

## Is Creativity Dangerous?

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People visiting my studio who like my paintings often ask if I teach art. I have always replied that I don't – I am stingy with my limited time to paint -but a year ago it occurred to me that I might help people engage in creative work as an alternative or complementary? way to do analysis. It would not be art therapy because I would not interpret the content of what they did but focus exclusively in the process. This group work would give me an opportunity to debunk certain long held beliefs about creativity, talent, originality, the role of the accidental, premature closure leading to mistakes, the importance of destructiveness.

For a year I have been leading a small group of people who responded to an announcement entitled, "Expanding the Limits". These are not artists or have special artistic inclinations, they have had or are still in analysis and were intrigued with the idea of a different way of freeing themselves from paralyzing constraints in several aspects of their lives. The group would give me an opportunity to put into action my own beliefs about the creative process developed from painting for over 30 years, from writing papers on creativity, from a very first paper which appeared on Psychology Today in 1978 under the title "Creativity as Communication", from documenting the evolution of a single painting and keeping track of my conscious thoughts as I worked on it and the journal of dreams that had to do with it. My beliefs have also stemmed from writings about artists such as Max Beckmann, Picasso, Lucian Freud, aspects of my own work and a major retrospective paper accompanied with 112 slides that I prepared in 1999 for the IPA Congress in Santiago, Chile and that I gave in Paris in 2000, in French! - the most scary and gratifying experience I have ever had.

My role in this art experience group has been to mind the members as they work and to mind the work itself. I move around from one to the other as they work flat on a large table in my studio, commenting on what I see, what seems different, promising, worth developing and I also let them work by themselves. I provide them with materials and let them choose the size of paper or canvas they feel like working with, a very telling indicator of where they are at the time and how much freedom they are willing to tackle. I don't let them give up and encourage them to continue to look for something of value in what they do, to forget factors such as balance and harmony, so stressed in painting classes.

Reflecting on what I have learned with this group, with all my work before this group, and with myself while painting, I have to conclude that creativity IS dangerous. That is why so many gifted people give up half way. It is dangerous not only because, just like in one's analysis, one gets in touch with unwanted aspects of oneself but primarily with one's destructiveness. As a new member of the group tried to continue putting painting on paper she stopped, and turning to me said in exasperation. " Here is where I Quit!"

She had attempted to paint many times in her life, taken various art classes but would come to this stumbling block. This time around I was watching her and her painting. I asked her to show me the smallest area that she liked and encouraged her to develop that area and forget the whole painting, the notions of balance and harmony expected from finished work that were running through her head. During the next hour she not only worked in that very small area but expanded her doing to cover two thirds of the painting in complete abandonment. And, working in layers, stayed with that painting for three consecutive sessions. The judgment of balance and harmony became not only appropriate but necessary in the last layer. The workings of her unconscious and conscious mind were at play and could proceed smoothly from free expression to judgment and back to free expression in a constant flow.

It is paradoxical that the move away from narcissism that is necessary when one paints is at the same time the most acute expression of the self. I presented this notion to Neville Symington during his conference at LAIPS three months ago. He agreed that art making represents such a paradox. Artists are aware of this paradox when they distance themselves from the work to be able to see it as a separate object and to be able to do the editing the work as separate requires. As they pay close attention to this separate object in front of them what develops comes to represent the essence of who they are. No wonder it is dangerous! While they pay attention to IT, they see themselves in the mirror and many times they don't like what they see. This is better observed when there is a slow down in the process and people get a chance to move around and see what other people are doing, something I encourage them to do.

They then go back to their own work, appreciating its uniqueness. However, they may like what they see in others and decide to incorporate it into their own work. "Time to steal!", I say to them. This is so frequently frowned upon in art schools as they value true originality. So we encourage unashamed stealing from here and there, voicing their stealing as they come to realize that their work will be enriched in the process. They not only come to appreciate their own work but the work of the others in the group. Composer John Corigliano wrote the program notes about his First Symphony premiered here in Los Angeles some 15 years ago. It was an account of all the stealing he did while working on it, an appropriation that resulted in a most original work.

People are afraid of making mistakes, and art making is no exception. It is immensely freeing to the group members to be encouraged to make mistakes and to learn how to profit from them rather than quickly dispose of them. After all, we go from mistake to mistake, from destruction and reparation many times over in the course of a single painting. The best aspects of an art piece are frequently the result of a mistake that forced the artist to develop the work further. One of the group members recently looked at what she had done and exclaimed, "I wrecked it!" "I always wreck everything! I shouldn't have come today! And, discouraged, she added, "I better leave early." The idea that she could build something new on top of the wreckage had never occurred to her. She has since been able to appreciate the wreckage as the fertile ground of new work and has ended up liking what she does with it. She has learned to look at her own destructiveness in a totally different way, making peace with it. Of course I don't underestimate the role I play in helping people like her to accept destructiveness as a necessary ingredient in the

cycles of destructiveness and reparation: I am the new mother who is not afraid of their destructive impulses and I am there and steady, minding them and minding their work. And the others, the siblings, are there learning too. As Sabina Spielrein wrote already in 1932, destructiveness represents an essential aspect of creativity.

I also encourage them to stay in the not knowing place Bion wrote about. That was the most refreshing aspect of the first art class with Keith Finch I joined in LA many years ago. Nobody in that class knew what they were doing and were not afraid of admitting it! What a relief from the clinical training in psychology at UCLA where omnipotence was rampant among professors and students alike.

If all of this rings a bell when it comes to a psychoanalyst's work is because it does. A few years ago I gave a workshop at NCP entitled "Creativity: From the Art Studio to the Consulting Room". Colleagues attending this workshop were expressing the same concerns as the members in my art experience group. As I mentioned at the beginning, I wrote a blurb about the art experience group entitled Expanding the Limits because overcoming the fear of creative work is tantamount to a substantial increase in the capacity to withstand doubt and uncertainty. This capacity translates into a new freedom. And isn't this also the goal of psychoanalysis, the pursuit of freedom? Freedom to think, freedom to speak one's mind, freedom to feel, freedom to confront oneself? In the case of creativity, we have to add the freedom to plumb oneself.

An art dealer from Germany visited my studio recently. I showed him some of the work by the art experience group members. He could not believe that it was not that of mature artists or graduate students in an art department. It is clear to me, I told him, that the reason their work looks so good is that they are overcoming the dangers of creative work and plunging into the joys of creativity. One of the most gratifying aspects of this work, however, is that, in moving away from narcissism, the group members have come to develop a true appreciation for each other and for each other's work. They really look at each other's work! And one of them, the most recalcitrant, brings a camera and takes photos of the work in progress by the other members. He said to one of them, "You work in layers. Hold on! I want to keep track of the layers before you continue".