

empty canvas : wondering mind

creative retreats

with

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The workshops I offer these days take the form of Creative Retreats. Their content has evolved out of my experience as a somewhat nomadic artisan and teacher. And while a great deal of my teaching experience was in the classrooms of schools and institutions I have found that the context of a focused retreat is more conducive to the exploration of our natural creativity. It's this mysterious movement that has always been my passion. One's artworks are maps of one's journey into creativity rather than prescribed or pre-defined products. While I am now in the so-called retirement years of my life, I can easily be coaxed to share the delights of this creative journey.

Please do not imagine that I am an authority on creativity or anything else. I'm just a fellow wayfarer on the via creativa - one whose destiny has been to make things, to teach and travel and think a lot about creativity.

I've also thought a great deal about joy and color: along with creativity, they have been life-long passions. My 'retirement' workshop repertoire has reduced itself to just three retreats exploring these concerns.

joy

Also known as unconditional happiness, it's what we all need and seek. Without it, life lacks juice. We dry up.

Joy is different from pleasure, and the keys that trigger it hide in different places for different folks. For me, it lurks in the process of creating things with color, pattern and texture. It bubbles up with the extraordinary and the uninvited - the fortuitous accidents and unplanned serendipities that are so familiar to all creative artisans. Some folk refer to this as 'being in the flow'. Most mysteriously, it seems that to the extent that the 'artist' is absent, joy is present.

Joy is about relaxing into not-knowing, it's about awareness of interdependence, and it's about noticing how creativity flows naturally from that relaxed awareness. **the art of chance** retreat is designed to explore the art of not-knowing. And amazingly, it's out of one's not-knowing that undreamed of creative possibilities arise. The game is designed to become obsolete as the player quickly discovers their own authentic way of creating.

the art of chance© a game

This playful and powerful game sidesteps the yapping mental critic (often mistakenly identified as the artist within) whose opinions and conclusions paralyze both aspiring and seasoned creators.

It's a game of chance, using dice and cards to create - whatever wants to be created. We concentrate on just three of the elements of visual language: color, texture and mark, learning about line, tone, shape, form, pattern and design – by default!

Wild cards introduce countless ideas for creative play, and we aren't restricted to two dimensions. The possibilities are infinite.

the art of chance is offered as a three-day or a week-long event, but the game is an excellent laxative for creative constipation anytime, anywhere.



the art of chance in Norway

color

Consider color for a moment. When observing the world of appearances, do we see anything but color? Color creates form, texture, tonality, shape and contrast. We're told color consists of spectral energy waves which the toolbox of conscious perception translates into a world of objects. No consciousness? - No color, no world.

Clearly there's a potent relationship between color and consciousness, one of mutual interdependence. We know, for instance, that color has its own language and that the cells of the body know how to read it. We can explore that language best through color play, when we have no expectations of what might unfold. However one approaches color, it's always a magical catalyst for creativity.

Cezanne spoke about "**a colored state of grace**" and I've borrowed his phrase for the title of a creative retreat focusing on this magic.

a colored state of grace

creativity by default!

Stuck, blocked, scared? I know these states, and I know that color saves me every time. This creative retreat includes two powerful projects which never fail to fuel new inspirations and open us up to the exquisite language of color.

The first project sees us mixing up a huge palette of hues and their tones, learning about the language of color in the process. Then we turn our hands to the technique of collage, and, in response to what the colors have to tell us, we play.



a colored state of grace: the first project, in Kerala, India

The second project was inspired by tempera techniques used by Renaissance fresco painters. To simplify the process I developed a similar method using fast-drying acrylic paints. Layers of color are built up with pure white sandwiched between them. The white light creates form; the layered tones create depth and shadows. And the experience is truly delightful. Once the technical basis has been presented, participants are encouraged to play with the emerging forms created by the layered colors, rather than following a planned design.

When J Krishnamurti was writing his Journal, he would often say - when speaking of the landscape - "and color was god", but not the god of any temple or church. Paul Cezanne talked about a "colored state of grace" when referring to his works. We mightn't be able to define either god or grace, but we all know what graciousness and godliness feel like – or what their absence in our life feels like.

In the scriptures we read that God is light. Color is also light, and artisans whose spiritual practice involves color experience it as both powerful and sacred. Science tells us that color is spectral energy made visible by the process of perceiving. Keeping the wonder of both sanctity and science in mind, we relax into play and let the colors have their say.

creativity

I believe that the most important thing for humankind is its own creativity.

These words from the Dalai Lama in his book *Freedom in Exile* made a huge impact on me; they helped me understand my lifetime preoccupation with the mysterious movement called creativity. Understanding and fostering creativity is indeed vital work. Creativity heals. Its movement shifts our stuckness.

In an inexplicable way, it acts to reconnect us with something so much greater than the small world of our self-preoccupation. It arrives unannounced and its perfumed calling card is gilt-edged with rightness. Perhaps we know it best by its absence.

The noted physicist and creative thinker David Bohm explained to me that the absence of creativity doesn't imply neutrality, but that destructivity flows into its absence. We don't have to look far for hard evidence of this fact.

empty canvas : wondering mind



Blind Men on a Log bridge
By Hakuin Ekaku
(The Gitter Collection)

I've yet to find a better visual depiction of the creative journey ...

Creativity is incompatible with definitions about it and prescriptions for it. Like life itself, it's an immense and wondrous mystery. But our encounters with it can be described. I believe that the work of the genuinely creative artisan will inevitably be an ex-expression of that encounter.

In these retreats, the encounter - along with our description or expression of it - is our concern, for it makes explicit the level of our unfolding understanding. That's why you won't find any step-by-step instructions for making a certain kind of art product in these retreats. Instead, you'll find invitations to leave your aesthetic comfort zones and to journey at your own creative edge. This is what **empty canvas : wondering mind** is about.

empty canvas : wondering mind

This week-long retreat workshop explores projects, games and activities contained in my book of the same name. Gathered up over a lifetime's work in the classroom and studio, these projects eventually arranged themselves into a resource workbook for educators and students, now available as a series of e-books on the *wonderingmind* website.

empty canvas : wondering mind acknowledges the difficulty many would-be creatives experience when faced with the blank paper, the lump of clay, the pile of fabric scraps - whatever - without any idea of where and how to begin. Both the retreat and the book simply offer ways into the creative playground. And as Julia Cameron puts it, the best way isn't to think things up but to get things down.

Our challenge will be to work outside our aesthetic comfort zones and, in a fully supportive environment, to examine and release the notions that act to disguise our natural state of creativity – the ideas, assumptions and opinions we have about it. Why? Because these are the saboteurs that insist our work be perfect from day one, that make it hard for us to face the empty canvas with beginner's mind.

the art of chance and **a colored state of grace** retreats can be designed as three-day 'long weekend' events, or week-long events. In both cases they are preceded by an introductory evening. **empty canvas : wondering mind** is only offered as a 5-7 day event, as it covers a great deal of territory.

For the most part we work in silence, apart from times set aside for sharing, so the introductory evening is important for clarifying procedures.

The retreats are ideally offered at venues established with the intention to provide a space of beauty, tranquility and sanctity; places conducive to inner exploration, creativity and celebration.

If you feel these workshops would enrich your current program, or if you simply want more information, please contact me:

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