

TRUST THE PROCESS



AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO
LETTING GO

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THE BLANK PAGE

There is something moving in every situation.

WE TEND TO THINK THAT PAINTINGS and drawings always start in the mind and the idea is then channeled down through the arm and into the hand and fingers, which execute the mental image. This way of working in any medium is likely to generate stiff constructions.

Why not consider that images grow through the interaction among hands, body, eyes, materials, the painting or drawing surface, and the mind? Images emanate from gestures, spontaneous marks on the surface, and other leads sent out in advance of the composition that call it forth. Truly original expressions can never be planned in advance. Surprise rather than predictable results rule the process in which creations reveal themselves. As creators we try to stay open and receptive to what is moving through and around us.

A performance artist said to me, "I plan, but what comes through is much bigger than anything I can plan or even imagine. It's actually frightening how big it can be. I have to learn how to be flexible and just be there to let it happen."

Skill in creation has as much to do with responsiveness as initiation. Successful expression involves the ability to let materials and unplanned gestures lead the way. We do not have to know where we are going at the beginning of the creative act. People who control the work in advance are pushing against the grain of creation, so no wonder

there are feelings of inhibition and emptiness. Creators learn how to cooperate with the forces around them.

Yet structure does help the emergence of expression. Limits can be useful. They further focus and foster improvisation and imagination.

Creation is full of these paradoxical principles. Moving too authoritatively in any one direction is sure to arouse a countertruth.

The same principles I have observed with painting and drawing apply to my experience in teaching creative writing, movement, and performance art. Experienced participants routinely advise beginners not to plan too much in advance. People find that their most inspired creations come when they are “present” and responsive to what emerges naturally from the process. Creation requires attention and complete focus. But most of all it demands that we take the plunge into new territory without knowing what will appear.

I tell my writing students that ideas will come through the process of writing, by moving the hand across a paper or tapping a keyboard. Ideas and insights emerge from engagements with words, phrases, and sentences. The purpose of the work comes from the act of doing it. Thoughts gel from the interplay among unlikely participants. Major insights and learnings come upon us when we least expect them. Nothing will happen unless I begin to write and regularly practice this particular art.

“Get the juices flowing” is a cliché that affirms this truth. I might be feeling apathetic or sluggish, but creation, like any other activity, demands that I get myself out on the road, fully involved, in order to be transformed. This pattern supports my sense that the creative spirit is something that moves from the world to us, and it flourishes when we lose ourselves in whatever we are doing.

This morning I felt little direction. It is a cold winter day but the ground is clear, so I listlessly went into the woods on my mountain bike. The first half-hour of riding was tedious, but as I kept moving, and as my body warmed, everything started to shift. The ride became exhilarating. I experience the same pattern when I am averse to teaching, driving to my office, or visiting friends. Once I get myself fully