dialogue. Pathology is not overridden by premature eradication but listened to with patience and insight. (p.14)

This “seeing through” that Watkins posits lets the surface definition of a problem soften and yield its multiple dimensions to our embrace. Seeing through initiates a dialogue. The first step is for the art therapist to listen to herself to notice what calls for her witness. Where should she pitch her tent, her mishkan, the portable sanctuary she creates whenever she holds the space for images to arrive. Therefore, in her training to be a socially engaged artist, she should have been given ample time to make art in response to those stories, situations, and world sufferings that speak to her. She is not asked to design treatment plans or set goals but rather to give form to that which is waiting to be known, to see her way through to dialogue. Her contribution may be to the community soul, activating new pathways for those who are engaged in the day-to-day work to meet each other in new ways. Perhaps she holds the space where others connect:

Attentively noticing the world, we find ourselves particularly attuned to certain issues, problems and situations. As though singled out by our temperament, history, wounds and passions, particular aspects of the world soul call us to them. The path of individuation is in part a fine tuning to the ways in which we are called and obligated. (Watkins 2005, p.15)

Art therapist as social activist

Art therapists are used to working with individuals and groups. But what does the art therapist do when confronted with the poverty, violence, or despair in which her client is located? Typically, she offers art as a respite, a momentary pause in an awful reality. She offers to stand with her client in his pain, to be present. If she is ambitious, she may seek the cause of distress in the images made in art therapy. She may offer insight: Who is at fault? What can be changed? Remove the child from the home, increase the depressed woman's medication, sign the bully up for karate after school. Like most

therapists, the art therapist will locate the source of suffering within the individual life of the person before her.

Joanna Macy (1991), Buddhist scholar and long-time social activist, has worked extensively with the feelings of despair that arise when the state of the world in which therapist and client are situated is authentically encountered. She has said:

Psychotherapy, by and large, has offered little help for coping with these feelings, and indeed has often compounded the problem. Many therapists have difficulty crediting the notion that concerns for the general welfare might be acute enough to cause distress. Assuming that all our drives are ego-centered, they tend to treat expressions of this distress reductionistically, as manifestations of private neurosis... Such therapy, of course, only intensifies the sense of isolation and craziness that despair can bring, while inhibiting its recognition and expression. (p.19)

As a social activist, the art therapist must widen the lens of her vision. She must see the context of the person who is depressed: lack of health insurance, unemployment, divorce, chronic illness related to stress or environmental factors, fragmentation of families and their extended support systems due to the underlying despair that Macy talks about. If she is working within an institution, she must take into account the illness of that institution, not merely that of those individuals in her care. She must accept that her presence there as a caregiver does not inoculate her against the pathology of the system. If anything, her use of image making renders her more aware of systemic dysfunction even as her relatively low place in the hierarchy mutes her voice in institutional discourse. She must accept that the context defies her offer of paint and clay, and yet she must not turn away. She must accept the complete inadequacy of paint and clay to solve anything, and she must submit to paint and clay anyhow. For these tools are her passage to the place of all possibilities. These are her path to the imagination and hope. Here she can fall apart over and over, dissolving her resistance to her grief and strengthening her ability to say yes to life again and again – not merely on behalf of her designated client but on behalf of the institution and, most importantly, on her own behalf.

The art therapist as activist is not the “can do” American of our dominant myth who charges in, rolls up her sleeves, and pitches in, painting a rosy glow over all she sees. Instead, she must be willing to be in the paradox that,

on one hand, making art is ridiculously inadequate, and, on the other, making art in service to the pain of the world is necessary. Macy (1991) said:

Recognizing the creative powers of imagery, many call us today to come up with visions of a benign future – visions which can beckon and inspire. Images of hope are potent and necessary: they shape our goals and give us impetus for reaching them. Often they are invoked too soon, however. Like the demand for instant solutions, such expectations can stultify – providing us with an escape from the despair we may feel, while burdening us with the task of aridly designing a new Eden. Genuine visioning happens from the roots up, and these roots for many are shriveled by unacknowledged despair. Many of us are in an in-between time, groping in the dark with shattered beliefs and faltering hopes, and we need images for that time if we are to work through it. (p.25)

Grappling with despair

I found myself stunned when reading Macy's words just a few months after closing my community studio, Studio Pardes. The word *pardes* means garden in Hebrew and, in the mystical tradition, refers to the Garden of Eden. I founded the studio as an oasis, a sanctuary, intending it to be a place for those who needed to be replenished to come and make art together. I did this because that was my need, to be replenished after six years of working with two other art therapists to establish the Open Studio Project (OSP), a community art studio in Chicago.¹

One of the goals for the OSP was to provide a respite place for social activists to come and clear their vision, commune with the soul of the world. When I felt called to establish my own community studio in my home community of Oak Park, Illinois, I thought the vision would unfold naturally. I thought that, if sanctuary was offered, it would attract those who were doing the difficult work of social change. I thought that I could set up projects, like the mask project Facing Homelessness (see Chapter 3), and that those who were seeking to do the work of building a more just community would simply arrive and join in solidarity to do this work. I knew the process of art making with intention and witness was a powerful way to seek truth and to commune with the soul of the world (Allen 2005). I expected that the kind of activism described by Mary Watkins (2005) would simply manifest:

[It] arises less from egoic intention than from the slow dilation of self that Walt Whitman lyricizes; that rhythm of sympathetic inhalation of the world into the self, and the creative and erotic exhalation of the self toward the world that signals our belonging. (p.15)

I believed that after witnessing the self through intentional art making for a while, everyone – or at least some people who recognize the interconnectedness of all beings – would propose projects of social significance for which the studio could provide a centering place and source of support. In the beginning of the Facing Homelessness project, I felt I was attempting to lead the way or, to paraphrase M.K. Gandhi's (no date) well-known words, to "be the change I wished to see" (paragraph 1).

What I learned was startling and somewhat devastating. I learned that I, along with most of those I encountered in the process, was in the "in-between time" described by Macy (1991), "groping in the dark with shattered beliefs and faltering hopes" (p.25). Yet, like the coyote in the roadrunner cartoons, we continued to run at top speed toward our illusions, unaware that we had passed the edge of the abyss and hadn't yet looked down to see that there was no ground under our feet. Over and over, I watched individuals come to the dark places in themselves and in the world, and then seem to back away into images of light and wholeness seeking spiritual relief. To my horror, I found myself resenting the mandalas, the images of light and peace, which often felt cramped and inauthentic. Alarmed by the stubborn judging of others arising within me, I sought the source of my anger and feeling of isolation.

Around this time I returned to realistic oil painting, the art form I began as a young artist many years ago. I painted portraits and still life (Figure 4.1) and simply returned to seeing the beauty of the world and recording it with pleasure.

Although I continued to hold the intention to serve the Creative Source, I was not yet able to see through to what was occurring. As I sat with the work, it yielded very little witness writing – that is, dialoguing with the image and receiving guidance directly from the image (Allen 2005, pp.61–81). The work simply remained silent. Nagging in the back of my mind was the memory that I had felt called to enter a cave-like existence when I left OSP, a call I did not directly heed.

Months before I began to seek a studio space in my town there had been a number of small spaces available, but now there were none. I felt great internal pressure to have a space, and I did not want to leave one place

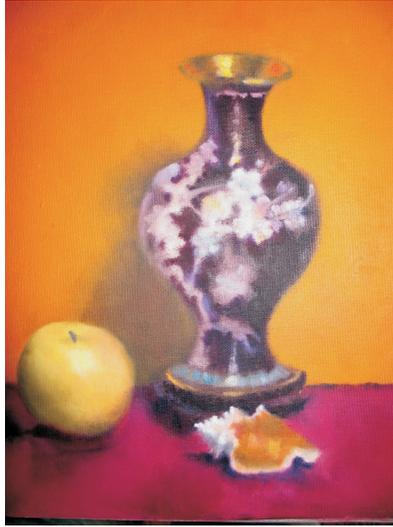


Figure 4.1 Still life

without knowing where I would go next. A space became available that was quite large and not at all cave-like. I found myself again in a public space, a storefront on a busy corner. I assured myself that I wasn't really all that tired. Soon I was actively teaching, curating shows, designing projects, hosting a drum circle and a monthly minyan, participating in the politics of the arts district in which the studio was located. In addition, I found myself meeting with all manner of people who showed up on the doorstep or called seeking consultation, help, or collaboration with projects of their own. For the four years I ran Studio Pardes, I continually rearranged things to create a more and more cave-like personal space within the larger studio where classes, workshops, and shows took place. Everything happening was great, exciting, and appreciated; yet I felt a gnawing unease.

One day I happened to reread the brochure I had written that described the mission of the studio: "to provide a place to replenish the soul." For four years the studio had done just that for many people and, to some degree, for me as well. However, during those four years, I had been recovering from my separation from OSP, the transition of my only child to college, and my husband's dark night of the soul and career change that for several years challenged the continuation of my marriage. I continued to write, teach, and make art. Although the studio process held all of that and more, it was

impossible for the cave-like state my soul was requesting to manifest amidst all the other activities and responsibilities.

The Facing Homelessness project with its many demands had finally surfaced all the residual fatigue from the life changes I had been through. I was forced to face the paradox that, although the work was exciting, was succeeding, I was too often feeling overwhelmed and empty. Like many of the other studio artists I saw around me, I, too, had touched the pain of myself and the world. I wanted to leap ahead to solutions to larger issues without dwelling deeply enough on these issues and their images. I did not grasp the scale of time necessary to really think about homelessness, for example.

I could sit for several years in a painful marital transition with the support of the studio process to ground and instruct me. I listened as the images told me to meditate on a tree in a storm; I accepted paintings of myself as a tiny figure riding the enormous energy of the Serpent of Kundalini.² I knew how to live through the “groping in the dark with shattered beliefs and faltering hopes” on a personal level, and trusted that I would be led through the storm. But, when I sought to engage with the world, in effect to open the lens of my vision a few stops more, I neglected to notice or employ the rawness and vulnerability that had been created in me through the life changes I had undergone. I expected to simply set a goal and achieve it.

In every aspect of the Facing Homelessness project, I was confronted with the fact that it wasn't just the homeless individuals who were suffering and the other participants who were somehow not suffering and had the resources to offer help. Although I knew this on an intellectual level, I finally discovered that my underlying belief still was one of separation. Instead, I realized that all of us who were involved were in need of the same things: to be held and seen, to be affirmed and welcomed by the studio and the art-making process. All of us were living life as best we knew how. Watkins says:

The imaginal registers and amplifies the calls of the world, awakening us through image and perception to what suffers and what is beautiful. With exacting specificity free arising images convey the way the soul perceives the daily realities we live amidst. Through its stark renderings, the imaginal cuts through our denial, dissolving our distance from grief and loss. (Watkins 2005, p.17)

Finally, I was delivered to the shore of grief and loss, if not yet into its sea. I received an image that set me on the road to understanding my own denial, the denial of my own homelessness. My sense of unease was strong enough to make me stop and take stock at the end of the project. For a year, I sat with my sense of failure. In spite of all the positive aspects of Facing Homelessness, I felt myself blind to something essential. Something felt hazy and out of reach. I interviewed many project participants, especially the staff of the homeless program with whom I had worked so closely. Seeing the work through their eyes, I located some clues about my distress and could release the notion of success. There were several strands of the work that had become entangled.

One strand was the provision of direct service. As an art therapist, I felt uneasy that I had not done more direct work with homeless people, even though the primary goals of the project were raising awareness and providing education. This strand in fact was addressed when a staff member began a weekly art program at one of the shelter sites. Her participation in Facing Homelessness had kindled the spark of her own creativity. I could then say, "Okay, that strand, while important, is not mine."

A second strand involved a breaking down of an illusion in my mind. I had imagined that those in a position of power in my own town could take action to end homelessness but, through ignorance, were dealing with it at times in an inhumane way. This issue shifted for me as I worked with clergy and public officials and recognized that their experience of the mask-making process simply met their *own* need for respite and recognition. They had their own fears of art and reluctance to risk. The universal joy at seeing themselves in the finished masks broke my heart and activated my compassion. I recognized that I had been harboring unreal fantasies of the location of power when in fact our goal had been to show the common humanity among our community members, housed and homeless. I had been acting as if being housed or having a position of responsibility conferred a particular set of values and powers. As I examined certain experiences that had led me to create Facing Homelessness, I became clearer still about the source of my failing.

One of the experiences that had initially inspired me was a news story in a local paper citing the purchase of new benches for a public space. The benches were constructed with a divider to make stretching out on them uncomfortable. It was stated matter-of-factly in the article that these benches were chosen to discourage homeless individuals from occupying public

space. I literally felt weak at the knees reading that article, yet I did not protest; I did not write a letter to the editor. I now see my lack of response as denial of grief.

The second event that inspired me was the decision by our local arts council to spend several thousand dollars to rent a piece of sculpture from one of the international art fairs in Chicago and install it as public art. The council did not have a sufficient budget to buy a large piece outright. The piece chosen was a carved stone sculpture created by an artist from New Zealand. Costs included cleaning and eventually shipping the piece back to the artist at the end of the rental period. It seemed ironic to me that the piece was meant as a meditation on space. The installation site was a few yards from the mall area of town where the uncomfortable benches were also placed. I was angry about this decision, believing that the money would have been better spent on programs for community members to make art themselves.

Again, I did not protest. Instead, thinking I was creatively channeling my disappointment, I engaged with the Public Action to Deliver Shelter (PADS) program director, co-wrote a grant for Facing Homelessness and presented it for funding to the same arts council. I did not reference the sculpture but I did hold out an alternative definition of public art that included the public as participant and not merely as spectator in the creation of culture. At the same time, I attempted to leapfrog over my anger and shame, my bewilderment at the feeling of being a member of a dysfunctional community that takes pride in making it hard for people to sleep on a bench or present an inconvenient image in public.

Here Joanna Macy (1991) offers help in untangling the strand that I had wound around myself to separate me from my unfeeling fellow citizens.

Thanks to his teaching of the radical interdependence of all phenomena, the Buddha set compassion in a context that extends beyond our personal virtue; it affirms the basic nature of our existence. He taught that social institutions co-arise with us. They are not independent structures separate from our inner lives, like some backdrop to our personal dramas, against which we can display our virtues and courage and compassion. Nor are they mere projections or reflection of our own minds. As institutionalized forms of our ignorance, fears and greed, they acquire their own dynamics. Self and society are both real, and mutually causative. They co-arise or to use Thich Nhat Hanh's phrase, they "inter-are." (p.96)

The third and final strand had to do with my confusion about my identity. Who was I in relation to my community? An artist? An art therapist? An entrepreneur? A social activist? At times I functioned in any and all of these roles but without sufficient discriminating awareness. On some level, I was attempting to enlighten people while feeling quite separate, even superior. I *was not* like these people who despise the homeless. As we become aware of the messy and uncomfortable feelings that becoming engaged in the world arouse, we must recognize our natural response to them. Some will deny through withdrawal into a circumscribed life, seeking an idealized surrounding where evidence of social problems is muffled:

We can never avoid what we seek to escape, least of all the political and economic institutions into which we are born. But by virtue of their dependence on our participation, by vote or consumption, lobby or boycott, they can change. They mirror our intentions, our values and ideals. (Macy 1991, p.105)

Others, like me, will become active through an act of will, trying to avoid the step of falling apart. Yet Macy (1991) reminds us that we must work to realize that “going to pieces or falling apart is not such a bad thing. Indeed it is essential to evolutionary and psychic transformations as the cracking of our outgrown shells” (p.22). Still, to be active in the social realm means being acted upon as well:

As doer is indeterminate with deed, modified by his own thoughts and actions, so are his objectives modified. For, however he articulates these objectives, they reflect his present perceptions of reality – which are altered, however slightly, by every cognitive event. Means are not subordinate to ends so much as creative of them – they are ends in the making. (p.105)

As an artist, therapist, and teacher, I am used to being able to construct my own reality – within certain bounds, of course, but with a great deal of freedom. I was surprised to find out that the aggregate of energy in some ways determines what can occur. In the realm of social action, a great deal of the necessary work involves building social and relational capital on a wide if not deep scale (Putnam 2000). This is far different from the relational capital of a therapist who builds deeply with a few people. Without a wide constituency, social projects cannot go forward. As an art therapist, it was difficult to modulate the level of engagement; my expectations of others were not in line with reality. I essentially projected my dreams and aspira-

tions onto those with whom I had built modest relational capital as if they were collage elements in one of my art pieces. Volunteers in the mask project were delighted to participate in the activity as offered, but it did not arouse in them a need or desire for a deeper engagement with ideas about how to end homelessness, my personal grandiose and hidden agenda.

Toward resolution

Finally, all events led me to a place of profound disappointment, grief, and feelings of helplessness. I made my intention to understand myself as an artist in relation to community. Figure 4.2 emerged. In this image, a house speaks to a fool, a man of “disparate parts.” I asked these images to speak to me.



Figure 4.2 House and Fool

House: I am welcoming him home. He was off on a quest to receive his shield, now his disparate parts are not desperate. One cannot enter community without a shield. One cannot come in too open, too exposed or the rest of the group will tear you limb from limb. It is just a fact, not a failing. Human beings are hungry, and they will eat you. You will eat each other. I am a structure. I happen to look like a house because that is a structure that you understand, and a home is a good metaphor for community. But most people are homeless, if not literally

then figuratively. If you show up looking like a house, they will move into all your rooms and eat your food and sleep in your bed. They will drop their socks on your floor. You cannot be a house. This poor guy is a little like a dunce; he isn't even a house and he invites everyone in until he can't stand it and has to fly away. But he isn't really a bird. He needed to go away to receive his shield.

I say: House, I notice you do not have a door.

House: That is correct, I told you, I am not really a house. I am an idea. Another idea is a shield.

I say: Why? Shouldn't community be about putting down your shield?

House: No, that is where you are mistaken. This shield concentrates power and mirrors it back to others; they can see themselves in its reflection and bask in its glow. Then they do not have to eat you alive. Creative works are shields – sometimes you can transform into a house, a boat, an oasis or a whip, a cave, a closet, a grassy hill, an ice cream soda – but you must be sure to know how to keep changing back into nothing. That is what the shield is for.

I did not have a shield. I did not take time to be a conscious witness to my own feelings about being a citizen in my community. I created a project about facing something from an intellectual place as if I knew something that others did not know. In fact, I did not know who I was. As I reflected on these matters, I remembered one of the men who became involved in the Facing Homelessness project. One day he asked me for a ride to the bus stop. Then, at the bus stop, he had no fare. A few days later, I saw him in the park and he needed money. He became one of my teachers of the shield. I entered into this work without sufficient preparation. I did not have a shield and was experimenting with my identity. Who was I, a therapist, a friend, a fellow artist, simply someone with more resources than someone else? It isn't possible to be all things or everything that anyone may want in real life as it is within the imaginal realm. Having the image process provides a shield that must be used with discernment both to mirror and to protect. One cannot be in the cave and on the street simultaneously. Perhaps the cave is where the shield is fashioned, the street where it is wielded.

Yet, Rabbi Tarfon (Telushkin 1991), the second century Jewish sage, says we cannot refrain from work in the world because it is too big for us to finish. Neither can we wait until we are ourselves complete, for it is in engagement with the world that we are completed. Periodic cave time with

substantial reflection must precede and follow engagement in the public sphere. Using our shield to reflect reality to those around us is an artistic martial art. Before we enter into such work, we must chart the dark and grief-filled places, map them and dwell there. We must also remember to dwell in long time, remembering our heritage as atoms in the creation of the universe, not merely the particular form we happen to take in our present life. When our work changes, we must take time to forge the appropriate shield to serve that work. Finally, we must periodically turn the shield toward our own face, gaze into it, and see who gazes back.

Notes

- 1 The Open Studio Project (OSP) moved to Evanston, IL, in 2000. Art therapist Dayna Block is the Executive Director. She has actualized the OSP as an arts and social service agency and continues to teach the studio art process there. For more information, see www.openstudioproject.org.
- 2 The basic principle of Kundalini in contemplative practice is the holding of energies so that they may dissolve into more subtle forms. See *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* by Madhu Khanna (2003, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions). This image is available for viewing in color at www.patballen.com in the “virtual studio.”

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