

Art Therapy for Recovering Mormons

bob mccue

October 13, 2005

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We may define therapy as a search for value. Abraham Maslow

Abstract

See <http://www.virtualcs.com/blackboard/lessons/lesson7.html> and <http://www.spiritualcompetency.com/jhpseart.html> for a summary of information related to recovery from the kind of spiritual crisis many of us pass through as we leave Mormonism. This is based on the DSM – IV, the manual psychiatrists use to diagnose mental dysfunction. The type of trauma recovering Mormons often experience fits into the DSM – IV definition of “religious or spiritual problem”.

Recovery from spiritual trauma, such as that caused by discovering that basic religious beliefs are false, requires that we “restory” ourselves. That is, through ingesting new kinds of information, talking with people we trust about both our old way of perceiving ourselves and reality (our “personal mythology”) and new possibilities in that regard, we eventually become comfortable with a new way of seeing ourselves and our place in the world – we find a new personal mythology or narrative.

Some psychiatrists recommend that it is useful from a therapeutic point of view to develop our creative abilities while going through the restorying process. I have found drawing helpful in that regard. See “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain” at <http://www.drawright.com/> for a great way to learn to draw. It is psychology based, and teaches us how to suppress the functioning of the symbol based left side of the brain, and allow the creative and more accurately perceptive right side to dominate. As Dr. Betty Edwards (author of “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain”) puts it, she teaches people a new way of seeing that causes them to be able to draw. I experienced this during the first two hours I spent on her course. It was a fascinating experience during which I produced for the first time in my life drawings that resembled what I was trying to draw. Those who have seen my lack of talent in this regard demonstrated (including my wife) regard these drawings as near miraculous. That is not to say that they are remarkable for anyone but me. But relative to all else I have done in that regard, they are amazing.

The feeling that results from doing the left brain suppression exercises Edwards prescribes as a prelude to drawing closely resembles the mental state associated with yoga and certain types of meditation. The symbol based, left brain is what allows us to make quick decisions and is where the simplifying assumptions we make about the world reside, including those related to religious and other cultural beliefs. It therefore can be thought of as housing much of our personally mythology. As we suppress it, we are more able to see things as they are instead as we have been taught to perceive them. This should in most cases help the restorying process along.

During a recent trip to France, my wife and I enjoyed creative writing classes, painting classes and cooking classes. Each of these in different ways required the suppression of the left brain so that the right brain could both perceive what was before us and resurrect memories in ways that the left brain cannot. We both experienced a minor rebirth as a result. It is not surprising to me that this kind of activity would be recommended by psychiatrists as a useful aid to those who are attempting to reorientate themselves after leaving a belief system like Mormonism.

Introduction

The DSM - IV (the manual used by psychiatrists to diagnose their patients) provides some interesting perspective with regard to the causes, and recommended treatment, of certain religious or spiritual problems. See <http://www.spiritualcompetency.com/jhpseart.html> for a summary. The purpose of this essay is to outline a few of the key concepts behind the DSM – IV in this regard, and to describe my recent experience using some of the therapies (art and creative writing therapy in particular) that are suggested for persons suffering from trauma related to the religious or spiritual aspects of life.

DSM – IV: “Religious or Spiritual Problem”

The basic ideas behind the DSM IV treatment of spiritual problems are as follows:

- The DSM – IV defines "Religious or Spiritual Problem" as including distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith, problems associated with conversion to a new faith, or questioning of other spiritual values which may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution.
- We conceptualize ourselves by way of stories and the role we play within them. This aspect of ourselves is referred to as the “narrative self”, and the story in which we see ourselves playing a role can be called our "personal mythology".
- In order to have sound mental health, it is essential that we feel secure within a personal mythology. It is through our role within this mythology that we perceive meaning in our lives. Another way to conceptualize this is by way of Yeats “mask” metaphor. See http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/bmccue/2005/02/27 for a summary of this concept.
- A disruption one's personal mythology related to religion can cause a form of mental dysfunction that is dealt with by the DSM - IV. For example, if my personal mythology is derived from Mormonism, I likely perceive myself as doing god’s work here on earth and making many sacrifices in order to do so, and in exchange I am earning wonderful blessings that will mostly come to me and my family after death in the Celestial Kingdom. I perceive the world as dominated by unseen forces of good and evil that are locked in an eternal struggle, and through my action or inaction, good or sinful acts, etc. I can either harness the forces of good through my priesthood and literally subject nature to my will (as long as it is consistent with God’s will), or alternatively if I am not righteous I may fall under the influence of evil forces that can harm and deceive me in many ways. If the beliefs that underpin this belief system are shattered, I should be expected to feel somewhere between disoriented and suicidal. The DSM – IV provides the tools necessary for a psychiatrist to assess the degree of mental dysfunction the kind of trauma I just described has caused in a particular individual. And I note that this is only one of several kinds of spiritual problem that the DSM – IV identifies.

Dr. David Lukoff (see <http://www.virtualcs.com/blackboard/lessons/lesson7.html> and <http://www.spiritualcompetency.com/jhpseart.html>) describes the recovery process with regard to a spiritual trauma such as what should be expected to result from leaving Mormonism. He says that this kind of recovery requires that we learn to “retell” our personal mythology. That is, either the old personal mythology of Mormonism needs to be stretched to become believable and hence workable again, or an entirely new mythology must be developed that will ground and give meaning to the individual. Lukoff suggests that in order to do this, a lot of self expression (talk therapy) is required. Ideally, a therapist who understands the process would be found and a lot of time would be spent allowing the patient to tell the old narrative, explain why it does not work, talk about hopes, dreams and fears, talk about new sources of information that are being ingested as the therapy proceeds, and from all of this reading, talking, thinking, etc. a new personal mythology will eventually emerge, and as time passes, will stabilize.

Here is how Lukoff puts it in part:

“Psychotherapy can be seen as a process of helping clients construct a new narrative, a fresh story of their lives. In this narrative understanding, psychotherapy does not consist in the cathartic healing effect of releasing traumatic repressed events and their emotions, but in reconstructing a person's authentic story. In making interpretations, the therapist retells the patient's stories, and these retellings progressively influence [the] what and how of the stories told by patient. The end product of this interweaving of texts is a radically new, jointly authored story. Or as Hillman describes it, the client comes to therapy to be “restored”: ‘The patient is in search of a new story, or of reconnecting with her old one. . . .The story needed to be doctored, not her.’ (pp. 17-18).”

Lukoff has nicely summarized the process through which I went. In my case, the personal mythology that made the most sense was the religious naturalism (RN) story that Ursula Goodenough (See “The Sacred Depths of Nature”) tells so well. See <http://www.religiousnaturalism.org/> for sources of basic information in this regard. I had worked out 90% of this on my own by reading Einstein (see <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Theology-Albert-Einstein.htm> for example) and others before I knew anything about RN, and so when I ran into Ursula's book a few months ago, and then ended up at Star Island (See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.star%20island%20overview.pdf>), it was like walking into a reunion for a high school I had forgotten that I had attended.

Later in the same article, Lukoff provides the following description of a particular kind of spiritual problem that will sound familiar to many post-Mormons:

“Persons transitioning from the “culture of embeddedness” with their teachers into more independent functioning often seek psychotherapeutic help (Bogart, 1992). Vaughan (1987) reports that many individuals who have left destructive spiritual teachers reported that the experience ultimately contributed to their wisdom and maturity through meeting the challenge of restoring their integrity. One such case was described by Bogart (1992):

‘Robert had spent 8 years as the disciple of a teacher from an Asian tradition that emphasized surrender and obedience. Robert had become one of the teacher's attendants, and reported that he “Loved the teacher very much.” Yet there were difficulties. . . . Robert left the community after the guru's sexual and financial misconduct were revealed. Upon leaving, he had intense and at times even paralyzing feelings of betrayal, anger, fear, worthlessness and guilt.

Robert went into psychotherapy with a spiritually sensitive therapist. Later in psychotherapy, he realized that his relationship with the guru replicated his relationship with his father--an angry alcoholic who had humiliated and physically injured Robert, but whose approval he had nevertheless sought. He also worked on major issues around establishing a life outside the structure of the spiritual community and integrating his spiritual beliefs and practices into this new life.' (adapted from pp. 4-5, 16-17)."

And finally, Lukoff distinguishes between emergencies and the process of spiritual emergence that many people undergo as their religious beliefs change:

"In spiritual *emergence*, (another term from the transpersonal psychology literature), there is a gradual unfoldment of spiritual potential with minimal disruption in psychological/social/occupational functioning, whereas in spiritual *emergency* there is significant abrupt disruption in psychological/social/occupational functioning. The Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, describes the process:

'Spiritual emergence is a kind of birth pang in which you yourself go through to a fuller life, a deeper life, in which some areas in your life that were not yet encompassed by this fullness of life are now integrated or called to be integrated or challenged to be integrated (cited in Bragdon, 1994, p. 18). While less disruptive than spiritual emergencies, emergence can also lead persons to seek out a therapist to help integrate their new spiritual experiences (Grof, 1993).'"

It is common for people emerging from Mormonism to go through what might be called an emergency, and then later settle into a period of emergence that may last for a long time. I hope my emergence never ends. Near the end of his life, the great artist Goya wrote "Aun aprendo" (Yet I learn) on one of his drawings. To this we may all aspire.

Do We Need Therapists?

Many reading this will realize that bulletin boards like those at Recovery from Mormonism (see http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agora/w-agora.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb_recovery), and The View from the Foyer (see <http://www.aimoo.com/forum/freeboard.cfm?id=418550>) perform the role of a therapist, to an extent. I did not go to a therapist, and in fact, the idea that I might do so did not cross my mind. Were I leaving Mormonism now, however, I think I would see if I could find a therapist with experience in a related field and buy some of his or her time. I can see how an experienced therapist with regard to the phenomena described by the DSM – IV could be profoundly helpful, and particularly so during the stage described below when many of us tend to obsess over the details of what went wrong with Mormonism at a time when the therapeutic advice suggests that we disengage from wrestling with our past for a time and focus on developing our creative potential and ability to see things more as they really are that comes with this. I don't believe that many people will be capable of doing this without significant support. And I did not realize how much research has been done in this field. The links about point to a number of books that indicate the depth of clinical and theoretical experience that has been developed.

Since I did not realize that therapy was either available or advisable, I simply spent a ton of time at Recovery from Mormonism and The Foyer and elsewhere reading, writing, thinking, etc. while also reading books, sending emails and speaking with people I trusted. Out of this my personal

mythology gradually emerged. But while thrashing around during the process, I would say with the benefit of hindsight that I put unnecessary pressure on a number of important relationships, and may have damaged some of them in ways that are not repairable. Hence, for those who can seek therapy, I think it is advisable. Since I am not in the business of selling therapy, this advice perhaps can bear more weight than it would from a therapist.

Spiritual Emergency v. Spiritual Emergence

I believe that I suffered a spiritual emergency when I discarded my Mormon beliefs. I could think and speak of little else for months. My work suffered. My family life suffered. Etc. Another DSM – IV category that is relevant to this process is posttraumatic stress disorder. Many recovering Mormons show many of the symptoms that define this disorder.

In my case, eventually the emergency passed and a process of spiritual change and growth commenced that is still underway. This still seems like a miracle in many ways from my point of view.

Here is what Lukoff has to say about dealing with the “emergency” aspect of this process:

“However, for spiritual emergencies, most of the models of intervention come from the transpersonal psychology literature. Grof and Grof (1990) recommend that the person temporarily discontinue active inner exploration and all forms of spiritual practice, change their diet to include more "grounding foods" (such as red meat), become involved in very simple grounding activities (such as gardening), engage in regular light exercise (such as walking), and use expressive arts (such as drawing, clay and evocative music) to allow the expression of emotions and experiences through color, forms, sound and movement. In the case described above, Kornfield made use of most of these elements to avoid hospitalizing the individual who entered a spiritual emergency during a meditation retreat. Reliance on the client's self-healing capacities is one of the main principles that guides transpersonal treatment of spiritual emergencies (Perry, 1974; Watson, 1994). In addition, psychologists should be willing to consult, work closely with or even refer to spiritual teachers who may have considerably more expertise in the specific types of crises associated with a given spiritual practice or tradition. Unfortunately mental health professionals rarely consult with religious professionals or spiritual teachers even when dealing religious and spiritual issues (Larson, Hohmann, Kessler, Meador, Boyd, & McSherry, 1988).

Another key component of treatment of spiritual emergencies is normalization of and education about the experience. While this is a common technique in therapy, it plays an especially important role with spiritual emergencies because persons in the midst of spiritual emergencies are often afraid that the unusual nature of their experiences indicates that they are "going crazy" (as described in some of the above cases). An extremely abbreviated version of normalization of an unusual spiritual experience is reported by Jung (1964) in the following case: ‘I vividly recall the case of a professor who had a sudden vision and thought he was insane. He came to see me in a state of complete panic. I simply took a 400-year-old book from the shelf and showed him an old woodcut depicting his very vision. "There's no reason for you to believe that you're insane," I said to him. "They knew about your vision 400 years ago." Whereupon he sat down entirely deflated, but once more normal.’ (p. 69)”

I first note the “normalization” point. That is what brings many people to places like www.exmormon.org (Recovery from Mormonism of “RFM”). They seek validation. That is why the storyboard at RFM is so powerful. Mormonism restricts its members from talking about the reality of their experience. The only expressions of belief that are permitted in public are those that support the institution, thus isolating and invalidating all who do not resonate with what is publicly stated. This, over time, causes one’s real feelings to be suppressed and creates an inauthentic manner of relating to reality and other people that can itself cause various forms of psychoses.

However, Lukoff’s suggestion for those in the initial stages of crisis was counter intuitive for me. He did not suggest digging in and figuring things out (as I tried to do), but rather withdrawing from direct contemplation of the problem to engage in what amount to strength building, healing exercises that would create a greater ability to both see and bear reality. I think this idea needs a little reworking to be useful from a Mormon point of view, and here I will take a shot at doing that, as well as describe my resent experience with these modes of therapy.

It seems clear that Lukoff is referring to people who have acknowledged that they have a problem, and so have sought out a therapist. The main problem on the way out of Mormonism is that the organization has its hooks into us in so many different ways that it is not easy to get the point at which one can look herself in the mirror and say, “I have been duped. What am I going to do about it?” A destructive act is required to get to that point. Until that extraordinarily painful destruction occurs, the “patient” will not acknowledge that she is ill and hence will not seek, or in most cases be prepared to accept, treatment. Anger is important in this regard. It helps to generate the energy required to break tenacious social and psychological bonds, and painfully tear out the most vicious of the hooks that hold us in place.

I do not lightly use phrases like “the organization has its hooks into us” and “I have been duped”. These impute intent to the Mormon institution that is contrary to the interest of its members in most ways. However, it is important to distinguish between the Mormon institution and those men and women who lead it. The people are generally well intentioned. Even when they consciously deceive, as Mormonism highest leaders do, they believe that they are acting in the best interest of rank and file Mormons.

Social groups act in many ways like organisms. They need resources to survive and grow; they attempt to avoid forces that will limit their influence and ability to get the resources they need; etc. The social scientists who study this phenomenon tell us that there is a difference between what some have called the “collective mind” of an organization and the decision making, intentions and morality of any member of the group, including those who lead it. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> at page 42 for a summary.

The collective mind is a product of various factors that are composite within the group and between the group and its environment rather than being found in any particular decision making mechanism, like a single leader or group of leaders. In this way the mind that runs the group is similar to a market (remember Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”) and the forces that make ant hives, bee hives, human cities and other social phenomena predictable to an extent. See Steven Johnson’s “Emergence” for an interesting look at some of the issues relevant to this topic. A group’s collective mind can be thought of as an “emergent” property of the humans in that group in a particular context, much as is consciousness an emergent property of the functioning of neurons in our brains.

For example, consider how each of the following contribute to Mormonism’s collective mind:

- Its belief history: “it is impossible that homosexuality is part of God’s plan because his prophets have said on countless occasions that it is not ...”;
- Its institutional form: Many of Mormonism’s highest leaders have likely thought something like this, “God speaks through the unanimous decision of the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency, and though I disagree with them, I am honour bound to support their position ...”;
- Broad social constraints: Consider the difference between what was required in terms of social cooperation during the freewheeling early days of Mormonism under Joseph Smith and the migration to and pioneering of the Great Basin under Brigham Young;
- Particular expediencies: Mormon leaders in the late 1800s said something like, “It is better to lie to the US government, the public and regular Mormons about our continuing practise of polygamy than to disobey God’s commandment that we practise polygamy ...” and then in the early 1900s they said something like, “If we continue to lie to government officials we are putting the entire Church at risk while modelling a kind of dishonesty that is corrupting our people, so odd as it seems God must really want us to stop polygamy ... God moves in mysterious ways ...”. And more recently, the Internet has forced Mormon leaders to acknowledge the reality of Mormon history in new ways while pretending they have always been as open and honest as possible in this regard. Contrast the story told by Leonard Arrington in “The Adventures of a Church Historian” as to how his attempts to tell the Mormon story in realistic terms were frustrated and the Mormon leadership’s acceptance of Richard Bushman’s recent Joseph Smith biography “Rough Stone Rolling”, which while still tepid goes further toward realism than any prior Mormon effort.
- The personalities of particular leaders and how others (Mormons and non-Mormons) react to them: Consider the differences between Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, David McKay, Joseph F. Smith, Spencer Kimball, Ezra Benson, Gordon Hinckley and Boyd Packer and how each of them have influenced (or may influence) the “Mormon collective mind”.

In light of this research, I think it is fair to speak of Mormonism as an entity or organism that does “get its hooks into its members”, “sucks the life out of its members” or “dupes its members” in some ways, as well as nurturing them in others. And on balance, there is a lot more hooking, sucking and duping than nurturing.

Places like RFM play an important role in providing the information that people on the fringes of Mormonism need to validate their feelings, destroy unjustified beliefs, and find sources of information to start to re-work their personal mythologies. This requires focus on the problem – precisely what Lukoff recommends we avoid while in an emergency state. I think that it is fair to say that the state of emergency – if it will become such – will not occur until a person has accepted that his most basic beliefs are false. So, I suggest that Lukoff’s advice be followed as soon as the penny has fully and truly dropped. Until then, it is necessary that the focus be internal – on the issues required to falsify unjustified Mormon beliefs, and particularly, those beliefs in Mormon authority that enable Mormon leaders to be able to control a large percentage of Mormon behaviour.

My moment of truth is described at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.revelation.pdf>. It is my belief that had I done what Lukoff recommends (disengaged from Mormon studies and began to explore my artistic side), it would have saved months of thrashing around and a lot of stress on some of my most important personal relationships. This belief is based both on what I have read about Lukoff's theories, and experiences I have had during the past few weeks.

Become As A Little Child

When I came across Lukoff's essays several months ago, my wife and I were in the process of planning a 25th anniversary trip to the south of France. We had talked about taking some cooking or other creative lessons while on that trip, and reading Lukoff made me decide to intensify that aspect of our experience. We planned to be in France for two weeks, and I am the type who goes into sensory overload if I look at art, architecture etc. all day for days at a time anyway. So, we booked a week at a creative writing course in Martrin with Sharon Colback (I highly recommend it and will write more later about that experience in particular – see <http://www.writehereinfrance.co.uk/>) and a week of painting and cooking courses at Saignon with Andrew Petrov and Marcia Mitchell (near Avignon – see <http://www.personalprovence.com/>) Again, I highly recommend this experience.

My creative writing skills are limited, I have never applied paint to canvass, and my cooking goes no further than what can be either eaten cold or warmed up. These courses were part of a conscious effort to put myself into new and uncomfortable territory. My wife Juli has long aspired to be a writer and has taken a writing course. She took her first painting class and art history class this summer and loves to cook in creative ways, particularly when it comes to deserts. So she was more than happy to include these experiences in our trip.

Before finding Lukoff's papers that are noted above, Juli and I had already decided to incorporate some learning activities into our trip as a result of a lecture I heard Allison Gopnik (UC Berkeley) give last Spring with regard to the difference between adult and child neural functioning. Gopnik indicated that children are more conscious than adults. She used the example of what happens when an adult goes to a new city – let's say Paris – and experiences a wide variety of new things while falling in love. Falling in love is a very intense form of new experience and one of the few things that can shock an adult human out of the relatively unconscious state in which most adults live. Most people who have experienced what Gopnik describes would agree with her – while in the state induced by new and interesting experiences the whole world seems to pulse with life while our brain is in a child-like learning mode. That is, the requirement that we learn changes our mental state, and makes us more likely to absorb and remember all kinds of things. We become aware of textures, smells, sights and sounds by which we are constantly surrounded but generally speaking unconscious. We are shocked into this state by confronting new stimuli that requires us to use our attentive faculties in ways we generally do not. While in this state, we feel more alive. Gopnik says children live this way to a much greater extent than do adults. This causes their regular displays of wonder and excitement as they encounter new things.

I had often wondered about the way in which the world seemed to come to life for me during my transition out of Mormonism. Gopnik explained that. I was, quite simply, jarred out of my "adult" mode into a child-like state. I was humbled and became anxious to learn. I needed to learn. And so I began to experience many things as a child does, including the sense of wonder and joy at new discovery. This gives new meaning (likely not intended by those who wrote the words) to the scriptural injunction that we should "become as little children.

Gopnik indicated that children are so engaged in exploring and learning that they don't get very much done. To get things done, we need to reduce our actions to largely unconscious, repetitive motions. Think of driving the car, for example. We don't need to think about that. Most of the jobs that we do require similarly low levels of conscious activity. While she did not mention Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's research with regard to "flow" (see <http://www.wie.org/j21/csiksz.asp> and <http://www.authentic happiness.org/>), her findings are more or less consistent with what they have to say. That is, in order to be both productive and happy we need a balance between doing things that have become so routine we don't need to think about them (and so we get a lot done) and things which challenge us. The ideal mix is just enough challenge to have us continue to learn and have feedback with regard to our progress, combined with an opportunity to do things at which we are already very competent and therefore feel success and productivity. And occasionally it feels great to confront the kind of challenge we did in France, but even then, the challenge must not be so great that it overcomes us, and there must be enough positive feedback to encourage us to keep going even though our skills are rudimentary. Our instructors structured the experience and provided feedback that was well within these requirements. Hence, we had a great time during our classes, and embarked upon sight seeing expeditions and various social experiences with our hosts and others we got to know along the way with our minds opened by the learning experience we had each morning.

Gopnik indicated that the trade-off between the time it takes to learn and the need to get things done in order for all to survive has resulted in humans evolving so as to have years as children during which they primarily do, and then a period of time as adults during which they spend most of their time getting things done. Children are put in a position where they explore their environment, re-evaluate their environment in fundamental terms and develop the set of skills necessary to cope with their environment. Accordingly, as the environment changes as a result of what adults or nature do, children develop abilities that their parents often did not have. This is an example of co-evolution – the environment changes and the organism (in this case humans) changes in response, which enables it to cause further changes to the environment, and so on. One does not need to look further than the children who were raised with computers when compared to their parents in terms of dealing with the Internet base environment.

“Drawing On The Right Side Of The Brain”

Since we had committed to take the painting lessons, I decided that I wanted to learn something about that type of artistic process before going to France. A couple of weeks before going, I bought a book that I had heard about in that regard called “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain” (see <http://www.drawright.com/>). It advertised a psychology based approach to drawing that appealed to me, and came with a workbook and step-by-step exercises that made things easy to follow.

My ability to draw has long been a source of hilarity around our family and my office. I am a tax attorney, and have to draw diagrams on white boards during meetings on a regular basis to illustrate the transactions we help people to complete. These require at times symbols for buildings, oil wells, factories, etc. Any child in grade two could do as well as I do in this regard, and I am regularly kidded by my clients and colleagues as a result of the crude nature of my drawings. And my handwriting is illegible. But I was not concerned about becoming a competent artist. Rather, I wanted to have an “outside the box” learning experience that would open my mind in the fashion noted above, and would help in the manner Lukoff suggested. Artistic talent was not required for either of these functions. Nonetheless, several friends who heard that we were going to take painting lessons while in France almost laughed out loud.

I was so busy before we left on our trip that I did not open the drawing book until we were on the plane flying to Toronto for a few days of business meetings before leaving for France. During the course of a four-hour flight, I read a few chapters in the book, and did the first three exercises. The result was astonishing.

Dr. Betty Edwards is the book's author. She developed her approach as a high school teacher in California, and then turned it into a PhD thesis at UCLA where she later taught for many years. She developed her approach on the basis of the "left brain" – "right brain" research produced by Dr. Roger Sperry, who won a Nobel Prize for his research. While this area of study is still controversial and the version Edwards used is now out of date, for her purposes it works well. She quotes Richard Bergland, a well-known neurosurgeon, as follows:

"You have two brains: a left and a right. Modern brain scientists now know that your left brain is your verbal and rational brain; it thinks serially and reduces its thoughts to numbers, letters and words... Your right brain is your nonverbal and intuitive brain; it thinks in patterns, or pictures, composed of 'whole things,' and does not comprehend reductions, either numbers, letters, or words." ("The Fabric of Mind", Viking Penguin, Inc., New York 1985. p.1)

That is, the left brain uses symbols. It does not see things as they are, but uses simplified versions of reality that can be quickly manipulated to get things done. The right brain, on the other hand, sees things more as they are both as wholes and in relationship to each other. It also perceives the patterns that provide the basis for our sense of meaning.

Edwards says that she teaches people a new way of seeing that causes them to be able to draw. She does this by showing us how to suppress the functioning of the symbol based left side of the brain, and allow the creative and more accurately perceptive right side to dominate. In this regard, her techniques closely resemble certain types of meditation that are designed to quiet the "chattering" that goes on continually in our minds. I could feel this quieting occur as I did some of her exercises.

The symbol based left brain is what allows us to make quick decisions and is where the simplifying assumptions we make about the world reside, including those related to religious and other cultural beliefs. As the left brain functioning is suppressed, we are more able to see things as they are instead as we have been taught to perceive them. The experience of trying to perceive an object, like a cathedral I sketched while we were in France, while the left brain is declining in influence and the right brain is taking the stage, is like watching while a curtain is pulled back and a new view opens up. As this occurs, the left brain's chattering quiets and we pass into a quasi-meditative state.

Edward's teaching system uses various techniques to disable the left side of the brain. For example, the first and most striking exercise I did involved turning a Picasso drawing of the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky upside down and attempting to copy it. Were the painting right side up, our dominant left brain would recognize "hand", "foot", "face", etc. and would provide us with the symbols for those things. This leads to the childish drawings most of us produce. However, once the drawing is upside down, the left side of the brain does not recognize its parts in the same way, and disengages. This allows the right side of the brain to take over and allow us to see the lines in front of us as they really are instead, and more or less accurately reproduce a complicated drawing.

For me, the result was stunning. I almost woke my wife up (she was sleeping in the airplane seat beside me) to show her. And for the next two days, as I sat in a large conference hall during meetings that required very little of my attention, I sketched things in the room around me. Chandeliers. Water pitchers. Pictures from newspapers, including human faces and other body parts. My own hand with the fingers pointed toward me in a claw like posture. None of these were wonderful works of art, but they were reasonable representations of what I was trying to draw. This was new territory for me. And each time I started to draw, I could feel myself entering a semi-trance of the kind I have come to associate with meditation.

Creative Writing

I am not going to try to give even a partial account of the wonderful five days we spent with Sharon Colback and two other students at Martrin, a small town near Millau in the neighborhood of France's Tarn Valley. However, I note that many of the exercises Sharon led us through were designed to disengage the left side of the brain, though she did not speak of what we were doing in those terms. As I struggled with those exercises, I became painfully aware of how I have been trained to use the left side of my brain to control my perception of life and how much this has caused me to miss. I could feel resistance each time I tried to let go of my need to control the story I was trying to tell; my need to think logically and linearly. This made me think of the relationship between our conscious and subconscious minds.

The subconscious often acts as a kind of filter. It screens out information that the evolution of our brains has programmed us to perceive as dangerous, for example. This is at the root of denial, and is explained by cognitive dissonance theory (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance) as well as various biases and other perception distorters (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.denial.pdf> starting at page 17 and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases).

For example, a woman whose husband is cheating on her will likely be the last to reach that conclusion based on the evidence in front of her. Why? Because if she becomes conscious of this evidence, she will likely take action that may dramatically change her life in a fashion that evolution has programmed us to perceive to be risky. The same process applies to information that would threaten our relationship to important social groups and explains why people who are committed to various religious, political and other ideologies have such a hard time grasping any information that contradicts their group's point of view, regardless of how cogent that information may appear to those outside their group.

The instincts that suppress information that threatens our important individual and group relationships were formed long ago while evolution brought us into being. At that time, the connection between mates (and particularly the female's connection to the male) and the connection of each individual to a protective group was far more important to our survival than accurately perceiving each and every aspect of our social world. That is, our intelligence was not designed to accurately perceive and process information about what is going on around us in all cases. It was designed to keep us and our offspring alive. Sometimes, in the brutal environment in which our brains evolved, it was important from a survival point of view that we not know about certain things.

For example, if we became aware of something about our group (for example, that our leader is a liar who invented the story that legitimizes his leadership out of thin air) and start to talk about that with other group members, we might be pushed out of the group or the group itself may disintegrate. During most of human history, being pushed out of the group meant death. And

what if the group's alpha male is having clandestine sex with my mate? If I become aware of that, I may feel obliged to challenge him which will likely result in my death and perhaps the death of my offspring. If I remain unaware (at the conscious level at least) of what is going on, his fancy will likely pass and my life will go on relatively uninterrupted. And I may unwittingly raise one of his offspring as my own. As an aside I note that recent studies that use genetic data to look for certain diseases have uncovered the fascinating fact that about 7% of children in North American society think "Dad" is someone other than the male who is really their father. Hence, it seems fair to conclude that the example I just used, which I was using long before I ran across this data, is still more relevant than I thought it was.

So, our brains evolved to keep us ignorant in some cases as opposed to enlightened. In this concept we find the roots of cognitive dissonance, cognitive biases, and much of the puzzling behaviour we see around us in the religious, political and economic behavior of humankind.

With this in mind, I wondered how much of a connection there was between the left/right brain dichotomy and what I had read before regarding the subconscious and conscious minds. As noted above, the left brain acts as a kind of filter – a control mechanism. The subconscious does the same thing. So I perhaps should not be surprised that as I learned to take the brakes off my creative process, to reduce the influence of my subconscious and/or left brain filters, some of what came tumbling out was troubling. I found that many important perceptions about myself, my behaviour, important relationships etc. had been kept from me by the filters just described. And I found myself wondering how far down this rabbit hole I wished to go. This is something I am grateful to have become aware of, and hence able to make choices respecting.

Sharon recommended various exercises to enhance our creativity. Here are a few of them.

First, each morning when we awoke we were to write for 15 minutes before doing anything else, and were to write about whatever came into our heads. This could be dreams, what we looked forward to that day, what had happened the day before; whatever. It was critically important that we commit to ourselves before hand that no one would ever read what we were to write during these sessions. She said that sometimes when she did this a stream of profanity emerged. I laughed at that, and wondered out loud what could provoke that kind of language from someone as obviously genteel and cultured as Sharon. A female course-mate assured me that it must be a male of some kind, and Sharon agreed.

In any event, Sharon told us that we were not to reread, even to correct spelling, as we wrote for 15 minutes each morning; that we were to encourage whatever seemed to want to tumble out to do so; and that we were not to go back and re-read it for three weeks.

In another interesting exercise, she had us draw a river on a long sheet of paper in a fashion that would describe our lives, and then write about that. This provoked a few painful realizations, which in turn provoked a torrent of writing.

In another, she had us make up characters on the basis of photographs she gave us, and then having created these essentially random characters, to write a dialogue between them. Then, having written the dialogue between them, we were to write a page of description about where they were. Then, we were to at random cut up the dialogue into sentences (or sets of sentences), do the same with the description, and then paste them one after another onto an other sheet of paper, alternating one strip from the dialogue and then one from the description. Amazingly, each of these made sense with little correction.

By the end of the week, I was getting to the point at which I could simply put my head down and write – just let a story pour out of me. Sharon emphasized the importance of allowing ourselves the liberty of writing a “shitty first draft” – of just letting go; letting whatever was there pour out. As already noted, I resisted that, but eventually the kind of random pouring out that Sharon’s exercises caused helped me get into a mental space where I could just let it rip. And as I did so, I recognized the same semi-trance that I have felt while doing my drawing exercises. There was a similar quieting of the left brain; elevation of the right brain (and perhaps the subconscious). What a fascinating process.

Because of the intensely creative nature of the exercises Sharon led us through, and probably the chemistry of the group, we became very close to the other people we shared our time with while at Sharon’s. And we became close to Sharon as well. We had a great time stumping around the French countryside together and will likely see each of these people again at some point. We have suggested a group reunion in Canada.

Painting

Given the fun I had with drawing, I was looking forward to the painting lessons perhaps more than anything else we had scheduled to do in France. Andrew Petrov was our instructor. He is an accomplished painter from Washington D.C. who has been living in France for about five years. He introduced us to yet another kind of letting go that without any question uses the same kind of left brain – right brain mechanism Edwards so nicely describes.

We had three mornings painting with Andrew. During the first he gave a little basic instruction about how oil painting works; how to mix colors; how to complement colors; and how to “paint falsely with accents of truth”. This last statement to the better part of two days for me to grasp.

Just as I tended while writing toward trying to control the flow of the story (going back to correct and re-write instead of just letting it tumble out), while painting I tended to try to quickly represent what I saw before me. Our first painting, for example, was of a Roman bridge near Apt called “Pont Julien”. From the beginning of the morning, I was trying to get something that looked like the bridge on the canvass, and Andrew was slopping paint on what I thought was a good start in that direction. He wanted layers of color on the canvass. He wanted no lines; he wanted no clear edges (he was continually pulling colors I had purposely separated into each other, creating what appeared to me to be a mess). And then after a great deal of work had been done, he would slop paint all over what I had done and I would be required to start over. And from this random mess, eventually a reasonable bridge emerged. Not where I had planned. Not the part of what I had started out trying to capture. But a pleasing representation of the bridge nonetheless. And behind it, and its various backgrounds, peeked an array of hints of color as a result of the many things I had tried and Andrew had forced me to more or less cover.

This is “a lot like life”, it eventually occurred to me. Lots of randomness. Does not proceed logically. Extremely forgiving. No need to rush, in fact most things turn out better with more time and patience. Most mistakes can be erased or painted over. At one crucial moment, I asked Andrew for some help and pointed carefully to the spot on the painting that was troubling me. He said, “You mean here?” and with his brush slopped a different color of paint over fully 1/3rd of the painting. And within 30 minutes what had initially seemed like a horrifying scar over my blossoming bridge has been absorbed seamless, and surprisingly, into the painting.

I sum up Andrew’s lessons as follows:

- Delay “ego painting” for as long as possible. Ego painting is the clear lines and visible brush strokes that finally bring definition to the painting and stoke it with the artist’s personality. This is like good foreplay before sexual intimacy – the longer the delay the more satisfying the result.
- Ask, “What is the essence of what I am seeing” when you look at your subject. Squint at it. What stands out? Think about what attracts you to it. Ask the question of yourself out loud. Andrew says that he regularly mutters to himself while he paints to get the brain moving outside its usual grooves.
- Regularly squint at your subject to see its important features. That is how we can tell what is really light and dark. That is how we can tell where to emphasize light and shadow. Only the essence stands out through the squint.
- Don’t worry about mistakes. Just get your feelings on the canvass. Don’t be afraid of “shitty first drafts”. You can erase paint. You can paint over. Just let it rip.
- Let go of ideas related to definite form. Paint what you feel in terms of color and shape, and with amazing frequency when you stand back to view the painting at a distance, you will capture the essence of what you want to represent. All you have to do is get the back relationships right. Relative size. Relative brightness or darkness. Relative location. And don’t be too precise.
- Our symbol brain (the left side) is generally what we use when looking at a painting. Hence, shapes do not have to be precise in order to be interpreted by the brain as what we want to them to be. We just have to get close, and our symbol brains and imaginations will do the rest.
- Never leave a clear edge. Our brain knows edges are clean and so our left brain interprets them as clean. But when we look carefully enough to overcome the left brain, our right brain tells us that all edges are fuzzy. And the further away they are, the more fuzzy. So paint them all fuzzy. And overemphasize what you want to stand out.
- Less is often more. Restricting a painting to a limited color pallet often makes it more brilliant as we choose colors to evoke what we feel instead of copying what we see. This was driven home from me both when Andrew made us substitute black for blue one day, and then the next when in the market we saw some brilliant black and white photography of the region, alongside color photographs. The black and whites were far more compelling than their brilliantly coloured counterparts. This was in part because of the quality of the photographer, and in part because the absence of color brought out the essence of the forms involved, which were striking. Old stone architecture; sheppards moving their sheep through fields; etc.

Lessons in Creativity

It is difficult for me to overstate the impact our days with Sharon and her group, and then Andrew and Marcia had on me. A new side of my person, and the world, opened up to me during an amazingly short time.

Perhaps the most important lesson I came away with has to do with how human perception, works, which has been central to the studying I have done since starting the attempt to understand my Mormon experience. This is best summed up by two aspects of our experience in France. The first was Andrew's consistent message to us that while painting we are not to try to capture reality, but rather to suggest or evoke it. If you want reality, he said several times, "take a photo". And the second was Sharon's incredible demonstration of the mind's ability to create a credible pattern out of close to random sentences when she had us write the dialogue and description of different events noted above, and then mix up the sentences and read the result aloud. That was a mindblower for me. I expected nonsense out of that exercise after writing both parts that were mixed, and so having a pretty good idea what their combination would sound like. And the fact that one after another four of us presented the result of the exercise to similar effect confirmed to my satisfaction that my case was not a coincidence.

So this is the key concept: Our minds have far more powerful pattern finding instincts than I had dreamed possible even after all of the reading I have done in that area during the past three years. And, a big part of what makes the artistic experience enjoyable both for the creator and the viewer is leaving room for the mind's pattern finding abilities to create a surprise as it leaps from what is on the canvass or written page to what it suggests. And so much more so if I am both the creator and the viewer. It was a miracle to see Point Julien emerge from the mess on my canvass.

This idea has a variety of implications with regard to my future enjoyment, and creation of art.

First, if I wish to be an artist, I need to get down into the meditative space where I can allow ideas and images to simply pour out. The better I become at doing this, the richer the material I am likely to produce and the more meaningful it will be to me. The upshot of what David Lukoff has to say about this process is that as we spend time in the mental space where the barrier between the conscious and subconscious is thin, we will process our "issues" more effectively and find out lives more grounded and satisfied.

And, the research of C.G. Jung and others with regard to the nature of the individual and collective unconscious (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious) would suggest that stories or art that is the product of our individual unconscious would tend to touch the unconscious nature we share with we are trying to communicate with in ways that we could not do through the means accessible to our conscious selves. This is a bit like the "Star Wars" "force". While I believe that trusting instinct will often get us into trouble when our individual interests are different from those of our group (see the "Denial" essay linked above), if we are trying to emotionally move others through our creative work, coming at it from the perspective only our unconscious mind can provide is likely to be more effective than any other approach. This is because humanity shares a great deal of these instincts, In effect, we speak a common unconscious language that is communicated through the symbols that dominate creative expression that originates in our subconscious. And the only way to produce this is to get down into the quasi-meditative state I have described. Each of the artists I have spoken to during the past few weeks about this describe the same kind of mental space in which they create.

I am also emboldened to experiment in a variety of ways once I get down into my creative space. I am less inclined to have an objective in mind when I start out, but rather to treat the entire experience as an experience that is per se worthwhile, and any "art" that results from it as an interesting by-product. This invites me to throw all kinds of things up against the wall and then stand back to see what sticks. And why not combine visual ideas or pieces of writing that

emerge from this process almost at random as we did in the exercise I have described just to see what my mind will do with them and what I will learn from that process?

It seems ironic to me that so much of the thrill of observing art, whether our own or that of other people, seems to be driven by the left side of the brain when that is precisely what we need to disconnect when creating art. That is, the left side of the brain is the "symbol" machine that takes complex data and organizes into things we recognize, as my mind took the random sentences I wrote and inferred a world around them that turned them into a credible dialogue.

I also find it interesting to think about how getting down into my creative, meditative mental space both allows me to perceive things more as they actually are, and to access the part of my subconscious that pulls up all kinds of things that have nothing to do with what actually is. That is, my creative powers seem connected simultaneously to the perception of the most essential aspect of reality, and the widest possible range of imagination. I will have to think more about this to grasp it.

Finally, I am more sensitive to the manner in which my context at the moment may influence how I feel about a piece of art. I think that this is perhaps an aspect of the abundance we experience from an artistic point of view that impoverishes us. Were my resources limited (the same painting; the same few opera; the same music) I would have perhaps noticed a long time ago how what I bring to the experience radically influence what I perceive.

Some aspects of the study of cognition confirm this to be the case – colours and other essential elements of what we perceive change with their context. A good part of design theory hinges on this idea. For a fascinating example of how this works, see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/shows/tchaikovsky4/index2.html>. Click on "Keeping Score". Let it load. Then click on "Primal Moves". Let it load. Then click on "Emotional Roots", do the little bit of reading required there, experience the types of music illustrated and feel them work up and down your emotional spectrum. No surprises, but it is interesting to feel so many of your buttons pushed so effectively in sequence.

And then go back one page and click on "Matching the Music" which is where the fun begins. This page allows you to match various famous painting with different types of music in the manner set out below. It is fun to play with by mixing and matching in different ways. This page allows you to construct a six frame video clip with music accompaniment. Each frame lasts a few seconds, and allows you to match a distinctive style of music with a painting. When you drag a painting and then a music clip over toward the relevant space on the page, you get to watch a piece of the painting while you listen to the music. If you "save" that combination, it will occupy the first frame in your little video. Then you are invited to do the same thing with the second frame, and so on until the six are filled. Then, you can press "play" and it will run through the entire piece for you. Instead of seeing only part of the painting while the clips run at this point, you are treated to different views of the painting while the music plays. I recommend the following experiment:

- Select Edvard Munch's "Scream" as your painting for the first frame, and match it with the music clip from the bottom right hand corner of the selection, which is from Alban Berg's "Three Orchestral Pieces".
- Save this as frame one.
- Make the same selection for frames two and three.

- For frames four through six select "Scream" but match it with the first music clip (top left hand corner), which is a Brahms violin concerto.

You will have a sense of what the radically different combinations of painting to music do by virtue of having set up these matches, but try to listen to as little of the music as possible while you set this up, to allow for maximal new experience as you listen to the combined clips. Then, sit back, relax, and play the sequence of six short music clips while looking at Scream.

In any event, my eyes have been opened to a variety of important aspects of life as result of what Juli and I experienced on this trip.

Recovering Mormon Therapy

Developing the ability to use the right side of the brain has powerful therapeutic benefits for those who are recovering from the effects of a domineering institution like Mormonism and are trying to develop a new personal mythology or worldview. And I can see particular wisdom in pulling away from the analysis of Mormonism once the crisis has been reached and we have accepted that our belief system is in disarray. At that point, as we begin to develop a new worldview, it is more important than ever that we perceive things accurately, as wholes, in their essences, and as they relate to each other, instead of as booming, buzzing details.

The disciplines of drawing, painting and creative writing as I experienced them in France each in different ways tended to suppress my tendency to see, think and feel as I have been taught, and enabled me to see and feel more of what was in front of me; of what was essential about the scene in front of me; and perhaps most importantly, to reinterpret various incidents in my past and to see new ways of dealing with both life as it is now and as it will become. It makes sense to me that this process would both help to calm the emergency, and would become wonderful creative fodder during the creation of a new world view.

I note in particular the analogy between what Lukoff recommends for those who are in a state of spiritual emergency and what I was being taught to do in different ways while learning to draw, write creatively and paint. Lukoff says, in essence, "Stop trying to understand the thing through analysis, introspection, etc. Just let it be. Go draw, paint, jog, garden. Be good to yourself. Don't be strict with yourself. Don't worry. Be happy."

And from each of our art and writing instructors I heard continually in a variety of different ways, "let go". They told me to stop trying to control my story. Let it tell itself. Let it tumble out. Accept, even embrace, a "shitty first draft". Concentrate on what is really there in front of you. Keep asking yourself, "what do I see?" Squint at it. Move around and look at it from different angles. Ask out loud why it appeals to you. Play with it and how it makes you feel. Just throw paint on the canvass in shapes and colors that seem consistent with how you feel, not what you see. And don't worry about how it looks because you can always fix it later. Let it stay in the realm of feeling and vague image for as long as possible because there it will develop in ways that will often surprise you.

Restorying ourselves is the ultimate creative, artistic act. Our palate is life itself, both already lived and as we can imagine it. We paint with our own blood and tears; write with our dreams. The more of ourselves and the reality around us we can perceive – in essence rather than detail – the more satisfying the story will be and the more authentic the role in which we can cast ourselves. Nothing makes more sense to me now than developing our ability to use the right

side of the brain as we reframe our relationship to ourselves and the world, and chart our path through life as the story unfolds.

I told myself several years ago after taking the first big steps out of Mormonism that I would never again allow myself to be convinced that anything was absolutely, unshakably true. I still feel that way. What I did not realize, however, that this attitude requires of me a continual restorying. As long as I live and continue to have energy, I will be redefining myself and my relationship to the world around me. This will largely be a function of becoming more self aware, and aware of my relationship to the people around me and other aspects of my environment. The biggest revelation of the past few weeks is of the critical nature that the disciplines to which I was exposed while in France will play in this process.

The process of becoming more self-aware is like peeling an onion. Trying to see and feel like an artist, and then creating something (anything), teaches us to suppress our prejudices in ways that will be helpful in allowing more of what is in our subconscious to come to the surface and more of the reality around us to be appreciated instead of sliding by. This excites me, and does not require anything of me beyond some time. I do not need to become an artist to gain the benefits I just described. All I have to do is act like an artist. This is what will teach me about both myself and anything else I care to consider. It does not matter if I ever produce anything that anyone else will like.

As Juli and I were wondering whether we could have taken the same kind of courses in Calgary or somewhere close to home and benefited in similar ways from the exercise, she suggested that the fact that it was hard while in France to avoid being reminded that the world is full of different possibilities was helpful. The streets are narrow. The houses and other buildings look different. The people speak a language that we don't understand. The food is different. The experience of recovering from jet lag is itself a kind of rebirth that gives the impression that one has emerged into a new world.

I agreed with her. The environment we chose for this experiment in creativity was close to ideal for our purposes. However, we cannot go to France often, and thankfully there are many opportunities to write, draw, paint, etc. around us where we live. We have both committed to incorporate this kind of creative endeavour into our weekly routine, and are excited to see where this may lead.

Postscript

Taking my own advice above, I signed up for a drawing course. The following was written the evening of and morning following the first class, and posted at RFM.

January 17, 2006

I just returned from my first art class, and have had an experience so interesting that I need to write about it in order to process what happened. As I sit here, getting started, I have no idea where this is going to end up.

As indicated [above] there is solid scholarly support for the idea that engaging the right brain through an artistic endeavor should help us break through mental log jams, enable us to perceive many things more clearly, "restory" ourselves, and incidentally advance in our recovery from the effects of a lifetime of Mormon belief and practise. So, I signed up for an art class – figure drawing for beginners at the Alberta College of Art and Design – in my hometown

(Calgary, Alberta). While doing so, I was surprised to learn that ACAD has a world class reputation. I don't get out much. A wonderful resource has been sitting their all these years ...

Our instructor, Richard Halliday, is the recently retired head of ACAD's Department of Drawing. He is a pleasant, encyclopedic instructor who seems remarkably unimpressed with himself. His grey beard, matching pony tail, large frame and rolling gait would make him identifiable as an artist from at least a block away. And his wry "seen it all" approach puts me at ease.

There are 20 students in the class, some with significant prior experience who were attracted by Richard's presence.

The class meets once a week – Tuesdays from 7 until 10 pm. Tonight the first hour was used for administrative stuff. We drew non-stop during the second two hours except for a 15 minute break.

Richard had us start with some scribbling. I understand that I need to get into right brain space (a semi-meditative state) to draw and so while Richard talks about admin stuff and then we scribble, I focus on one thing or another in an attempt to shut down my chattering left brain.

A female model joins us, and Richard has us shift from scribbling randomly to scribbling her dynamically posing form. We are not to more than occasionally glance at the paper. We are to trust our hands, and to feel that we are scribbling on the model. I realize later that at this stage of the class I sink into the semi-trance that makes it possible for me to draw.

During the course of the roughly hour and a half that we drew, Richard has the model change position every 2 to 10 minutes, depending on the exercise. And with each change we start a new drawing. We progress from quick scribbling to more deliberate scribbling to scribbling that is mostly shading with the broad side of a piece of charcoal that emphasizes "volume" (the perception of three dimensions) through the use of shadow. Time passes unnoticed.

By the end of the session I feel much as I did during our creative writing, and parts of our painting, experience in France. This is an odd sensation, one so rare for me that I want to record it while the memory is still fresh. I did not do this in France quickly enough to catch it.

"Exhilaration" does not capture what I feel. The feeling is both more full, and flatter, than that. I am sated; filled with something good almost to overflowing but still vibrating with latent energy. I have no desire to shout or dance. The feeling is quieter and more fulfilled. It is more like roots going down deep and nurture coming up than fireworks going off. And this feeling held steady during a long walk to my car, a 20 minute drive home. I turned off the CD to which I had listened on the way to class so that I could continue to enjoy this special peace. When it started to fade at home as I did a few chores and began to get ready for bed I decided to catch what I could of it on the written page.

Another sense that was so clear I could taste it was that what I did tonight was profoundly healthy – like just the right amount of physical exercise – when your body thanks you over and again for choosing to work out and stopping before you hurt something. I can feel my life forces moving; getting ready for something important and good. And I feel profoundly at peace.

I am not sure where this leads, but am excited to continue the trip. My recommendation of "art therapy for recovering Mormons" just become more clear and enthusiastic.

Best,

bob

January 18, 2006

I should add a few things that occurred to me this morning.

First, the experience I had does not require talent. I am not a talented artist. In a class of 20, I am in the bottom five for sure, and am arguably the least talented of the group. We are talking about learning to access a better (for some purposes) portal to reality as a result of trying to see the way an artist sees. That is, to produce many kinds of art (and drawing in particular) we must accurately perceive what is in front of us (the right side of the brain does this) as opposed to what we have been taught to see (the usually dominant left side of the brain does this). Our left brain, for example, has a symbol for "foot" that comes to the fore when non-artists (like me) look at a real foot and attempt to draw it. The foot at which we are looking is suppressed by the dominant left side of our brain in its rush to get a job done as quickly as possible, and is replaced by a crude symbol. This is responsible for the childish drawing to which most of us are limited.

Learning to draw requires that we disconnect the left side of the brain to allow the usually overridden right side to engage. As noted above, turning something upside down is one way to do this instantly. But with surprisingly little training, we can learn to shift into right brain space and hence to consciously perceive and then reproduce what is actually there in front of us. This seemed like a miracle to me the first time it happened.

I had assumed that I could not draw because I lacked coordination, or talent. In fact, I could not draw because I was not doing what was necessary to allow my perceptive senses (as opposed to my presumptions and symbols) to see what was in front of me. As soon as I learned to do that by going into the semi-trance noted above, the result was incredible. My art is not great, but you can tell what I am trying to draw.

Unsurprisingly, as we learn to focus on what actually is instead of what we have been trained to assume is real, a lot of things about society, religion etc. are easier to see. Now that I understand this process, I also understand why artistic people tend to be non-conformists. It is not that they are non-conforming for the sake of being difficult or "artsy" as I used to think, but rather it is likely that they see more of what is really there than the rest of us. In this sense they are visionaries at least, and sometimes prophets. This insight has caused me to radically reappraise the sources of wisdom in our society. Evil Hollywood, for example, while producing loads of garbage also hosts some of our greatest Seers and Prophets.

Second, as I walked around the room at the end of the class while getting my things together, I glanced at perhaps half of the groups final drawings, which we were given 10 minutes to produce. The range of individuality was staggering. Some of the pieces were brilliant from my non-artist point of view (one woman is an ACAD grad back for a refresher - hers was lovely), but that was not what impressed me most. It was the way in which different human personalities emerged through our attempts to represent a single physical object. It was overwhelming - like hearing a people weep one by one as they lay their lives bare – there was a common theme around which endless and incredibly rich variation was found. I could not have imagined even a few of the directions in which these drawing had gone.

I do not find it hard to believe that the font of human creativity is bottomless. We will never run out of songs to sing, stories to tell or pictures to paint.

Encouraging our artistic abilities, no matter how modest, connects us directly to our individuality. I believe that a big part of what I felt last night was my unique force pushing against bark thickened by many years of conforming to Mormon belief and practise. As buds, then leaves, flowers and branches emerge in this way, we are renewed and literally become a different being. This feels, and is, miraculous. We experience as directly as possible (except perhaps through childbirth) the awesome wonder of which we are each part.

In order to control its members, Mormonism restricts individuality in countless ways. While in this environment, we learn to assume to be real what is not. As we nurture our creative selves, we both learn to see more of what is as opposed to what we have been taught to believe, and feel the center of our souls stir.

The awakening of a new self is frightening in some ways, a bit like falling intensely in love and realizing that some of "you" is about to change as two lives run another. Those who wish to defend their inherited beliefs may say that we are drawn like foolish moths to this flame insofar as it causes us to abandon what is sacred. However, a reading of both history and mythology (see Joseph Campbell, "The Power of Myth", or Karen Armstrong, "A Brief History of Myth") suggests that what we feel in this regard is a human universal, and that those who wish to control people, and so repress the urge to the deepest possible individual expression, have been with us from the beginning as well.

So, I will continue toward the light and warmth I feel.

Best,

bob