

# **Who or What Creates?**

**A Personal Reflection on Painting**

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of the Requirements for the Diploma Program  
and Master's Degree in Process Work**

**by**

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## INTRODUCTION

### Topic and Research Question

This contextual essay accompanies a research project and presentation that I conducted in 2010 as partial fulfillment of my degree in Process Work. The primary purpose of the project was to engage in a heuristic study of the creative process in an attempt to answer the question: Who or what creates? Is it me, the individual? Or is it some force outside of my personal identity like the Tao, the unconscious, nature, the divine, or some other organizing background intelligence?

In order to answer this question, I studied my own creative process over a nine-month period by videotaping myself as I painted. During these videotaped sessions, I noticed and verbalized my inner awareness while painting, and then I journaled about my creative process after the sessions, reflected on the completed paintings, reviewed and analyzed the videotapes, and wrestled with many related questions that fascinate me but were outside the scope of this project. I also found myself drawn to explore other sources of information on the creative process including books, websites, documentaries, interviews, and the writings of other artists.

But now, I also realize that I had a secondary motive: I wanted to see my painting process through the lens of time-lapse videography. It was a fantasy I had had for many years. It seemed to me that there was more to learn about the creative process and that a video perspective could shine light on things that eluded my awareness during the painting experience. I had spoken of this desire to others, but never expected to actually do it. It lived only as an idea, a whim in the back of my mind.

After many years of silently viewing and studying my paintings in their final form and trying to remember how they unfolded onto the canvas, I knew that I could not fully recall the detailed process involved in creating a painting. Staring at the finished painting, I would try to relive moments from the creative process that were linked to specific elements and search my memory for the way images had taken shape, but such attempts at tracking the process were vague and incomplete. Things like the sequence of how colors, shapes, or patterns unfolded were largely fleeting. I might remember how a particular aspect of a painting came into being or find that specific images or elements drew me back to moments in the painting process, but most of the process seemed to evaporate with the drying paint. I recognized that I could only view my creative process in retrospect, in response to what had or had not already been painted, and I wanted to experience and understand the process more fully by bearing witness to the moment-to-moment development of my paintings.

I knew that my perspective as a painter was embedded in an immediate and direct experience of working with the paint, the brushes, and the paper. When painting, I sometimes spend long hours working with one color at a time. I usually stay close to the paper and rarely look from a distance at the painting on which I am working. Upon completing a painting, I often want to hang it somewhere and view it over time from a distance – as if I need to stand back, see, and digest what I created. The final form that the painting takes seems somehow different from the way I experienced it only days, hours, or minutes before when I was still painting it.

One of my first experiments with changing my perspective was when I began photographing my paintings. I was amazed at how different they appeared to me when I

viewed them as small thumbnail representations of the full-scale likenesses I knew so well. The strange newness that came with changing my perspective was fascinating to me, and the desire to videotape the painting process grew over time. I wanted to be able to watch the evolution of my paintings from a perspective other than the one from which they are created. In other words, I wanted to study the creative process from a slightly more detached perspective, from a view that was not immersed in the process itself, but was instead observing it from a distance with the finished product in mind. I imagined that in doing so, I might see serpentine movements in the way shapes and colors appeared and that geological-like progressions might even be revealed as layers of paint were applied and elements were introduced. I sensed I might learn something new from the time-lapse perspective that videography would offer, but I did not yet know what that learning would be.

So, when I neared the end of my Process Work training and it came time to create a final project, I realized it was a perfect opportunity for me to explore the creative process more deeply through the use of videography. As the next sections demonstrate, my creative process is strongly influenced by both Process Work and Point Zero Painting. The theories and applications of these approaches played an important role in creating and answering the research question, “Who or what creates?”

### **A Few Words About Experiential/Point Zero Painting**

Since 2000, I have been using an approach to painting that I call experiential painting, and I think of it as a meditation on the arising creative impulse. This painting methodology was developed by Michele Cassou (Cassou & Cubley, 1995) and later

named Point Zero Painting (2001). Cassou's personal experience as a teacher's aid observing small children led her to experiment with painting as a creative medium. She saw that children, left on their own with paints, created images that were beautiful, immediate, poignant, intuitive, and powerful. If no one imposed their ideas about how the things they painted should look (e.g., color, shape, proportion, or composition), children allowed their creativity to come forward in unexpected and authentic ways that depicted their experiences and ideas with vitality and depth. "Sheltered from judgment, criticism, and competition, the children were giving themselves to the natural process of expression, to the pulse of creation" (Cassou & Cubley, pg. xxii). Subsequently, Cassou developed Point Zero Painting and began writing and teaching this method to help her and others experience the joy of spontaneous expression. Her method encourages people to focus on the painting *process* as opposed to the *product*:

The creative process is enough... It is not only enough, it is a doorway into a direct experience of the essential life force which is at the root of the urge to create. It is the process itself – in the creative energy it releases, in the new perceptions it brings, and in the deepened connection with oneself it fosters – that is at the heart of the desire to paint. To make this the whole point of painting is a simple yet radical act. Cassou, 1996, p. xviii

My earliest experiences using Cassou's approach were mind-blowing. I was painting in a way I had never imagined before. With experiential painting, my painting style, content, and process all dramatically changed. Preceding my introduction to experiential painting, I had been in a kind of creative malaise in terms of explicit art-making. Overtime, I had become bored with my own creative style and the familiar idioms in my work. When I started working with Cassou's approach, I was surprised and exhilarated. I suddenly tapped into my creativity in a new way. I found myself painting

with abandon and felt ebullient. My paintings were unlike anything I had ever created before. Each was a unique record of a dialogue amongst the paper, paint, and me, which I could not anticipate or predict. Encouraged and excited by these experiences, I have been painting for over 10 years using only a few questions to keep me going – questions like, “What impulse am I aware of now?” and “What if I didn’t have to like what I painted?”

Experiential painting can be contrasted with other approaches to the creative process, which emphasize the development of technical skills or focus on the artist’s intention to portray an explicit image or pre-determined theme. In experiential painting, immersion in the process is the reason for painting, and the outcome or product (i.e., the actual painting) is considered a static record of that process, a snap shot of the party but not the event itself.

### **A Few Words About Process Work**

Process Work (also known as Process-oriented Psychology) is the name given to a body of psychological theory and methodology based on Arnold Mindell’s observation, in the early 1970s, that somatic experiences, such as proprioceptive sensations, physical symptoms, and illness, mirrored nighttime dreams (Mindell, 1982). Mindell found that by noticing and attending to secondary or more mysterious signals (i.e., signals that are ordinarily ignored or marginalized in favor of objective reality), he could help people to amplify commonly dismissed or overlooked impulses and unfold them to reveal a deeper meaningful process. With encouragement to identify with and believe in fleeting or unconscious experiences, clients experienced psychological insight and relief, and their awareness and self-expression increased. This method also allows for the development of

compassion and understanding for inner and outer life, as well as the mythic nature of deep, long-standing strivings and conflicts.

Mindell, a physicist and Jungian therapist by training, wove together concepts from diverse disciplines such as Taoism, quantum physics, and shamanism to create Process-oriented Psychology. Over time, he extended and applied Process-oriented Psychology to a wide range of human experiences and problems including individual therapy, couples and family therapy, group processes, and work with extreme and altered states (e.g., addiction, profound alienation and trauma, coma, and near death experiences).

Mindell formulated his earliest ideas about perception in terms of verbal and non-verbal signals within and between people. Learning to attend to and follow subtle, unintended signals and sensory-grounded information is at the heart of Process-oriented awareness and therapeutic techniques. According to Mindell, signals are defined as

...bits of information such as body movements and gestures, images that we see, sounds that we hear, feelings in our bodies, etc. These are signals that:

- persist
- tend to repeat
- can be formulated in words
- are dualistic, meaning that there are separate parts in relationship to other parts and polarities
- are channel-oriented - they are experienced through various sensory channels
- are closer to, or further away from, our momentary identity

Some of these signals are consensual and others are non-consensual.  
<http://www.aamindell.net/evolution-of-process-theory.htm>

Process-oriented psychology uses the data gathered through observing sensory-grounded signals in various channels (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic, movement, relationship, and world) to “unfold” or deconstruct everyday events

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process\\_Oriented\\_Psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_Oriented_Psychology)). It also uses sensory-grounded information to detect and uncover the essences, or most basic tendencies or qualities, behind our ordinary and exceptional moments.

Mindell found that people tend to identify with some experiences more than others, and he called these more conscious experiences *primary* signals and processes. Experiences that are marginalized, disowned, or disavowed, he referred to as *secondary* signals and processes. Generally, people have less awareness of secondary signals and processes. The boundary between primary and secondary processes is called the *edge*, and is considered the phenomenological dividing line between one's sense of what is personal identity and what is "the other."

Mindell based his psychological approach on three levels of reality or consciousness that he identifies as: the consensus reality level, the dreamland level, and the essence or sentient level (which, in more recent years, is also referred to as process mind). These three levels of reality can all be perceived and experienced, and they carry information and give meaning to us as individuals and sentient beings. *Consensus reality* is defined as the everyday, impersonal experience we share with others and the culture at large. It is the world around us that can generally be named and objectively agreed upon. Consensus reality includes collectively defined aspects of experience related to time, space, and matter – things like age, measurements of all sorts, and conventional classifications of things, like chairs, gender, species, colors, etc.

Mindell contrasts consensus reality with non-consensus reality, which can be defined as the sum of all non-objective experiences. Within non-consensus reality are

*dreamland* and *essence* experiences. Dreamland includes realities that depend on individual, subjective experiences for their definition and characterization and do not require agreement from others. These include nighttime dreams, daytime fantasies or daydreams, slips of the tongue, accidents, body symptoms, relationship conflicts, and other personal experiences.

Mindell uses the terms essence, sentience, intentional field, and process mind to refer to an essentially unknowable background source that gives rise to all experience. At the foundation of Mindell's method is the assumption that all reality emanates from and connects to an underlying, unseen, non-dualistic field of energy that can be perceived and experienced intentionally through sentient awareness practices. He describes it as "the palpable, intelligent, organizing 'force field' present behind our personal and large group processes and, like other deep quantum patterns, behind our universe" (Mindell, 2010, p. xi). Diamond and Jones (2004) similarly describe the essence realm as "a sentient reality beneath the threshold of awareness, an unbroken wholeness out of which signals, dreams, and all other experiential phenomena arise" (pp. 13-14). Although we often tend to marginalize or ignore our experience of this sentient essence level of reality, it can be found in tendencies that precede our subtle movement and in flirts, or micro signals, which give rise to fleeting perceptions. "Sentient knowing in non-consensual reality is marked by your capacity to perceive things not generally recognized" (Mindell, 2000, p. 580).

*Entanglement* is a term borrowed from physics and used metaphorically in Process Work. It conveys the idea that beneath the surface appearance of everyday life, "we are inextricably linked with everything we observe" (Mindell, 2000, p. 567). In other

words, our subjective experiences and events in the physical world are deeply interconnected, and “the basic stuff of the universe is an interactional relationship between everything involved in observation” (p. 581). We can train our awareness to detect and attend to these deep interconnections, and Mindell refers to this ability as sentient awareness. “Sentience is that special state of oneness that cannot differentiate between your looking at something and its looking at you” (p. 580).

Process Work is largely focused on defining and describing secondary signals and processes and the associated techniques used to unfold them. Unfolding techniques help individuals respond to entanglement by using sentient awareness when secondary processes are raised to consciousness in the form of dreamland experiences (e.g., relationship conflicts, dreams, body sensations, synchronicities, etc.). Perhaps one of Mindell’s greatest contributions to contemporary psychology is the emphasis he places on cultivating and using sentient awareness or the ability “to recognize the arising of experience before it has even been able to formulate itself” (Mindell, 2000, p. 17).

In her book, *The Dreaming Source of Creativity*, Amy Mindell (2005) describes how to use entanglement and sentient awareness as a way of exploring and unfolding the creative process emerging from the essence realm. According to her, one of the primary ways to access these sparks of creativity is to notice *flirts*.

Flirts are the first way in which the Essence world arises in our awareness, the first way that we experience the movement of the Intentional Field. Flirts are quick, evanescent, nonverbal sensations, visual flickers, moods, and hunches that suddenly catch our attention... The moment we notice a Flirt that has captured our attention, we have caught the tail of a creative process in the midst of unfolding. Mindell, 2005, pp. 23-24

Creativity is always there, waiting for us to notice it in the “almost nothing” that catches our attention. From a Process Work perspective, art is not simply created by the artist, but is instead a co-created and entangled experience between the art, the artist, and the essence realm. “I don’t have to be the creator; things have their own life force . . . I simply have to be available, open, and surrender to the flow . . . as it moves my body, my voice, hands, heart, and mind” (Mindell, 2005, p. 2)

### **A Few Words About My Dance with Point Zero Painting and Process Work**

I discovered experiential painting inadvertently. I was given a copy of Michelle Cassou’s, *Life, Paint & Passion* (1996), which sat for a year or more unopened in my room. When I finally started reading it, I was struck by one thought: “I should be painting every day.” The first painting I created using this approach left me ecstatic. I had trouble sleeping that night and just wanted to stay home the next day and paint! I can still feel the sense of expansion and exhilaration I experienced that day.

Around the same time, I started learning about Process Work. At the conclusion of each Process Work exercise that I did, I remember feeling bewildered by the sequence of steps that guided the process but also feeling that I had found something surprising, something that seemed to originate from somewhere other than my familiar verbally-mediated mind. Already, I began to see some basic connections between Point Zero Painting and Process Work: they both value non-consensual experiences, and they both use momentary awareness to unfold a process.

As I learned more about Process Work, I understood that “primary and secondary processes are separated by an ‘edge.’ The edge represents the limit of the known identity

as well as a point of contact with unknown experiences or identities” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 20). One day early in my painting experience, I came to a place where I was hesitant to paint the next impulse. I had reached the limit of my known identity and something stopped me from proceeding. I paused and asked myself, “What would I paint if I didn’t have to like my painting?” As I stood there and made inner preparations to try to paint what I could not or would not a moment before, I saw myself stepping across a threshold and into a vast dark unknown space. According to Cassou (1996) “in creative painting the defining moment is when you face the fertile white void. Your openness and your courage to step into that void with the spirit of exploration are all that matter” (p. xvii). As I saw myself stepping into the void, I realized I was at a momentary edge in my painting, and that I was doing a kind of inner work to help me get over that edge. As I reflected on this inner process, I came to see the experience of venturing into the unknown in my paintings as parallel to the process of crossing edges and identifying with secondary processes. As time went on, I began to use this inner work more and more when I reached an edge while painting.

Over time, the Point Zero and Process Work approaches merged within me and influenced my creative process. They both use second or sentient attention to take in information from the internal and external environments by focusing on subtle signals, impulses, and tendencies. By adjusting my attention and awareness to something outside of ordinary perception, I lean into signals and sensations that are sometimes only barely there, barely detected. When I tune in to a sense of something unformed, I use a sense modality that I cannot describe. I am sensing something. I practice doing so in a spirit of discovery, not knowing what will come next, but I trust that something will come. I look

for my secondary experiences (i.e., what is momentarily denied, mysterious, or disavowed) and invite them into my painting.

Sometimes, I am not able to stay in this flow, and I flounder as my mind tries to take control of what is happening. In these moments, I *try* to paint something instead of just noticing what is happening. My energy drops, and the painting process feels flat, dry, boring. When I notice this happening, I take it as a cue to return to sensing. I listen or feel for what is at the edges of my awareness, for some flirt or micro tendency that I have not fully noticed. I allow time to feel into the edge I am at and to imagine the unknown beyond it. Once my awareness to this moment engages, I reconnect to an impulse that carries me over the edge, and I spontaneously continue to paint with restored energy, clarity, and freedom.

When I paint, I use awareness skills honed in my Process Work training to follow and unfold the creative process and to think about what is happening. I often sense subtle impulses or tendencies in the visual, proprioceptive, or movement channels and use these to guide my brush strokes. I feel a tendency to move in energetic or delicate ways. I notice a color or brush that flirts with me. I delight in the smoothness of the paint or the rhythm of the bristles dancing on the paper. I become aware that one or more elements of the painting are somehow related to one another, and at times I sense a resonance between world issues in the themes or figures painted. If I pay attention to these subtleties and recognize these sensations, they can lead my creative process. If taken too literally, these dreaming elements recede and my consensus reality-oriented mind takes over the process. Walking the line between awareness of subtle dreaming tendencies and perceptions that may freeze the flow is like a meditation practice that teaches you to

notice and let thoughts pass while turning your attention towards the spaces between them.

I don't usually start with an intention to paint something explicit. Instead, I take a moment to look at the paints, brushes, and paper and to become aware of my inner mood and the momentary atmosphere and feelings present but perhaps not yet fully recognized. Then, I pick up a brush and dip it into a color that stands out to me. Painting begins with noticing and following a flirt; an impulse toward a color, a brush, and the mystery of the white page. Each stroke of paint to paper has an energy and quality of its own, of its momentary expression. One color follows another, one flirt follows the next, until something unexpected emerges.

As I begin to attend to the subtle impulses inside myself, and sense the atmosphere of the painting and process, I tend to step out of my ordinary, waking consciousness and into a more altered state. In 1972, Charles Tart, a pioneer of transpersonal psychology, defined an altered state of consciousness as being relative to an individual's subjective experience of their normal state of consciousness. Mindell (2005) similarly describes an altered state as "any state that is different from the one with which we normally identify" (p. 154). When I paint and follow the flow of the creative process, I am not in my normal state of consciousness. I tend to be a contained and orderly type of person in my daily life, but when I paint, I often experience a chaotic, high-energy rush. I put paint down freely in the early stages, and my movements and brush strokes are often big or fast. I apply many colors quickly and there is a feeling of flowing and flying with the paint. My rational mind becomes quiet, and I feel open to the mystery and irrationality of the process.

“A basic Process Work concept is that everything we need is here right now; it lies in following the details of your own awareness. Simply notice what you are experiencing and follow it” (Mindell, 2005, p. 223). When I paint, I follow the details of my awareness and notice sensory-grounded signals. “Following these signals means noticing if you are hearing something, feeling something, seeing something, or sensing movement in your body and then helping these experiences to unfold by amplifying them and discovering their messages” (p. 223).

I am sometimes drawn to make the same movement over and over, or there may be lines within a brush stroke that catch my eye and call for more amplification. I start to see things in the paint; the way one color runs over another, the curve of a line or space. I catch the gist of aspects of things, temporarily named, yet unknown. I notice figures, elements, or a specific thing wanting to emerge – a hand, a body, a cave, a tree. Over time, aspects of the painting call to me or catch my attention and I am drawn to refine or add particular shapes, colors, lines, or elements.

There is an inner scanning and sorting process that I am aware of. I follow impulses, apply paint, and then something coalesces. A direction emerges. At times, what emerges is an image, but early in the painting it is often more diffuse – a feeling or association to a color or pattern. Samkhya (one of the 6 schools of classic Indian philosophy) describes two kinds of perceptions: indeterminate (*nirvikalpa*) perceptions and determinate (*savikalpa*) perceptions. Indeterminate perceptions refer to impressions without cognitive understanding or knowledge. They are devoid of specific knowledge of the form or the name of the object. There is only awareness related to an object. There is

cognition of the object, but no discriminative recognition. I would describe the sensing aspect of my creative process as similar to indeterminate perception.

Then there is a transition, something is recognized or named in my mind. I see a figure or an element comes more strongly into focus, and I suddenly know something about what is happening and the pace slows as I attend to this emerging but not yet defined pattern. Long periods of time pass as I focus on inner body senses. The paints, the movement of paint, the brush strokes, and the painting itself all form a continuous flow of experience. I am immersed in the process, and my awareness is absorbed in something I cannot describe in words. I am “sensing” something, using sentient awareness. The room I am in, other people, and external sounds are barely noticed.

As the painting progresses, I am drawn to amplify shapes or ornament an image or area that I have painted. A certain part of the painting feels darker or lighter, or it is coming out or going in. Things are happening, and I stay open to following the flow of energy and impulses. Elements of the painting may be revealed or appear in a random, unpredictable order. I feel as if I am simultaneously moving in a direction and moving without direction. I sense a figure and feel into its position, location, and relationship to other aspects of the painting.

Edges may show up in my process as judgments, strong emotions, or beliefs about how the painting looks, its contents, composition, etc. “Edges may come up at various points in the amplification and unfolding process, such as letting go of experiences in occupied channels, or moving into experiences in unoccupied channels” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 126). When I get to the edge of my known experience, I can feel suddenly stuck, lethargic, bored, distracted, unsatisfied, or disinterested. My mind starts making

judgments: “It looks good. It looks bad. There is too much black. I have ruined it.”

Sometimes I cross an edge with the confidence of a seasoned explorer and sometimes I cross it haltingly and with tears. If I like all or part of what I’ve painted, I may not want to go on, and I find myself staring at the work for extended periods and not painting. Other times, I want to go further but loose connection with a sense of freedom, get stalled, and don’t know what is next.

In these difficult and edgy moments, finding the last thing that had vitality or going further with a denied dot, dab, line, or color helps restore momentum. This technique is partially based on the Process Work intervention of going back to the edge when the process suddenly becomes stagnant or loses energy. Returning my focus to impulses that I may be overlooking or avoiding gives me a sense of where to begin again. I may notice an urge to add color and detail or to layer in another element or figure. Allowing for the possibility that I may “ruin” or radically alter the painting helps me detach in the moment, jump over my fear, and fall into the unknown by boldly risking the next brush stroke. And once I move into this unknown realm, once I have crossed the edge, again I find myself effortlessly following some subtle and indescribable path.

In summary, I describe experiential painting as a meditation focused on following the arising creative impulse. That impulse could be a line, a dot, a color, a movement, a feeling, or an irrational idea or perception. Sometimes, the tendency or impulse is barely perceptible, and I can only sense into the brush stroke or color hesitantly, moving slowly, letting my hand and eye resonate with something emergent in my awareness but unformed. Sometimes the spirit of the moment is carefree and loose, and I boldly jump into the colors, movements, and sensations while applying the paint to paper. In these

moments, impulses come rapidly, and assessment of color, shape, and proportion become unimportant. I am taken by the momentum, by the altered state that pours through me and carries me and the painting forward. I continue in this way until I sense the painting is complete, until I am satisfied that no more parts of the painting are calling to me, or until I run out of time. Not all paintings are completed; not all of them reach a point where a feeling of satisfaction and completeness are achieved. Some are left for another day or are simply left unfinished.



## **APPROACH**

### **Heuristic Methodology**

This research project was a heuristic study of my painting process using audio and video recordings to capture the momentary creative process of painting. According to Moustakas (1990), heuristic research involves

a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries. p. 9

In this research method, the researcher does not attempt to remain neutral or objective. The researcher is both a participant in the study and an observer of the study. Heuristic research is a process of self-discovery and self-reflection in which the researcher's thoughts, feelings, reactions, and experiences all contribute to the data and findings. The opportunity to use primary source material allows and encourages the researcher to include all aspects of her/his experience as the subject of the study and as a source of data.

In heuristic research the investigator must have a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated...the heuristic researcher has undergone the experience in a vital, intense and full way...It demands total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity of a researcher who not only strongly desires to know and understand but is willing to commit endless hours of sustained immersion and focused concentration on one central question. Moustakas, 1990, p. 14

The main limitation of the heuristic approach is its strong, self-directed process, which relies so heavily on the researcher's recognition, reflection, and synthesis of his or

her own inner and outer experiences. Because my project was heuristic in nature, there was little I could do to mitigate the possibility of influencing or biasing my data collection (i.e., paintings, verbal reports, and personal journals) and analysis. In other words, as my own subject, I am vulnerable to “good subject” bias or trying to make myself look good in the eyes of the researcher (me). I accept that the dual nature of being the participant and the observer, the researcher and the subject, the painter and the audience is simply an unavoidable part of this study and the heuristic approach. It is also an aspect of trying to follow secondary signals or sensations in the creative process, and part of the struggle to find a meta-position that can include multiple aspects of one experience.

However, the advantage of such a subjective approach is that it allows for in-depth examinations of complex phenomena that cannot be easily quantified. Heuristic research investigates how we perceive, experience, and make meaning of phenomena, and it also allows for the discovery of new or unforeseeable learning and results. Whenever possible during the videotaped painting sessions, I tried to meta-communicate (i.e., reflect and verbalize) about my self-observations. I sought to identify and highlight bias or sources of influence that might cause me to edit, alter, or modify my experiences or the record of my experiences.

Heuristic and subjective approaches are not pursued to prove a fact or hypothesis, but instead to deeply explore experience in an attempt to gain greater clarity and understanding. In these ways, heuristic studies are well suited to Process-oriented perspectives because they both place value on less predictable ways of attaining

understanding and discovery, as opposed to established paths of exploration that are well-trod by others.

Moustakas states, “Accept everything about yourself – I mean everything. You are you and that is the beginning and the end – no apologies, no regrets” ([www.famous-quotes.com/author.php?aid=5180](http://www.famous-quotes.com/author.php?aid=5180)). In this study, I took Moustakas’ words as inspiration. I used a heuristic approach to explore how my subjective creative process unfolds while painting, and I tried to stay open and accepting of all that emerged.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this research project was collected from a variety of sources including the following: my paintings, my journal reflections, the creation of a PowerPoint presentation, and the review of the videotaped painting sessions.

I started painting for this project in June of 2010 and finished in January of 2011. During those nine months, I completed nine paintings. As I completed each painting, I hung it in my bedroom where I could gaze at it upon waking and before going to sleep each night. During these periods of reflection, I took notes in my journal and found that I was drawn to certain aspects of a painting. When this occurred, I allowed myself to enter into the state or feeling of the particular element or part of a painting that brought forth that feeling. This immersion in the moods and spirits of a painting felt like the final step in completing the painting. My journal notes and observations during this process were an essential contribution to my data collection and findings. I also used my journal to track my experiences while painting and to record anything usual or unusual before, during, or after my painting experiences.

In February 2010, I created a PowerPoint presentation about my painting process, which I presented to students and faculty at the Process Work Institute in Portland. Although I had not anticipated the presentation being a source of data collection, I found that creating the presentation required me to recap and outline my painting process in such a way that it became yet another data source. Reviewing my creative process, in a way that is detailed enough to present it to others, supported my previous observations and helped bring to light some that had not fully emerged yet. It also required me to work with the paintings themselves and to focus in on certain aspects of paintings or the painting process that I wanted to draw people's attention to.

In August 2011, I engaged a videographer to tape a session of me painting, and then hired another videographer to record two more painting sessions after that. Each video session was between 3 and 4 hours in duration, and I tried to capture my momentary experiences as best as possible by verbally reporting to the camera on my inner awareness, thoughts, feelings, impulses, and attractions. Reviewing these tapes was an important source of data and strongly influenced my findings. In addition, I had all of the paintings digitally photographed in January 2011.

### **Data Analysis**

My primary method of data analysis was studying the videos of my painting sessions and tracking the unfolding process to see what might be revealed. To understand my process more deeply and capture my momentary awareness, I meta-communicated about my experiences during the video-taped sessions. In other words, I reported verbally on my inner experience while painting. Articulating and recording these inner

experiences so they could be reviewed at a later time helped me to notice patterns and unfolding processes during the data analysis.

I watched the videos in real time and in time-lapse sequences approximately six times. Because I expected to notice a flow or progression in the images as they appeared, I first paid close attention to the visual sequence and appearance of colors, elements, and shapes. While watching the videos a second time, I made notes about my spontaneous comments, the mood or atmosphere of the painting, my descriptions of the creative state, my body symptoms, the movement or energy I sensed emanating from the painting, my intended and unintended actions, etc. During a subsequent viewing, I watched for secondary signals that didn't go along with my primary process. I also looked for and listened to my meta-communications about information that might indicate how I was following subtle impulses, identifying or responding to more secondary urges, and riding the edge between more and less known aspects of the painting or the process. Finally, I reviewed the recordings to pick up signals of altered states and reflections or reminders of things I was aware of but did not articulate verbally while painting,

I used my journals and other observations to help me analyze my process by reviewing notes and identifying patterns in my experience that related to or paralleled my painting process as recorded in the actual paintings or videotapes. Journaling captured information that might otherwise have been lost in the flow of life. For example, I recorded and dated dreams, body sensations, social interactions, inner work experiences, and snippets of radio programs that flirted with me or seemed significant. I found that my journal notes provided consensus reality information that demonstrated the sequence of events and awareness as they related to my painting processes. In other words, my

journals helped me to recognize experiences arising from the dreamland and essence levels of reality as described in Process Work.

I also read, reflected on, and studied a variety of other sources focused on the creative process. These sources included books, online articles, documentaries, and personal communications from other artists, Process Workers, scientists, and psychologists describing their accounts of and insights into the creative process. I took special interest in how artists conceptualized their experiences, their perceptions of what is happening when they create, what they are aware of during the creative process, and what seems to matter to them. I used this information to help me recognize some of the more subtle experiences that I had not yet articulated and to reflect on both the universality of the creative process as well as the diversity of creative experiences.

## **FINDINGS**

In this heuristic study of my creative process, I set out to answer the question: Who or what creates? Am I the source of my paintings? Or is it the Tao, the unconscious, nature, the divine, or process mind that is actually painting? After collecting and analyzing all of the data, I have reached the conclusion that the source of creativity arises from co-creative forces, which include the entanglement of my individual perceptions and awareness with a lesser known background intelligence or energies. In the sections that follow, I outline four unexpected key learning points that emerged from this study and led me to this conclusion.

### **Painting and Shamanism**

Over the course of this project and through my data analysis, I realized that for me, painting, and perhaps all art making, shares some elements with shamanic processes. In indigenous societies, shamanic practices are related to cultivating and using awareness for mystical or healing purposes. Traditional shamans are believed to use altered states to shape shift and merge with the unknown in unpredictable and irrational ways. Through these experiences, shamans bring new information, learning, and messages back to consensus reality to share with individuals or the communities to which they belong. During the course of this project, I discovered three similarities between shamanic practices and my creative process: the use of awareness to access and explore the unknown, entering into altered states and shape shifting to retrieve information and guidance, and the translation of non-consensus information and experiences into messages (images) that can be shared with others.

In my creative process, I use sentient awareness to notice momentary sensations, non-verbal flirts, and minute impulses. While doing so, I suspend ordinary awareness, thinking, and perception, and I honor irrational directions that pull me. Gradually, as I continue, I enter altered states from which my inner and outer experiences, the art materials, and the field are all sentiently woven into the painting. I do not necessarily know what I am painting. My paint brush and paper become a medium for expressing things unknown to and unanticipated by my everyday identity.

Artists leave known spheres and enter other dimensions, capture and express experiences from other realms... Artists hold certain similarities to shamans. Like shamans, artists have a special sensitivity and love for the unknown, and travel between this reality and dream-fantasy world. In the entanglement with the unknown, the inspired artist discovers the spirit in many forms: figures emerge...pictures appear on blank canvas... The artist is pulled into struggle and dance with the *nagual*, and finally to manifest the creative impulse in a medium. Vikkelsoe, 1994-1995, p. 24

Sentient awareness is fundamental to my creative process. Mindell (1993) describes sentient awareness as follows: “In the moment, something in you transforms, and you develop a deep attention, a steady focus on irrational events. This basic shamanic tool is attention to the dreaming process” (p. 5). The data in my reflections, journal writings, and video tapes frequently describe or demonstrate my use of sentient awareness while engaged in the creative process. They show the intentional transition of my attention from everyday reality to non-consensus experiences, and how this nonverbal information guides my painting process.

My data also includes descriptions of aspects of altered states that I enter into while painting. In these states, I lose a sense of time and place, I become immersed in the sense experience of the moment, I follow impulses in a fluid and non-linear way, I am

more willing to step into the unknown, and my ability to meta-communicate is reduced. Based on his study of shamans' experiential descriptions, Roger Walsh (2007) defined ten dimensions of altered states of consciousness and used them to compare various mystical, religious, meditative, and psychiatric states. Utilizing these dimensions to compare and contrast creative states with other kinds of states more precisely reveals the many similarities in the altered states experiences of shamans and artists.

In the chart below, which I recreated from Walsh's book, *The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition* (2007), I added the column on the right entitled My Creative States. This modified version of the chart shows the parallels and distinctions I observed between my creative states and Walsh's assessment of various dimensions of shamanic journeying states. The reader should note that Walsh distinguishes "journeying states" from a variety of other altered states brought on by fasting, sleep deprivation, drumming, ingestion of psychoactive substances, recitation of mantras, and other cognitive de-stabilizers used to induce altered states in shamanic practice (p. 185).

## Chart 1

### *Parallels Between Dimensions of Shamanic Journeying States and My Creative States*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Shamanic Journey States</b>	<b>My Creative States</b>
<b>Control of State</b> -- The ability to enter and leave altered states of consciousness at will	Yes: good control	Yes, good control
<b>Control of Content</b> -- The ability to control the content of experience	Partial control	Partial control
<b>Awareness of the Environment</b>	Decreased	Decreased
<b>Ability to Communicate</b>	Sometimes	Limited as demonstrated by attempts to meta communicate while painting
<b>Concentration</b>	Increased, fluid attention	Increased, fluid attention
<b>Mental Energy/Arousal</b>	Increased	Increased in general, decreased at times at edges
<b>Calm</b>	Decreased	Variable states of excitement attendant to creative process
<b>Emotion</b>	Can be pleasurable and positive, or painful and negative	Primarily positive, at times very elated, and occasionally painful or depressed
<b>Identity or Self-Sense</b>	Separate self-sense, may be a nonphysical "soul" or "spirit"	Second attention and immersion in non-consensus experiences, momentary loss of everyday identity
<b>Out-of-Body Experience</b>	Yes, controlled ecstasy	
<b>Nature of Experience</b>	Organized, coherent imagery consistent with shamanic cosmology and the journey's purpose	Organized, coherent imagery consistent with diverse, nonlinear and noncognitive states associated with creative activity

Along several dimensions, my experience in creative states is similar to what Walsh (2007) observes in shamanic journeying states. The shared dimensions include having control over entering into and leaving the altered state, partial control of the content, reduced awareness of the environment, reduced ability to communicate, increased and fluid concentration, as well as encountering a range of emotional experiences. Due in part to my experiences with experiential painting and in part to my training in Process-oriented methods, I have developed a reliable way of accessing altered states. During altered states, I retain the ability to choose to follow or move away from impulses or images that arise and in that way determine the content of the painting. I have experienced and noted the loss of a sense of time and space, a decrease in awareness of what is going on in the room, as well as the diminution of the ability to

verbalize perceptions and sensations while painting. At the same time, I experience an increase in sensitivity and an ability to concentrate on wisp-like inner sensations or signals. Finally, I witness and experience a range of emotions including joy, sadness, somberness, frustration, laughter, jubilation, elation, depression, etc.

There are, however, subtle differences between shamanic journeying states and my creative experiences in terms of mental energy/arousal, sense of calmness, and identity or self-sense. While painting, I frequently experience a steady and active level of mental energy that I would describe as alert, focused, observant, and open-minded. Exceptions to this would be moments when I approach or get to an edge or inner barrier to follow an impulse. Then, I may become fatigued, distracted, or mildly agitated. Walsh (2007) describes a range of levels of arousal associated with shamanic journeying, and he indicates that intensity and agitation may be prominent aspects of shamanic experiences. By contrast, when I paint, I experience a range of calm states and states of excitement, but not marked agitation. Often, there is a sense of calm that I experience as peacefulness or contentment. Sometimes, this feeling of contentment is blended with a sort of paced momentum, and I can feel my energy slowly accelerating. Additionally, I sometimes experience high states of energy and associated affect in my creative process.

Differences between Walsh's conclusions about the shamanic shifts in identity or self-sense and my own experience of identity while painting are more difficult to assess. For Walsh, the sense of self or identity in shamanic experiences "may vary widely, from the usual sense of body-based egoity, to the sense of being a soul detached from the body, to a sense of unity with all things" (2007, p. 239). Walsh underscores the differences between the shamanic points of view that assume the journey is real, "truly 'exosomatic'

(outside the body) rather than ‘imaginal’ (mind-created imagery)” (p. 173), but he does not take a stand on this ontological dividing line, preferring to stick to an experiential approach that includes both possibilities. I attribute my own momentary losses of identity while painting to an immersion in non-consensus reality and to my use of second attention or sentient awareness. I consciously use shape shifting to feel into elements of my painting that are emerging and to more fully experience the energy or quality they bring forth. For me, the question of the reality or actuality of secondary experiences is a non-issue; I am not claiming to physically travel to another location during the painting process. The question for me, and the impetus for this project, is who or what creates. This question rests on the possibility that during creative states I access information or a source of information that is beyond my personal will, vision, or intention.

By far, the most striking difference between Walsh’s depiction of shamanic journeying states and my creative process would be in terms of out-of-body experiences. For some, the out-of-body experience (often connected to ecstatic moments) is the defining aspect of shamanic experience. I do not believe I have ever had an out-of-body experience while painting.

Just as shamans enter into altered states to retrieve information for healing, my creative process involved entering into altered states to retrieve information for painting. The videotaped sessions recorded aspects of these altered states and my process of retrieving information. They also showed how surprising and unexpected information and images were created, and how they were often mysterious, irrational, discontinuous, and sometimes visceral. In addition, my painting process can lead to peak experiences that

connect me more fully to myself, and these experiences provide freedom, exhilaration, meaning, and depth to my life.

Beyond my data and personal experiences, I see other commonalities between shamanism and creative processes. Both painting and shamanism are ancient human practices frequently ritualized in culturally specific ways and possibly used in the service of one another at certain times and places in history. Being able to enter into altered states and access secondary information is a process re-discovered and re-conceptualized countless times in many cultures. As individuals, both shamans and artists struggle to live their dreaming experience within, and often against a social context that forbids or shuns it (Mindell, 1993). Following a creative or shamanic path may put an individual in conflict with one's family, community, or culture. Painters and shamans may suffer greatly in their efforts to access and travel between the worlds of consensus and non-consensus reality, and they may appear locked in a life or death struggle (Mindell, 1993). Paintings, like shamanic messages, can be the result of powerful inner experiences and have strong repercussions in the outer world. In these ways, artists are sometimes like warrior shamans using second attention for self-knowledge, and they sometimes act as healer shamans using fluid attention for the good of others (Mindell, p. 24).

I also recognize important differences between shamanic practitioners and artists. Shamans are explicitly identified as having a spiritual and mystical purpose within a unique indigenous context. Cultures and people supporting shamanic traditions often attach sacred meaning and significance to shamans, shamanic rituals, and practices. In conventional, contemporary Western society, making art is rarely linked explicitly to cultivating and using awareness for healing or mystical purposes. Contemporary artists

frequently lack the rank, social support, credibility, and valued role allotted to shamans in traditional cultures. Painters and artists in Western society are more likely to be experienced as disturbers than dignified as healers. Unlike the life training and preparations afforded shamans in traditional societies, artists in Western cultures often have limited training. Beyond formal schooling and the technical skill building needed for a particular medium, there is often no apprenticeship or sentient training for artists. Most don't have the benefit of an elder or mentor to guide them in following their awareness and understanding the role of art and artist in society.

### **Telic Moments in Painting**

Although the findings described in the previous section were the primary source for answering my research question, some additional findings surfaced that also support and corroborate the more general findings mentioned above. One surprise finding was that two of the videotaped sessions showed that my first brush strokes possessed a telic essence that gave direction to the paintings even before I consciously knew what I was painting. The term *telic or teleological* is defined as “directed or tending toward a goal or purpose; purposeful” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 1982). Telic phenomena therefore suggest that events and occurrences have a purpose or goal waiting to unfold, and the earliest impulses in two of my paintings revealed underlying patterns that shaped the final product.

The first video of my painting process was made in August, but I didn't review the recording until October. By then, the first two or three paintings I completed had been hanging on my wall for several weeks or months, and I was quite familiar with them. As I

watched the opening moments of the painting process on the video, I saw something remarkable and unexpected. I approached the paper and briskly applied yellow, the first color painted, to the paper. Next, I was drawn to a bright green paint, and with a few casual movements and no more thought than I would give to scratching my nose, I added the green to the page. Then, I withdrew from the painting and picked up a third color, but in the moment between applying the green and getting the next dab of paint, I noticed in reviewing the tape that the shape of the central figure in the final painting, *Simple Freedom*, was already there! Watching this unfold in the video made me realize that the very first strokes of paint to paper actually contained the essence of the figure that later became the central image in the painting. The first brush strokes of the painting revealed a pattern for the final work, and although this seemed fascinating, I shrugged it off as mere coincidence.



After that, I gave little or no thought to this discovery, and proceeded to paint a couple more paintings. When the second painting session was videotaped in November, I was working with a new videographer and preoccupied with the texture of the paint, which seemed to be impacted by the cooler temperatures. I felt distracted by these factors and painted for several hours but did not complete the painting. Then, in early January, I

watched the time-lapse and raw video footage of this second session and, to my surprise, found the same phenomenon. The first color applied showed the unembellished outline of the Running Dog that became the central identifiable figure in the final painting.



These two unexpected occurrences suggest that an underlying pattern may be present very early in the creative process that shapes or unfolds into the final product. This finding supports my conclusion that more is at work in the creative process than my individual or conscious intentions. This data also lends credence to the Process Work theory that entire processes are encapsulated in the first moments of an interaction, in initial energetic tendencies, or in subtle flirts and micro events. The end is in the beginning.

### **Observation, A Delicate Balance**

During my research, I used at least three kinds of self-observation. I used sentient awareness or the inner search for signals within and around me while painting. I have referred to this as a kind of sensing or indeterminate perception that helps me to discern subtle pulls or signals. Second, I attempted to meta-communicate, which is a form of self-observation that was aimed at expressing my awareness of what I was doing and feeling in the moment. And I used a video camera, which became a remote or delayed

form of self-observation. (It should also be mentioned that the camera came with a cameraman, who was another kind of observer, and the filming itself implied future potential audience of observers.) Many times, I was attempting to self-observe using all three modes simultaneously.

I discovered or affirmed through my experiences that while added focus on self-observation and awareness can lead to a richer and more multi-channeled experience, it can also diminish vitality in the creative process and reduce the ability to articulate experience. I was alert to the possibility that observation might mitigate the creative experience from the start. Ever since I conceived of videotaping my painting process, I had been wondering how the camera, as an external watching phenomenon, might influence my process. I imagined that recording my process might shift my awareness from its usual teeter-totter between inner and outer focus during the painting session and make me more focused on things like the result, the future, the project, possible audiences and their reactions, etc.

I wondered and journaled about this in advance of working on the first painting for this project. Even though I would not be videotaping this first painting or attempting to meta-communicate about my process, I was nonetheless aware that launching into the project marked the beginning of a new process. I would be using my painting experience for something other than immersion in the creative process, which I had not intentionally done before. In addition, I would be in a new space, a group studio with unknown people and a different atmosphere than I was used to. I wondered if these changes and having an external purpose would somehow dilute, diminish, or undermine the interiority of my painting process.

My sense of Michele Cassou's philosophy is that inside ourselves we struggle between painting for process and painting for product. These two motives are entwined. Everyday concerns and ideas about what is good art, color use, composition, content, subject matter, etc., threaten to impinge upon the painter and his or her creative process. Cassou's approach aims to help people disentangle process from product and strives to protect the individual's fragile receptivity to creative impulses from the drive for control, value, meaning, etc. As a result, things like showing your work, getting feedback on it, and using your painting process for video study, all seemed anathema to her system. These activities suggest that the painting is a product, not a process of awareness and discernment, not a meeting of the ever-arising creative flow of impulses.

On the other hand, the creative flow that Cassou's method tries to protect is not unlike the stream of secondary information and processes to which one's awareness is attuned when unfolding a process or facilitating someone else's process. When I'm facilitating, I have no fear that I will run out of secondary material, so why then would I worry that outside input or primary process intentions could impede my ability to follow the impulses I sense while painting? The continuous flow of secondary material waiting to be unfolded seemed to provide further support for my conclusion that the creative process was a co-created endeavor.

While working on the first painting for this project, I noticed that I was more alert to my own inner states and had more intense physical experiences than I had ever had before while painting. I had two especially strong and new experiences in my body. I had a feeling of wanting to breathe something in deeply, to suck something in or pull something towards me with my arms. I associated this sensation with the first figure I

saw in my painting (i.e., a large face turned downward that I imagined was both underwater and taking in air freely). Then, I painted additional figures drawing air into their open mouths, showing the breath entering their bodies and lungs. I also experienced a kind of pain in my upper abdomen that I associated with a parched quality that overcame me while painting. In my mind, I linked this sensation to my stomach and the parched feeling of the colors that dominated my painting at that time (i.e., pinks, reds, oranges, yellows, and browns), which seemed to me like the desert or mesas of the southwest. From a Process Work perspective, I was working with the relationship and synchrony between secondary aspects of the visual and proprioceptive channels.

These two experiences left me feeling unsatisfied and slightly ill in the moment, and although I continued to paint, I felt like I was just “putting more paint on the page.” I noticed I was at an edge. Another painter in the group studio came over, and I told her about my parched sensation. She asked, “Is all of you present in the moment?” which I found a very interesting and useful question. My immediate answer was “No, some small part of me was not present.” To which she asked, “What would that part paint?” And I knew immediately that it would paint trees. With this, I began to paint large leaves around the top and right side of the painting – I had crossed the edge that only moments before had stalled my process. Once I brought the trees in, letting this part of me paint, I immediately felt better. The green cooled, quenched, and relieved the parched inner sensation. My energy lifted, I found a way to enhance another figure that was not “as far forward as I would like,” and I dropped into a level of detailed embellishment that left me feeling free to continue with the painting or leave it incomplete.

It was late in the project when I experienced the way that self-observation could also impede the creative process and diminish the feeling of vitality in my work. After having had the experience of noting the telic nature of the first brushstrokes in the two video-taped painting processes, I decided to experiment with this new learning. When I embarked on the third video-taped painting, I did so holding some alertness to the possibility that an early direction might be apparent in the first colors applied.



I recognized a figure in the blue paint almost as soon as it was painted. It looked to me like a dancer both arching her back and squatting as if to spring forth. Initially, I left open the possibility it might evolve into something else or that some other elements or figures might come into the painting. But, as my painting unfolded, I found I elaborated the dancer, explored the posture in my own movement process and felt into the space around her. Somehow, my early naming or conceptualizing of this figure seemed to anchor the painting in a way that limited the fluidity of my process. I stopped painting for the day and never returned to complete it. I was left with an awareness that my process has gotten weighed down somehow by my early consciously articulated identification of this figure. Like a facilitator that gets stuck in the primary process content of her client, I was not able to free myself to pursue the more secondary possibilities of the painting that day.

Self-observation walks a fine line between naming, objectifying, and concretizing the creative pulse on the one hand, and optimizing awareness and discernment between secondary and primary signals on the other. When self-observation becomes expectation, it tends to push the mysterious away. However, when self-observation heightens attention to sensory awareness, it seems to open the channels to more information and unexpected progressions. Early experiences in my project alleviated concerns I had about losing the creative pulse and also suggested that intensified attention and self-observation actually expanded my sentient awareness and my body experiences, which enhanced my sense of creative freedom. The later experiment of being alert to telic impulses showed me how expectation is often entangled in observation and can diminish the creative flow.

### **Parallel Worlds Experienced**

Mindell has metaphorically applied many concepts from quantum physics to the world of psychology including parallel worlds theory, which says, “that many different viewpoints or worlds can exist simultaneously. The observed event is not the only event but one among many that are also present, although marginalized through observation” (Mindell, 2000, p. 258). The parallel worlds theory helps to explain what many Process Workers have observed: experiences and signals may be manifest, expressed, or experienced in multiple channels simultaneously. This concept is closely related to the idea of entanglement and the interrelatedness of all things. Although I had had many experiences (in exercises and facilitated processes) that seemed to support this concept, I

can't recall a strong, unbidden instance of the way signals are mirrored in multiple channels.

In mid October, I videotaped my second painting session. I was working with a new videographer and his presence seemed to distract me. Although I had explained to him that I would be attempting to observe and report verbally on my experience as I painted, he interacted with me as I meta-communicated about my process, and I felt an obligation to respond to him. I also felt restless with the painting I was working on and increasingly puzzled by a strange horizontal element that appeared in the center of the page below the head of a dog. No amount of following the irrationality of that horizontal thing seemed to restore a sense of flow. I worked on and around it for several hours and then decided to stop painting for the day. I hung the painting in my room that evening, and, over the next weeks, I found myself occasionally staring at that horizontal thing, strangely pre-occupied by it.

Then, in late October, I dreamt of three dogs. When I awoke, I recorded my dream as follows:

Three dogs – one very large. A woman says she is going to take it with her somewhere. The other two dogs are smaller but still 80-90 lbs. They do not get along. One keeps fighting with the other. The quieter one comes and lies on top of me and we fall asleep. People from my training cohort come into the room and awaken me. One of them, Nathaniel, comes over to me. He has pages from a magazine with images of geese and says something about a garden.

I associated the first large dog to a Swiss Bernese Mountain dog in the snow, which I connected to rescue work. The two smaller dogs reminded me of King and Baron, two German Shepherds that belonged to a childhood friend. Once, while sleeping over at my friend's house, King and Baron frightened me by choosing to sleep on either side of me.

Finally, I associated the geese with Inuit art that I have seen, and the magical transformation of animals into Native American spirit guides. When I unfolded each of these dream figures, I found implacability behind the Bernese Mountain dog, certainty behind King and Baron, and a mystical migration behind the geese.

That Friday, I came home to an empty house after work and was eager to take advantage of the moment to decompress from the week in the quiet of the hot tub. As I relaxed into the warm water, I let my arms and legs float out around me, and I became aware of a buzzing sensation in my arms. They felt as though they had huge fuzzy sleeves or mitts on them that radiated or emanated some kind of electricity. Suddenly, I was reminded of my painting and the strange horizontal shape floating across the page that would not be demystified. The sensation in my arms at that moment and the image from the painting shared some mysterious connection that was undeniable. The sensation in my arms was the horizontal thing in my painting! I was so shocked, I stood straight up, jolted by the surprising parallel, as if visited by an unexpected stranger in the tub. I tried to unfold the body sensation further in the moment, re-submerging in the tub but I was startled and unnerved and could not bring myself to attend more deeply to the surprising sensation. My calm and relaxing moment had been up-ended by recognizing the same, persistent signal in both the painting and my body.

Some days later, I wondered if the dog dream may have been yet another way the same signal had been manifesting. Although the nighttime dream of the dogs did not resonate as strongly with the painting as the body experience, the connection of the dogs in the dream and the painting stayed with me. Because I was not able to unfold the body sensation in the hot tub, I lost a vital link that might have shed more light on the way

these dream figures were related. How were the essential qualities of implacability, certainty, and mystical migrations that I found in the dream of the three dogs related to the painting and radiating sensation in my arms? What did it mean that I came to think of this painting as the Running Dog and imagined the strange horizontal element as a paw extending ahead as it bounded forward? How could I understand the association of the painting to the Running Dog graffiti of Switzerland which is a mystical symbol of eternity? And what about my association of the geese in the dream to animal spirit guides? These questions and others cannot be answered at this moment, but they hold my dream figures in suspension until I revisit them in new processes.

For me, recognizing the way a process can appear in parallel signals, channels, and worlds supported the idea that the creative process is related to more than my conscious, individual mind, and that it is co-creation that reflects strangely entangled energies, forces, and signals capable of manifesting in a multitude of interconnected and mysterious ways.

### **The Value of Audio/Visual Recordings**

Through the course of this project, I relied on self-observation via reflection, journaling, and audio and video recording to assist me in analyzing and understanding more about my creative process. Doing so allowed me to study the details of my creative process and the sequences of events to which I otherwise would not have had access. These recordings uncovered gaps in my memory that would have gone unnoticed without evidence to the contrary. What I did not expect to learn was: 1.) how limited my memory was for re-accessing a given experience, 2.) how challenging it was to meta-communicate

while immersed in the painting process, 3.) how being in an altered state compromised my ability to verbalize and remember my experience, and 4.) how fleeting insight, experience, and meaning unfolded from secondary processes were even when articulated and recorded.

The process of reviewing the audio and video recordings of the paintings revealed the transient nature of my experience and my memory. Even with my attempts to bring greater awareness to the creative process through meta-communication and inner work, I found that my recollection of key or even profound moments was elusive and quickly faded. Perhaps viewing the static paintings in their completed states somehow contributed to the reinforcement of certain memories and the loss of others.

It seems probable that my memory was also impaired by the altered states I entered into while painting, which also may have compromised my ability to meta-communicate. I had far more difficulty meta-communicating while painting than I expected. It seemed that the act of painting itself (i.e., moving the brush across the page while attending to a variety of signals and channels), displaced or diminished my ability to communicate verbally about what I was noticing. Both meta-communicating and using secondary attention while painting requires fluid awareness. As a result, I found it was easier to paint, then stop and communicate about what I had just noticed or report on my experiences, and then paint again. However, I found it near impossible to do both at the same time. The video recording captures the long pauses between words as I draw my brush across the page, and the way I stepped back from the painting and held my brush aside while reflecting aloud on some part of my experience. I suspect that shifting my awareness and identification from one process to another (i.e. from painter to observer to

secondary process as experienced in a particular channel) occurs sequentially and not simultaneously.

In two of the videotaped sessions, I attempted to do inner work as a way of unfolding aspects of the paintings I was working on. In both instances, I found that my memory of what I had unfolded and learned in the inner work was quickly lost. In the first of these sessions, I put down my brush and took time to shapeshift, feel into, and become the dark dots that seemed to be levitating upward at the top of the painting. In that moment, the unfolded process helped me relate to other elements of the painting to current struggles in every day life, and I remember feeling very moved by the significance of what I was experiencing and meta-communicating. However, once the session was over and prior to reviewing the tapes, I found I had forgotten much of the details of that inner work experience, and I was left with only one summary memory about it: I had had a profound experience of coming out of something.

This experience illuminated the role of the facilitator as an amplifier of and external memory for inner and outer processes. It seems I was only minimally able to observe and integrate my experience in the moment because I was simultaneously engaged in it. I could not rely on my memory of what I had experienced during the altered state when I was so deeply engrossed in the particular channel or identification. What seemed to be a vivid and powerful experience in the moment was reduced to a single summary statement that lacked any of the conviction or passion I felt at the time. The memory was there, as a placeholder, but I could not easily re-access the experience even when reviewing the videotape. For me, this finding reinforced the centrality of altered state experiences in the creative process and the dance between various levels of

consciousness that are at play. It also highlighted the significant role that the therapist or facilitator plays in holding, reflecting, and amplifying the altered state learning for individuals doing inner work.

In summary, the findings described above, all led to me answer the research question of “Who or what creates?” as follows: It is neither me as an individual who creates nor some outer force that paints – it is the combination of my personal identity, everyday awareness, and sentient attention to forces unknown that are the co-creative forces in the painting process.

### **The Paintings**

Since my data and findings are completely dependent on the study of my painting process, this section presents all nine of the paintings that I completed during the course of this project. In addition, I have included a few comments about each painting.



*Untitled*, August, 2010, 20" x 26", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
The large face of a figure underwater is taking in air freely thru its mouth.  
Other figures gasp and try to breathe air into their lungs.



***Simple Freedom***, August 7, 2010, 20" x 26", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
The small black dots at the top of the painting rise upward. A spirit in the center rises thru an opening.



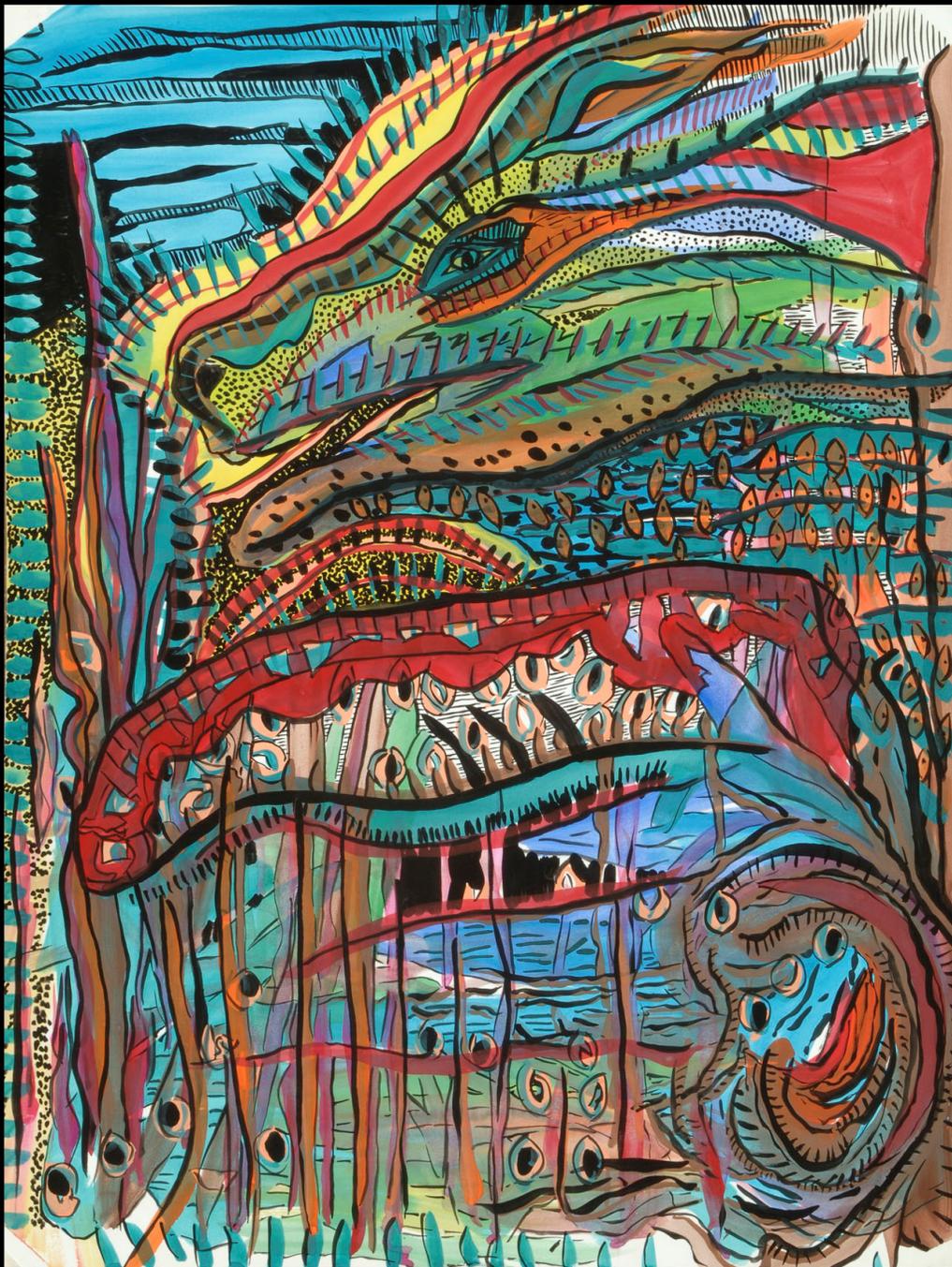
*Untitled*, August 14, 2010, 20" x 26", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
A sea cave with energy vortices radiate from the center toward the upper corners of the image.



***Anything in the Universe***, August 15, 2010, 26" x 40", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
The deep love and desire of a cosmic figure cradles the earth as it erupts. Pathos and anguish reach over its shoulder.



*Tree Spirits*, October 9, 2010, 20" x 26", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
Side by side, the life and death of tree spirits transit from one to the other.



***Running Dog***, October 17, 2010, 20" x 26", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
A running dog under the night sky.



*Heart*, November 13, 2010, 33" x 32", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
The faces of the heart as fluids flow in and out.



**Left & Right**, November 14, 2010, 20" x 36", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
The inner landscape of two domains.



**Untitled**, January 22, 2011, 20" x 26", tempera paint on lithograph paper  
An arched figure draws seed-like beings into the air.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Quality Criteria**

Although the subjectivity of a heuristic method results in low reliability and limits generalization of the findings, I undertook my project with an open mind, few expectations, sincerity, and a deep desire to understand more about my creative process. Some aspects of this project have strengthened my personal sense of the veracity of my findings, others confirm Process Work theories and ideas, and yet others make me wonder more about my own perceptions and self-awareness as well as appreciate the differences between knowing that comes from experience and knowing that comes from cognition.

The biggest subjective validation of this study was my repeated surprise at unexpected outcomes, observations, and findings. I did not expect to discover such unforeseen findings or to re-affirm some of the basic tenets of Process Work. These authentic moments of amazement and “Aha!” experiences reflect a sense that something new was revealed or experienced. Shock at finding figures in my paintings that reflected my body experiences and dreams, astounding recognition of the telic nature of the first brush strokes, and amazement at the limitations of my memory during altered states and inner work are all examples of surprises that I encountered during this project, which I think speak to the nature and depth of my endeavor. These unforeseen findings, which were reflected in my repeated surprise, lend phenomenological validation to my research and mitigate my concerns about the risks of researcher bias and self-fulfilling prophecies.

Another benchmark of quality criteria for this project was the cross confirmation of my findings through various methods of data collection. Data sources were diverse and

provided multi-dimensional perspectives on my experiences, so when the same or similar findings surfaced in different kinds of data, it strengthened the findings. Parallels that arose between the contents of my paintings, my physical body sensations, my childhood dream, and my nighttime dreams offered me unbidden confirmation that my experiences were not merely artifacts of my own conscious prejudices. For example, while working on one of the paintings (*Tree Spirits*), I did an inner work exercise in which elements of my childhood dream emerged, and I later realized that these same elements were represented as a figure in the painting. Such parallels offered validation of the Process Work assumption that a unifying background force helps to organize experience, and it also lent credence to the idea that my conscious mind was not the only architect of my experiences, nor was it the only painter at work.

If I consider this paper from the point of view of the reader, and if I am a skeptical reader (which I am), I must, in the spirit of transparency, confess my own suspicion of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a self-study of this type, when you, the research and subject of the research, are surprised to obtain findings that are congruent with your overall belief or assumptions, this concern is raised. I feel I have had a very exciting experience and rare opportunity to re-discover for myself some foundational tenets of the paradigm I am using (for example, the body mirroring secondary processes as manifest in the *Running Dog* painting). While these were personally wondrous moments, I do not expect my reader to do more than share in my skepticism about what factors might have led to those experiences. That my contribution is predicated on finding something I might have expected to find (but in my case, did not expect to find) is a wrinkle that I cannot flatten.

I can only ask that the spirit of my experiences and findings be included in the reader's final assessment.

There is a perspective that might support both a conclusion that my findings were self-fulfilling at an unconscious level influenced by existing knowledge, and simultaneously completely authentic in the sense of discovering things previously unknown. Such a view assumes that experiential knowing and cognitive knowledge/understanding can and are phenomenologically distinct, and that one can discover and have knowledge without having yet found it in one's experience, or, in my case, in one's body. Given my experience, that would be my resolution to this conundrum, at least for the time being.

### **Intended Audience and Contribution to the Field**

The intended audience for this project is the Process Work community, artists, and others who are interested in reflecting on and understanding the creative process. While others in the Process Work community have written about the connection between Process Work and creativity (e.g., Amy Mindell, 2005; Vikkelse, 1994; Jobe & Heizer, 1994; Kavanagh, 2007; Arye, 1991; Payne, 2005; Starbear, 2005), I think I am the only person who has studied the creative process using videography. I hope that my experiment with video encourages other students of Process-oriented Psychology to document their own experiences, to use video and audio recordings to explore other phenomena, and to use these recordings as powerful tools to hold and review fleeting experiences and memories for learning and personal growth.

Process Work has helped me to better understand my creative process and to think about the creative processes of others, and I hope that my paper and presentation provide other artists, Process Workers, and anyone interested with a sense of the universality of the creative process. I also hope that my project encourages others to use their unique dreambody experience to transform ordinary reality through whatever medium they choose.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are a number of limitations to my research project:

- It does not look at the experiences of other artists or the use of other media.
- It does not quantitatively confirm any of the findings presented here through the observation of other people engaged in the painting process (e.g., to validate the first strokes theory that the essence of the painting may occur in the first moments of applying paint to paper).
- It does not relate my subjective experience to the vast body of research and writing on creativity from various disciplines (i.e. art, history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc.).
- It does not include historic or contemporary beliefs about conditions for the creative process.
- It does not attempt to define the inner conditions and awareness needed to follow secondary signals and processes, or to differentiate them from primary signals and processes.

- It does not include a reflection on the impact of painting on my everyday life and work.
- It does not answer the question of how the creative process might change the artist.

Future studies in this area could aim to undertake and explore any of the limitations mentioned above. A future study that I would love to conduct would be interviewing other artists about their creative experience in order to find out more about how they think and speak about their process, including their beliefs about the conditions required to create, who or what creates, altered states experiences, awareness of secondary and primary signals during the creative process, and the resilience of the creative force and their access to it.

Further research on the first moments in the creative process would also be valuable. This area holds potential for observing and understanding how essential energies first manifest and give direction to an unfolding process. As Process Workers, we are especially apt for such research because of our ability to notice, trust, and embrace tiny signals, and our capacity to teach others to follow wisp-like flirts as well as to nurture the initiating impulses.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I paint to experience myself in a state where unexpected ideas, emotions, sensations, and images can appear. I paint because I am drawn to explore and understand something by looking. I paint because color, movement, lines, and shapes seem to speak

to me – each seems to have a specific quality or message that I perceive. I sense them and respond from within myself. Outwardly, a record of this unique dialogue is made on the paper with paint, but it is only a static snap shot of something far richer:

The visible painting is just the echo of a much greater process. What is reflected in the forms, images, and colors is the by-product of a journey that has taken place on an inner landscape . . . The true artistic product is the personal transformation that takes place within the painting experience itself. Cassou & Cubley, 1996, p. xxv

By reflecting on my inner and outer experience of painting, I have become more interested in other artists who work in other media (e.g., music, movement, design, photography). I notice my first reaction to art is no longer, “Do I like the work?” Instead, I have an almost immediate interest in some unique aspect or element of the work that catches my attention. I feel connected to a deeper experience in myself and an empathic link to the artist. I sense something about the experience behind the work that I may not be able to verify but which gives my experience of the piece more richness. I notice I have a growing appreciation for artists’ ability to follow things that sometimes lie outside of conventional agreements about form, sequence, composition, and what is considered “good art.” I recognize their ability to catch complex and subtle intuitions and make them manifest. I hear music, song, and sound scapes with more depth and fullness – I am in the music and not just listening to it. Each time this occurs, creative empathy changes me and extends my capacity to relate to the diverse world around me.

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