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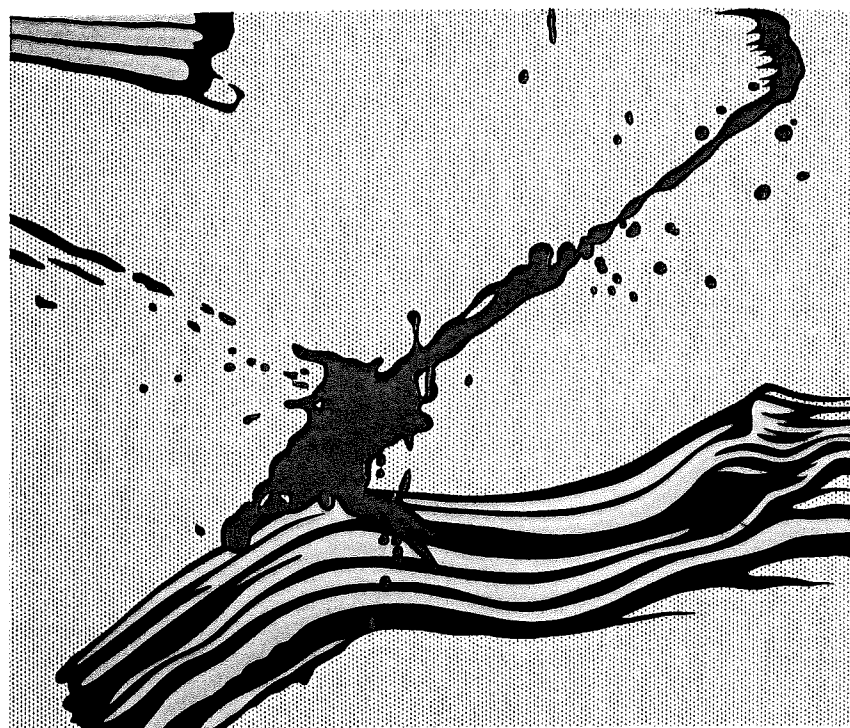


TRUST THE PROCESS
AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO LETTING GO



SHAMBH

TRUST THE PROCESS



AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO
LETTING GO

shaun mcniff

Whether in painting, poetry, performance, music, dance, or life, intelligence working in every situation. This force is the primary carrier

and follow its natural movement, it will astound us with its ability to
through problems—and even make creative use of our mistakes

magic to this process that cannot be controlled by the ego. Somehow
the way to the place where you need to be, and a destination you
have known in advance.

everything seems hopeless and going nowhere . . . *trust the process.*

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Publications, Inc. Printed in U.S.A. ♻️ Printed on recycled paper.

University Book Store

PRICE \$18.95

MCNIFF,
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260 9781570623578



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1675796-0811

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STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

*If we are able to stay with a situation,
it will carry us to a new place.*

MY BELIEF IN THE INTELLIGENCE OF the creative process has been affirmed by people who struggle in workshop groups where they are given opportunities to express themselves in the arts. Sometimes, people who are invited to express themselves freely will react with feelings of paralysis, fear, and intimidation. Memories of embarrassment and failure wrap them in what one woman described as a “cocoon.” The past traumas are often self-inflicted and not the fault of parents, teachers, or institutions. Even the best teachers of creativity encounter a common resistance to self-expression in their classes. The cocoon is spun partly from fears of self-disclosure. We all know intuitively that our spontaneous creative expressions elude the habitual monitoring of our inner censors, revealing things to others that are outside our conscious control. If we allowed our simple essence or our ungroomed emotions to show, we might look foolish, vulnerable, or unattractive. There is also the assumption that creative expression is only for the talented few and that our creation is a waste of time since it will never compare to what the “masters” do.

The typical person says, “I can’t do that.”

Or, “This is ridiculous, a waste of time. I have more important things that I could be doing today.”

It is intriguing how schoolteachers participating together in my creative arts workshops are often the most resistant to free and imaginative expression. Teachers are known for demanding clear directions and immediate applications because school is almost totally focused on training the literal mind.

There are many things that we teach in school that involve the mastery of sequential skills that build upon one another. Most of the educational system is established on the assumption that learning follows a logical and predictable pattern of acquiring knowledge. Educators are actually required to produce lesson plans and structure their classes around measurable outcomes. We then test the student at various intervals to determine whether or not they are performing within acceptable standards. Many people teach art in this way. They show the student how to draw a head by starting with an oval and then mathematically locate the placements of eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. This approach to teaching is technical and it has its place within the training of artists. Structure and openness are partners in every creation.

But there is very little emphasis within our educational systems on the education of the *imagination*, which requires sustained encounters with uncertainty. My experiences in working with teachers illustrate the benefits of acquiring the aptitude to embrace the unknown—what John Keats called “negative capability.”

In my training groups with teachers I repeatedly observe that their initial resistance ultimately leads to rewarding experiences with creative unfolding. There are typically a series of difficult phases that the groups of teachers must pass through in understanding that the creative process is not something to be contained in lesson plans.

When I work with teachers in an extended creative arts workshop, there is a classic resistance that appears at the beginning. The doubt can be heard in their silence: “What’s the purpose of this? What’s it got to do with my classroom? What am I doing here?”

Someone inevitably protests and questions the validity of what is happening. I experience fear and sense how easily everything can fall

apart. Others join the protest, and the community divides. The group founders.

I have learned that I must let "the process" follow its course. As frustration builds, someone as a rule challenges my ability and people in the group begin to confront one another. Others withdraw into themselves. It is always hard to see that doubt, fear, and indirectness are eternal aspects of the creative path.

When everything seems hopeless and going nowhere, I observe that the group as a whole is enacting how the process of creation works its way through an individual person. Strong feelings start to focus energy. People become keenly involved in spite of themselves. The process arouses emotion and draws everything into itself.

A new direction flows from the dissolution. There is a feeling of hope and transformation.

If we are able to stay with a situation, it will carry us to a new place. The "process" knows where it needs to go and if it is exclusively directed or controlled by any one person, we miss the opportunity to learn this lesson. There is a group mind or collective intelligence working in every situation and if we can trust it, and sincerely support its natural movement, it will astound us with its ability to use whatever we give it.

The psychologist Carl Rogers used to say that given the proper support and safety, every group will progress through conflict to a state of change and resolution. But in order for the process to become transformative, there must be a prevailing atmosphere of respect and empathy for the participants. These attitudes provide the essential environment that people need in order to risk new expressions, whether in the art studio, the classroom, the office, or the family.

Trust in the process assumes that there is a force that moves within a group, an individual, or a situation that is distinctly "other" and not subject to control. "It" finds the way through problems and complex interactions among people and as well as through conflicting forces within ourselves. Although outside the reach of explanatory definition,

this force is well known to any person familiar with the situations I am describing. It is the primary carrier of creation.

Training people to work with the creative process begins with their personal immersion in it. How can we guide others in a territory we do not know ourselves?

In training graduate students to work with the arts in therapy and education, I encourage an ongoing personal engagement with creative expression. The graduate students experiment with creative expression and personally experience the processes that they encourage in others. Repeatedly I observe how the most pervasive outcome of these extended involvements with the depths of creative expression is a faith in the process. The more intensely the students struggle, the more deeply they discover how the process will ultimately carry them to a new place. As D. H. Lawrence suggested, the soul is perfect in its movement and its ability to minister to itself. We are needed as active participants, but we have to learn how to act forcefully while simultaneously stepping aside so that the process has the freedom to do its work.

What Carl Rogers said about groups also applies to an individual person's experimentation with the arts. If we work in a safe and supportive environment with what Rogers described as "unconditional positive regard" for our expression, the process of creation will ultimately proceed to a stable and meaningful outcome. The most threatening element is the lack of confidence that people have when the process becomes difficult and tense. They don't realize that the conflict and uneasiness that they are experiencing are necessary and "part of the process." Transformation occurs when we lose our way and find a new way to return.

In my personal experience as a teacher, it was the student who fought and struggled the most in her research into the workings of the creative process who produced the most memorable and convincing study of how the creative spirit moves through our lives. The depth and wisdom of her findings were shaped through the authority of her experience. The student taught also me to trust the process, because I

was the constant target of her frustration. When things were going badly, I was the object of her fury. It was very difficult, and I privately wondered whether I was doing the right thing. She needed someone to fight against, someone who would hold firm amid all the turmoil. What distinguished this student's work from the more conventional nay-sayers and complainers was the way she stayed with the process. She gave it the opportunity to transform itself.

In the education of imagination we invariably confront the way in which people have been conditioned to expect certainties in learning situations. There is an expectation that something concrete will be delivered by the teacher to the learner.

In training teachers from every conceivable discipline to engage all of the arts and integrate them into their different work situations, I have observed that they generally come with the following assumptions: "Tell me exactly how to do it and how I can use this in my classroom." They are oriented toward the individual technique, not the process that runs through every method and continuously generates imaginative ways of doing things. Within the creative process, variations and unusual perspectives are encouraged. A group of us might work for a period of time in the same room and with the same materials and end up in vastly different places. There is no one "correct" way of proceeding, and this aspect of creativity goes contrary to many ingrained ideas about instruction.

Personal immersion in the creative process helps teachers establish empathy with what their students are experiencing. In my work I am constantly involving experienced teachers in art experiences for the first time, and they repeatedly say, "Now I understand what the children are feeling."

The teachers describe how there is a pattern to the way they face every new art experience with resistance and fear. They feel an equally consistent thrill and satisfaction after completing each new phase of the work. Whether it is dance, storytelling, musical improvisation, painting, mime, or poetry, the same forces of creation move through

the experience, affirming that there is something essential that cannot be taught when we focus only on specialized technical instruction.

Trusting the process is based on a belief that something valuable will emerge when we step into the unknown. There are elements of surrender and letting go which have more to do with flexibility and the ability to change direction, than with defeat and annihilation. The ego is willing to relinquish its plans and expectations in order to receive an unanticipated result. Experienced creators are able to step aside and relax in order to advance. They work with the process, stimulating it with a forceful initiative or a subtle nudge, but always respectful of what takes shape outside the sphere of a person's control.

The most rudimentary exercise for those wishing to experiment with stepping into the unknown, involves painting, drawing, moving, writing, or making sounds without any goal in mind. If you begin to work exclusively for the sake of expressing yourself, you have begun to practice "negative capability."

In my experience with this type of creative discovery, everything depends upon the degree to which I can perceive what I do with "unconditional positive regard." When the teachers in my studio group began to have a positive feeling for their free expressions with paint, everything began to change. The simplest gestures, color combinations, and repetitious patterns of lines and shapes became fascinating. As with meditation, any object intensely contemplated can be an opening to reverie. Everything depends upon the quality of attention that we can apply to our perceptions. The humblest expressions can be sources of insight and wonder.

Negative and fearful experiences can really test our capacity for positive reflection. In art therapy, healing often occurs when we begin to make paintings and performances that engage the sources of our discontents. When I enact my angst and fears in an artwork, they become my partners in creation, and my relationship to them is transformed.

One of my graduate students decided to conduct a research project on the area of her expression that she feared the most. She was working

in body-oriented therapy, and she had difficulty letting herself collapse in falling exercises. She practiced falling in her classes and made connections between her inability to let go and her difficulties in falling asleep and falling in love. She explored links between the physical ability to fall and letting herself open to simple experiences of daily life. The outcome of her master's thesis was a sophisticated psychotherapeutic method that used falling exercises to treat psychic states of fear and the inability to let go in different activities of daily life. The project began by addressing a fear that needed attention. The final result of the research was completely uncertain. The student simply focused on a theme that was troubling her. By falling into the unknown, she arrived at a new place in her life and work.

When we are constantly keeping ourselves from falling and shielding ourselves from experiences, we exert tremendous energy in controlling our environments and defending ourselves from imagined threats. Falling becomes a release, an immersion in the process of life. Trusting the process brings a realization that miscues, mistakes, and failures make important contributions to the creative process.

In scientific research the world's most advanced researchers spend years conducting experiments that "don't work" in order to eliminate possible explanations for the problems they are exploring. When something doesn't function, it contributes to our understanding of what does. The same thing applies to the arts. Failed expressions close some doors and open others. It all goes together.

When we stand back and look at any creative enterprise, we typically see slips and failings throughout the process. We can do the same thing with our lives. Examine any major success that you have experienced, and try to remember the difficult moments and blunders. Mastery requires the ability to sustain commitment. There is also a time for quitting, and a sense of timing that we need in order to get out of difficult situations. All of these decisions are "part of the process."

When something is difficult and painful, there is a natural instinct to quit and get as far away from the scene as possible. The ability to extricate ourselves from these situations is an important part of creative

expression. But sensing when to quit is always complemented by a stubborn persistence and an ability to stick to the problem in the face of adversity. The magic of the creative process will never be experienced unless we persist and trust that there is a force working in every situation that we cannot know until we undergo the experience.

Clay is an excellent medium for experimenting with the way shapes emerge from the unknown. When working with clay it is important to have confidence that new forms exist within the block that you break apart and shape with your hands. What appears to be random movement has a purpose in the process of transformation. The existing form has to break down before the new one can emerge. Throughout the process, the clay is a stable partner, always interacting with your eyes and hands. When I work with clay, my involvement is primarily physical and kinesthetic. I push and pull, squeeze and twist. There is always a sense that something is taking shape through the motions, even though I have no idea what it will be. My eyes are allies, but they are less directive than the hands and their movements. The visual sense might call for "more of this" or "less of that," guiding us just as the sense of taste does when we cook.

The most important feature of work with clay is the ability to sustain the motion and the effort. I have to stay with the process while the material is moist and amenable to being freely shaped, and there always seems to be a point when the work reaches a completion that feels like the natural end of a dance or the conclusion of a gesture. The decision to stop is sensed.

The same principles apply to painting with any medium. Materials like oil stay moist longer and enable us to move in and out of the engagement over prolonged periods of time, whereas watercolor, tempera, and inks are tied to specific moments.

Each medium makes its particular contributions to creation. The material is always a primary factor in determining what will be realized in any given situation. In every artistic activity we have to have confidence in the material as well as ourselves. The media constantly give directions, inspirations, and counsel as we interact with them.

I like to work with moist materials. The wetness is a constant source of motion. I seem to need the slipping and sliding that accompany thick and oily substances. Others prefer to create with dry materials. We are so inclined to think about art materials with only end products in mind that we don't take enough time to engage them in a purely physical way.

We create together with our materials and our bodies, not just from our minds. We need to trust their individual contributions to the creative act and realize that they are primary participants in the process. When I move freely from my body and other senses, the materials will respond. I have to keep reminding myself that every gesture is significant and that the materials of expression will always reflect the quality of my engagement with them. When I look at a finished painting, I imagine the gestures and feelings of its maker. The more expressive the painting is, the more I feel the presence of the artist who made it. Forceful textures, brushstrokes, and colors stand as a record of the engagement that brought them into being. The same applies to a delicate watercolor or pencil drawing. Each medium generates particular feelings. As I work with these different materials, I try to open myself to their influences. I become like them as I work, never knowing in advance what kind of effect they will have on me during each engagement.

Try working with clay, paints, oil sticks, pencils on paper, and inks with the objective of exploring their material properties. Relax your tendency to think in terms of outcomes. Just give as much quality attention as you can to experiencing the different physical properties of the media. Explore what they do in response to different kinds of movements that you make. Watch how the spontaneity of your gestures corresponds to your ability to feel the medium and what *it* is capable of doing.

Do the same thing with collage materials, pieces of cloth, and found objects. Arrange them in configurations on the basis of how they feel, and don't be too concerned with what they look like. Work with sticks, string, stones, grasses, and other natural materials. If you can surrender

to your sense of touch, you will see that textures produce visual patterns. These art experiences will help you develop confidence in what the materials can do. In my studio workshops I repeatedly see how the simple presence of these varied materials incites the creative imagination. People move from painting to performance art and into the construction of objects and environments within an ongoing process of creative play that responds to the suggestiveness of materials.

Confidence, and what I have described as a positive faith in the outcomes of creative expression, are essential when venturing into the unknown. In order to realize our creative powers, we have to believe that we have the ability to make something significant. As I reflect on this attitude, I realize that I am not really talking about self-confidence. I am describing a commitment to "the process" and its ability to generate worthwhile results. I learn over and over again that the creative process is an intelligence that knows where it has to go. Somehow it always finds the way to the place where I need to be, and it is always a destination that never could have been known by me in advance.

Teaching, as well as my personal art expression, has helped me understand the intelligence of the creative process. I have been one of the primary beneficiaries of the training groups that I have described because I have repeatedly witnessed the way in which the process is a reliable teacher. Throughout my career I have had a deep-seated sense that I must teach creativity in a way that immerses people in the process. It would have been so much easier to avoid uncertainty by giving controlled directions at every turn. When I teach in this experiential way, I travel with my groups into the unknown. Many times I have felt like Dionysus being torn apart by the fury of the maenads because I expose participants to the uncertainties of their individual and collective psyches. But when we stay with the process, its benefits are received as we reach the other shore, and Dionysus is resurrected as well. These journeys into the creative process reenact mythic patterns and truths that have always guided human experience.

As I experience these creative cycles over and over again in my workshop groups and in my personal artistic expression, I have become a

more relaxed and confident guide. My belief in the formative powers of the unknown helps people to trust more and to go more deeply into the creative process. This is the way of the creative spirit, which makes us anew through every encounter.