

There is a Sufi story about a council of fishes that gathered to discuss a topic important to them all: whether or not a substance called “water” existed. Fish “scriptures” had taught that their kind took life and breath, in fact every aspect of their very existence, from water. Water both sustained their lives and was the source of all life.

The council seemed divided on the question, however. One fish said that fish had no business trying to understand water. It was too mysterious. Another said water could only be understood through one’s intuition. Third fish demanded absolute proof, insisting there was no such thing as water. Yet another fish said they would never understand water if they tried to describe it in words... instead they must experience water.

Finally, the council decided to seek out a wise fish in the deepest reaches of the sea who they felt could settle this issue. They made the long journey and asked, *“We have heard that water is the source and origin of all, but none of us has ever seen or experienced this water. Can you demonstrate its reality to us?”*

The wise fish floated in silence for a while and then said, *“Oh, fish, if you could bring me one thing that is not sustained by water, then I might show you the essence you seek. But, understand this, water is everywhere. This endless ocean that surrounds us is made up of it. Water has held us up from the very moment of our creation. Your voyage is but*

*an inward journey, and in the entire ocean, none is swimming beside you, under you, over you, except for the all, the one... this Water of life."*

This endless, all-encompassing ocean calls to mind Indra's Net, as Alex Grey relates in his *Mission of Art*:

*In the abode of Indra, Lord of Space, there is a net that stretches infinitely in all directions. At every intersection, each "eye," of the net there is a jewel so highly polished and perfect that it reflects every other jewel in the net."*<sup>1</sup>

And Matthew Fox relates Black Elk's teaching on the presence of the divine within each of us:

*The heart is a sanctuary at the center of which there is a little space, wherein the Great Spirit dwells, and this is the Eye. This is the Eye of the Great Spirit by which he sees all things, and through which we see him.*<sup>2</sup>

In our fast-paced cellular world, it is up to the artist to bring about an awareness of the Divine in our midst. It is up to the artist to take on the role of the wise fish and help us understand and appreciate our connection to the Divine. Grey tells us, "*Art can point to the transcendental source of wisdom.*"<sup>3</sup> An artist is called to use his or her imagination to awaken the imagination of others, to enable others to better experience and then express and share their relationship with the divine mystery through their own creativity.

My own paintings are abstract contemplative brush paintings done with acrylic paints. At first glance they might seem without clear "meaning" but each is a representation of a particular energy field I have worked with,

whether it be the Serpent Mound in Ohio, the Chartres Cathedral, or someone's back yard. We learn in Grey's *Mission of Art*

*The abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock flung large fields of drips and swirls of paint on his canvases with the intention of "making energy visible."*<sup>4</sup>

When I sit down to create my energy paintings, I view a drawing Allen Ginsberg did for me of a serpent eating its own tail, a circular entity encompassing the sun, moon and stars. While I was at Naropa, I had the privilege of studying with Allen for two years. He had recently been diagnosed with cancer and had switched to a macrobiotic diet. My wife Jini and I had a long background in natural foods, and on occasion, after a full day at Naropa, we would assist Allen with food preparation. While preparing a meal, we often discussed Japanese and Chinese poetry, haiku in particular, a common passion we shared.

One evening Allen burned a lentil and rice dish while we were debating positioning of a single word in one of Buson's haiku. And Allen said: *"you know, it is the quality of attention that makes things sacred."* I got my journal and wrote down *"It is the quality of attention that makes things sacred."* And that is how I try to approach all my creative endeavors.

An artist must, through some form of contemplative practice, develop this same *"quality of attention,"* and then needs to *"pay attention to what he pays attention to."* Intention is critical to creation of truly spiritual art. *"It all comes down to intention,"* said Alyson, as she looked up from her painting. *"Intention directs an artist's aim and mission. It makes the*

*difference between whether artists recognize their own spiritual nature and whether they bring that spirit into their work.”<sup>5</sup>*

I have been to many galleries and art fairs, and I have the ability to dowse the energy fields of works of art. It is not surprising that when I find a work of art of high vibration, the artist relates how it was produced on a bright, sunny day when everything was going well, and it was easy to get in to the rhythm and flow of the work. And just as many times, when I dowse a low energy, the artist explains that the piece was done on a dreary, rainy day, or they had just had an argument with someone, or money was tight, or they needed to “churn out” twenty pieces to have enough for the show. As Alex Grey reminds us regarding the intention of an artist in the creative process,

*A crucial ingredient to making any practice function is wholehearted intention. A prayer said by rote without inner understanding contains no blessing. A painting made without full engagement of the artist’s spirit is an empty shell.<sup>6</sup>*

The energy an artist puts in to his work, and the energy it manifests is critical to contributing to the overall spiritual resonance of both viewer and the Divine. Alex Grey says, “*Artists need to consider what type of energy they want to put into the world... the question of the artist’s mission is only answerable within the crucible of their own soul.*”<sup>7</sup> Artists must journey to the “*crucible of their own soul,*” for one can neither follow the path of another nor compare their creative and spiritual path with that of another.

An artist’s creative journey is unique, and whatever path one takes,

It is god calling you. There should be no compulsion in the work of an artist and there are many who believe each soul journeys alone. There are as many ways to become an artist as there are people searching to express themselves artistically. Beyond the individual, the spiritual world is universal and infuses the whole of the natural world.

Every time we pray or meditate or find our spiritual center, we tap in to a vast reservoir of creativity where we can make deposits during times of plenty and withdrawals during times of need. We must join in this process on behalf of all beings everywhere to keep this reservoir replenished. Like our fish in the great ocean, we are all expressions of a universe committed *“for its entire fourteen billion years of existence to creativity... All of life, it turns out, is busy being creative.”*<sup>8</sup>

When we engage in contemplative practices, we become still, and we open ourselves to a myriad of creative possibilities. As one of my Tibetan Buddhist teachers once said, *“you cannot see your reflection in running waters, but only in still waters.”* Channels and paths are available during prayer and meditation, and it is here we commune with all others who are sharing in a region of “sacred space” that singular moment of transcendence of the mundane and ordinary in our lives.

Entering into the creative and limitless possibilities of the present moment is imperative. The habit of ignoring our present moments in favor of others yet to come leads directly to a pervasive lack of awareness of the web of life in which we are imbedded. It severely limits our

perspective on what it means to be connected to each other and the world around us.

Time passes in moments, moments which rushing past define the path of a life, just as surely as they lead towards its end...how rarely do we stop to examine that path, to see the reasons why all things happen...to consider whether the path we take in life is our own making, or simply one in to which we drift with eyes closed...But what if we would stop, pause to take stock of each precious moment before it passes... might an artist then be able to tap in to the vast reservoir of untapped creativity? For someone to get at the core of their spiritual essence, one must first get to know oneself, for no one knows “water,” or the Divine, who has not first known him or her self.

Art in its purest form has in its expression the ability to focus our attention on the deep wellspring of creativity in each precious moment.

*Though the artist, the art, and viewer are all impermanent, art can provide evidence of contact with the universal creative force beyond time. Art has a function and a mission to interpret the world, to reveal the condition of the soul, to encourage our higher nature and awaken the spiritual faculties within every individual. Art can be a form of worship and service.<sup>9</sup>*

In closing I offer this reflection from an interview of Bob Dylan. He was asked about his songwriting and to what he attributed his “artistic vision.”. Dylan replied that “*it comes out of that wellspring of creativity... it is a time of penetrating magic.*”

End-notes

- <sup>1</sup> Grey, A. (1998). The Mission of Art. Boston, Massachusetts, Shambala Publications, Inc., p. 24.
- <sup>2</sup> Fox, M. (2002). Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet. New York, NY, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, p. 52.
- <sup>3</sup> Grey, p. 29
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 165
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 205
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., P. 135.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., P. 30
- <sup>8</sup> Fox , p. 142
- <sup>9</sup> Grey, p. 232

Bibliography

- Fox, M. (2002). Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet. New York, NY, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.
- Grey, A. (1998). The Mission of Art. Boston, Massachusetts, Shambala Publications, Inc.