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Answering the Call: The Role of Transformational Art Processes

By Aviva Gold

Introduction

The reality of ecological devastation and suffering of people, even when not directly in our face, lies always on the edge of our psyche. All else seems secondary while our air, water, food, night sky, silence and earth, become polluted. Images of war and the devastation of all living creatures bombard us. Cell phones, texts, tweets, sound bytes, emails invade, distract and drain us. Often I feel helpless and in despair. I want to contribute. I want to make a difference.

This I know: Art in all its varieties is the most potent transformational magic available to humankind. Art is a revelatory spiritual and healing practice; it is our universal heart-opening language. Art offers expression, detoxification and clearing of shadows, clearing of personal and collective unconscious blocks. The Transformational Art Process which I teach, "Painting From The Source[®]," is an intuitive unplanned painting expression, which deepens with the addition of multiple modalities such as sound, movement and poetic dialog. Such spiritual creative experiences can initiate "breakthrough," ease personal and collective angst, and open the heart to the needs of our planet and fellow beings. Creating alone or in a group can also be fun, playful and joyous, offering opportunities to lighten up. It provides an opportunity to see life in a larger perspective!

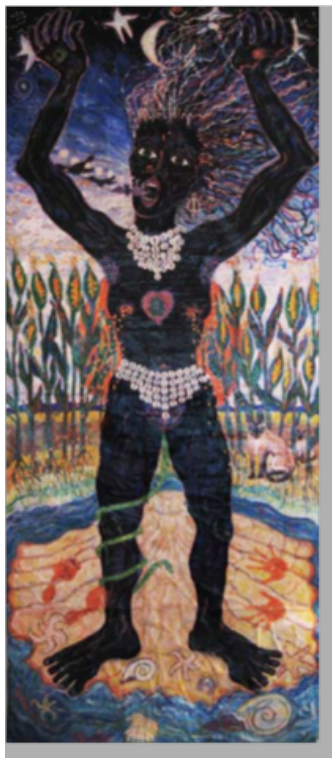
I also know that each of us is called to participate in our own unique way. If you are uncertain of your purpose or not yet found what gives you meaning, then I invite you to paint. And, please note: any reference to positive attributes of the process of painting, applies to all creative modalities, such as dance, music, song, poetry, theater, and new combinations. When you engage in transformational art processes what excites you, what makes you feel more alive will become obvious. As Carl Jung says, "Trust what gives you meaning and let it be your guide."

My personal search

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s my own personal search for meaning and healing brought me face-to-face with the “Wild Woman Archetype,” an energy and being who has disrupted, guided and reassured me in my life journey. Powerful female figures – birthing creatures of all sorts – had shown up in my paintings for years. Then in the mid-1990s a friend gave me the audio tapes of “Women Who Run With The Wolves” by Clarissa Estes. I became obsessed with listening to these tapes filled with myths and fairy tales dealing with the Wild Woman Archetype. I cried and laughed. Hearing the stories of the Wild Woman Archetype was an awakening for me. The stories helped me understand, accept and value aspects of my life and paintings of which I had previously felt ashamed. Realizing that the Wild Woman was a strong active aspect of myself was reassuring and healing.

A few years later I was teaching a workshop in New Mexico. I painted a dark female face on a single sheet of paper. The one-page face demanded a body and it took a year of adding on papers, painting, allowing her voice, dance, sounds to come through me and listening to her guidance to finally complete this 10-foot tall painting. She is indeed the essence of Wild Woman, our dark powerful shadow calling out for earth healing through authentic creativity. She has various names: Dark Eros, Black Venus, Lilith, The Great Cosmic Mother.

Black Wild Woman hangs on my wall wherever I live cheering me on, guiding me, reminding me of the purpose in all I do. People who see her are either deeply moved or agitated. No one remains neutral.



Black Venus by Aviva Gold

We are living in a time when more people feel desperate ... cut off from their authentic self and purpose; thus a window of opportunity opens. I believe and here propose, that the process of creating intuitive art is a potent, necessary and radical form of activism and spiritual practice. Opening our hearts and ultimately the heart of our culture to authentic creativity is our best hope for positive change in the way we live on earth.

Going deeper: Art medicine

“The Soul does not think without a picture” – Aristotle

A more urgent, pressing, direct and essential use of art on a grander, more earthy, popular scale, is what we need. What I call creating Source Art is an intentional ritual for individual, group, and planetary healing. Ritual is a set of actions, which marks the sacredness of life and is performed mainly for its symbolic mystical value. James Hillman, Jungian Analyst and author of *Re-Visioning Psychology*, reminds us that “the soul is exposed and available during a crisis. The ego drops away and we come in touch with the essentials of life and death.” Thus an opportunity arises to take a risk, to try something new. In practicing our art, we practice life, we bring heart to mind, we discover the universal Sacred in everything, (including our perceived enemies). I believe the practice of alchemical Soul Art is a natural way to stay connected to our higher self.

Sadly, many of us turn off the switch. I hear the lament from thousands who come to my workshops: “I stopped painting when my third grade teacher said, ‘Don’t you know that daisies aren’t blue?’;” “My father would not pay for college if I studied art;” “I lost touch with my inspiration and my paintings became stagnant when the gallery and public wanted to buy the same look;” “I got so busy with life/survival, there was no time to paint (write, sing, make music).” Does this sound familiar?

I taught art to children – all ages and socio-economic groups – in New York City and other locations for many years. I noticed that most children in our culture somewhere between the age of 7 to 11 stop creating from the Source, even if they show special interest and/or promise, due to some imposed standard they are often discouraged.

The goal is to empower each person with whatever level of creative expression is right for them. There is no need for intermediaries, experts, or enhancing psychedelic substances. Each person has their own direct experience of the divine Source through creative sensuous and ecstatic body engagement. This is the process we encounter through the Painting From The Source process.

Power of the tribe: Connect with others to find yourself

“umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (“a person is a person through (other) persons”).
– Zulu maxim related to South Africa Philosophy of Ubuntu.

A workshop participant speaks: *“My own painting only grows and gets fed by painting with others. I know that painting is meant to be a social activity, a sharing, and a way to know*

each other without the encumbrance of words. I wrote in my journal, 'Have just done the intensive Painting From The Source. I saw art in a completely different way. It moved me from a place other than beauty. Everyone revealed himself or herself on the paper; they couldn't help it. And my whole process was so much more honest than I normally am with myself and I felt like I came that much closer to really expressing myself.'

Imagine you are in a large room with empty white papers on the walls around you and a table filled with a spectrum of colored paints along with a variety of different sized paintbrushes. As you sit among your "tribe mates" in a circle you are aware that this is the 21st century. Like you, these people bear modern titles and personas – lawyer, teacher, salesperson, parent, homemaker, professional painter, therapist or corporate executive. Like you they are weighed down with everyday concerns. Still, even before you hear their introduction and see their embryonic paintings, you sense deeper tales beneath them.



Coming together to paint and share, the experience transforms this group of 21st century citizens into a primordial gathering of noble souls. Imagine this group as your ancient ancestral tribe which has taken time out from daily hunting, gathering and other survival tasks. Perhaps the occasion is a solstice, full moon, harvest or hunt. You are gathering once more to infuse everyday life with the absolute need to connect with a deeper purpose and to the eternal Self that existed before you were born and that will exist after your death. The magic and alchemy of creativity will be both your vehicle and memorial.

You can see how simply coming together in a circle with the intention to create can activate your primal tribal memory. A safe spiritual container is further established with an inspiring prayer/ invocation. After lighting a candle on our altar, I ask participants to take a few deep breaths, settle down and bring their attention inward to their bodily sensations.

I then say some variation of the following ecumenical invocation:

“Great Spirit, You that energy which started the universe in motion, be with us in this painting retreat; Great Spirit, You that evolutionary creative energy which oversaw the formation of our star, sun and solar system eons ago, be with us, protect and guide us this weekend (day, week); You, Creative Source of all, who oversaw the cooling of our molten planet flung from our star sun, oversaw the separation of our future moon from our molten crust; Yes, you that energy, present as the speck of DNA in a tidal pool, evolved into swimming things, crawling scaly creatures, winged creatures, furry beings and two-legged ones like us, please be with us, protect and guide us as we open our vulnerable selves to your creative powers. Please flow through us as we put brush to paper; give us what we most need even though it may look very different from what we thought we needed.”



I hope you can feel how this invocation, which places us in the bigger picture of deep time and space, further grounds the intention for an auspicious and revelatory inner journey. New tribe mates open their eyes feeling an energy shift in themselves and the room, they are more present, rooted, expectant, heart open toward each other. I ask people to look around the circle and make eye contact with the souls with whom they will be journeying.

The candle flickers within the circle revealing eager faces. It is time for brief introductions. I ask, “tell us your true name (people sometimes choose a special painting name); with no premeditation, tell us briefly your greatest hope for this painting retreat, and, if you are aware of any fear, what is your greatest fear?” Often there are tears as people speak. Often people’s greatest hope and fear are the same. For instance, “My greatest hope is to be fully present, to be free. And my greatest fear is to be fully present and to be free.”

Now to paint, to pray. The Studio, the painting chapel, feels pregnant with impending mystery.

Another participant speaks to the power of the tribe:

"I gave in to the paint, to the brushes, and to my inner voice. I watched others paint with the reverence you had instilled in us. I could almost hear the buzz of excitement as people pushed through their fear and experimented with the unknown. There were no judgments or criticisms, just loving support. Once, I heard laughter behind me and was sure they were laughing at me. But my trust in the group was stronger than the voice of paranoia. I let go of the thought and continued painting. A place in me that I thought was dried up and dead appears to be alive and well. I am proud and grateful to be part of the painting tribe."

It becomes clear that Source Painting in a group provides all the elements to fully rekindle and reflect our true altruistic nature, embodying the African philosophy of Ubuntu. The process emphasizes that now is a time when you must connect with others to find yourself.

Transformation, transmutation, alchemy, individuation, & beyond

"Creation is the place the Sacred waits to be discovered."
– Rabbi Arthur Green, Sacred Evolution

We are talking about change for the better, talking about going through a process that somehow alters us for the better. In the end we are talking about spiritual Source creativity as a catalyst for changing us, and thus the world, for the better. The concepts and reality of transformation, transmutation, alchemy, and individuation are germinal to our quest.

We understand transformation as a marked change in appearance, behavior and character, as in biology, the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, and/or of child to adult. For our purposes it implies an evolved change/growth in form or attitude while keeping the same basic genetics.

Transmutation is a metaphysical concept, implying a basic radical change from one form, condition, substance to another, like the alchemical concept of changing lead into gold. This is a more miraculous, magical aspect of transformation. The Freudians alternate the word, "transmutation," with "sublimation," the process of re-channeling sexual energy or passion into art making. In both transmutation and transformation there is a change from a more raw, common, less evolved substance or state of being into a more inspiring, precious, highly evolved substance or state.

Alchemy is both a philosophy and an ancient practice, which contributed to the basics of modern chemistry and has been practiced throughout Asia, the Middle East and then in Europe in a complex network of schools and philosophical systems spanning at least 2,500 years into the 20th century. Alchemy focused on the attempt to change base metals like lead into gold, investigating the preparation of the "elixir of longevity" and achieving

ultimate wisdom. A legendary substance called the “Philosopher’s Stone” was sought as a catalyst to activate these alchemical transmutations.

Finding the “Philosopher’s Stone” has never been recorded. Nor is there any record of changing lead into gold or finding the elixir of eternal youth. However, I see the alchemical process and activation of the Philosopher’s Stone as metaphorically necessary and alive in the creative process; I propose that after thousands of years of losing the body, the feminine principle and over-activating the mind and intellect, the “stone,” the key/catalyst which unlocks the transmutation magic, is right above our nose, the pineal gland also known as the “third eye.” As described in Eastern Yogic teachings the third eye becomes re-activated and opens during an authentic body-centered creative process. So true art is alchemy, transmutation, raw materials of paper and paint into magic living painted beings (which alter the viewer as well as the painter) and is only possible with the activated mind/body which I also call the Awakened Artist’s Soul. This finding the Stone within ourselves, touching the balance of feminine/ masculine energy, is both the journey and destination of life.

Carl Jung and analytic psychology call this quest of discovering the unique individual you truly are, the process of “Individuation.” I understand the process of awakening the artist’s soul and the individuation process to be the same; in both you activate the “Stone” within. The Jungians further explain individuation as the process of actualizing your individual blueprint through examining and listening to imagery patterns and archetypes in your dreams and waking imagination. You then begin to see your individual deep values and nature separate from those of your family and culture.

The process of submerging in Source Art fosters individuation as well. Both Source Art and Jungian analysis unfold and activate the “Stone,” in each of us. I believe, as did Jung, that a human being is inwardly whole, but most of us have lost touch with important parts of ourselves. Finding our own Philosopher’s Stone is finding our true self. In the creative process it is both activated and actualized.

In the early 20th century, Jung, who was going through his own mid-life crisis, fell into and experimented with a waking dream exploratory process, using imagination, painting, dialoging and journaling. This was a profoundly powerful catalyst for his own individuation process which he called “Active Imagination.” Painting From The Source taps into the same universal dream energy of Active Imagination...taps into the collective unconscious but with the important addition of movement, sound, ritual and performance art in a tribal communal setting. Source Art emphasizes the feminine principle, the full engagement with body, which is now essential for our progress to sanity. Non-verbal, evocative movement and sound, passionate emotion, sensuality in tribal circles has not been previously valued and embraced by our culture. These feminine attributes (in both men and woman) must now take center stage to support a global individuation process of human consciousness.



These subtle energies flow from the activities of life, consciousness and spirit. They create an energy ecology, a second ecology of the earth, that surrounds and permeates the world and is deeply interconnected with the biological ecology around us.

–David Spangler Writer and Spiritual Teacher

Tribal source circle in action

Now we move to the cauldron in which the magic gets stirred. Over the past 35 years I have offered a safe, sacred container to facilitate thousands of people in group gatherings worldwide through this transformational healing painting journey. Always, at some point, I look around the room while people are engaged in amazing courageous paintings, all so different yet the same in authenticity. I sense a primal stirring, a sense of shared trust...goose bumps, breath of fresh air, sanity.

Periodically we sit in a circle surrounded by our birthing paintings. Each painter, when called by an inner prompting, courageously allows the movements and sounds in his/her painting to come through him/her as we all witness. I call this “embodiment,” as we allow the painting to borrow our voice and our entire body, what Shamans have traditionally called “shape shifting.” This may move into spontaneous movements, dance, sounds or song ... often surprising the painter and witnesses alike. Sometimes wild movements, growls, screams and shaking erupt, alarming us. Sometimes there is silence, song, humor or vulnerability, often tears.



Sometimes an image, a blue bird, a gnarled brown troll or a mighty oak, will poetically speak to us through the painter's altered voice... rumbling like a tree or squeaky like a bird or anguished like a desolate troll... startling, delighting, deeply moving us to tears or laughter, awe. Sometimes the group spontaneously gathers around an anguished person with hands held toward that person chanting and sending healing energy.

Do people's health, behavior and attitudes change for the better after the group art making experience? ... Yes! always and constantly. People go home altered for good. They make positive changes in their lives, health and habits. They start becoming active in ecology and social reform, making necessary contributions in their communities. Often the people in the group stay in contact long after our retreat. And always the paintings when fully completed are extraordinary. Many people invite friends to paint when the workshop is over.



Painting and expressing your archetypal shadows and guides in a group setting fosters your individuation process, opens your artist's soul. You discover that what is already yours are riches enough! Art is indeed the royal road to transformation.

Author

Aviva Gold, MFA, has been facilitating inspired art for over 36 years. She leads Painting From The Source workshops and Teacher Trainings in the US and Internationally. Her background includes Psychoanalytic, Jungian and Gestalt psychotherapy; she is also an artist, author and spiritual seeker. Aviva believes the process by which art is made is similar to the evolutionary process of creation in the universe and the capacity to create is part of the divinity of being human. She has published two books: *Painting From The Source*, Harper Collins, 1998 and *Source Art in the World*, 2011, www.paintingfromthesource.com.

She is the mother of three sons and resides in Oracle, Arizona.