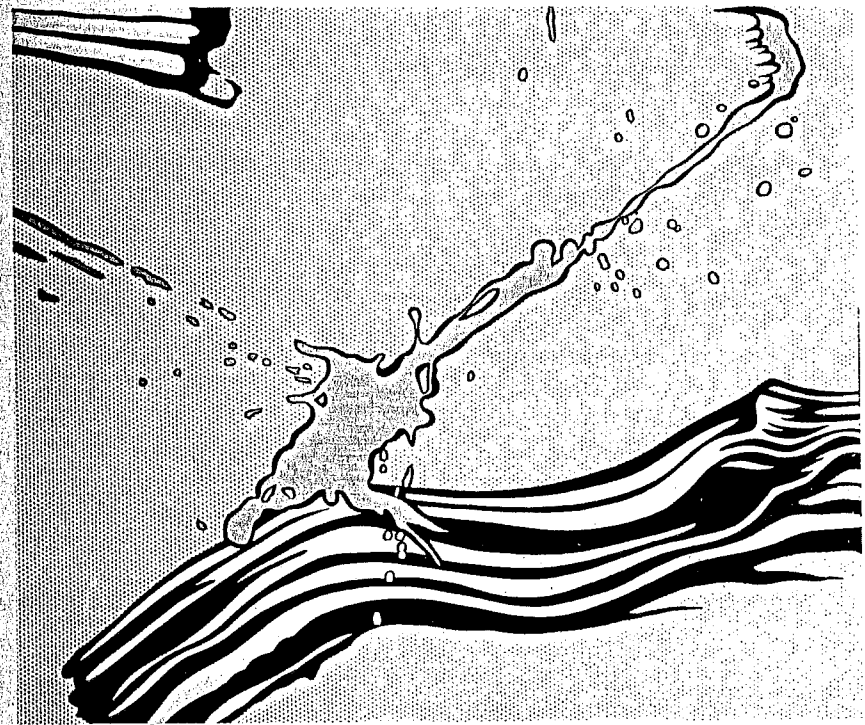


Reading #1

TRUST THE PROCESS



AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO
LETTING GO

shaun mcniiff

McNIFF



TRUST THE PROCESS
AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO LETTING GO



SHAMBHALA

University Book Store

PRICE \$18.95

MCNIFF,
TRUST THE PROCESS

260 9781570623578



9.1

US \$18.95

CAN \$26.95

1675790-0811

THE WELLSPRING OF MOVEMENT

*We have grown so accustomed to the idea of the
solitary and willful creator that we find it difficult
to see the deeper ecology of creation.*

EXPERIENCED CREATORS UNDERSTAND that a person's mental outlook has as much to do with the quality of expression as technical skill. The way we view situations is the basis for their creative transformation.

When asked to define what is a work of art, Pablo Picasso was reported to have replied, "What is not?"

There is a tradition within the arts that perceives every aspect of experience as an element of the creative process. Although many of history's greatest artists have identified with this vision, it has been opposed by those who advocate "art for art's sake" and others who favor strict or "pure" specialization. While aligning myself with the integration of art and life, I have never seen an opposition between this idea and restricted practice. Art has room for both perspectives and many more.

The classical pianist who spends hours practicing every day in order to deliver a perfect performance is engaged with an "aspect" of the art experience. There are many more aspects of creation, as suggested by James Joyce in *Ulysses* when he writes: "Any object, intensely regarded,

may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods." Joyce affirms that creation is limited only by our consciousness.

While embracing the creative expressions of world-class musicians and dancers, we can also celebrate the creative spirit as manifested in the most ordinary aspects of daily life.

Since creation and art are "ideas," let's take these concepts to their limits and see what magic they can bring into our lives. I appreciate the wonders of the concert hall and the museum, but I'm equally interested in how the creative spirit manifests itself in the office, on the bus, or in the kitchen, as it expands our sense of aesthetic practice.

By looking more imaginatively at what you do every day, you will see that you are already a creator.

Our society puts us into boxes, and we do the same to ourselves. We tell ourselves, for example, "I'm a business person, so I'll leave art to the artists." But it doesn't have to be this way. There are other ways of looking at the creative process that are more in sync with how it actually works.

This narrow labeling is encouraged whenever I ask someone, "What do you do?" There is an assumption that we do one thing alone and not many different things that affect one another. I should consider saying to a person that I meet for the first time, "What are the different things that you do?"

We might ask ourselves, "Where is the creative spirit most active in my life? Where is it most inactive? What do I do every day that can become a basis for creative expression?"

I will suggest many methods of creation that build subtly on what already exists and what you already do. Rather than starting you off in completely foreign environments with novel exercises, I want to help you creatively engage what you presently have. The essential technique is a commitment to perceiving and acting in new ways.

I will encourage you to look and re-look, sift and probe, upend and reverse, twist and turn, because ultimately, as the classical adage advises, the process of creation is "in the eye of the beholder."

But as useful as these and other techniques can be, I have found

that there is an absolutely fundamental principle of operation for both beginning and experienced creators. It is such a commonplace saying within the creative arts that until recently I have been reluctant to utter the three words for fear of being trite: "Trust the process." Whenever I find myself in a difficult situation, the principle is reaffirmed. Actually, the more hopeless my problem seems, the more I learn to trust the process.

There have been so many times when I have given up, only to go at it again the next day, or the next year, and over the full course of a life all of the moments appear so purposeful or even necessary. The difficulties are always the most important ingredients in the total picture of a creative experience.

Improvisation is one of the basic principles of process-oriented creation. Working for the first time in any art medium, we tend to think that the result has to be known before we start. I remember my early experiments with art when I assumed that the finished composition was first conceived in the mind and then executed in paint. The same misconceptions apply to creative expressions in other media such as words, movement, and sound. We don't realize that the experienced dancer or painter might begin by simply moving and making gestures with art materials. One movement leads to another. We are apt to be more familiar with this improvisational dynamic in group movement and music. Creative sparks fly from person to person. The same thing applies to the interplay among the different elements of an individual's expression in painting, drawing, and creative writing.

As I look back at my experiences with lecturing, it has always been the unexpected happenings that have produced the most gratifying results. I prepare by establishing a simple framework of what I want to do, but I always leave room for what is generated by the event. The creative process blends structure with chance.

I do the same thing when I am painting. After establishing a rough and overall form, I let the unique qualities of unplanned gestures and color combinations emerge through the process of painting.

It seems that whenever I really want to do well, I am more likely to

contradict these basic principles of creation. If it is an especially important event, I am apt to plan too much. As I deliver the performance, I realize that I am following a script. There is no magic unless unplanned expressions arrive to infuse the performance with a spontaneous vitality that can never be preconceived. After many of my best performances, the notes I made in advance may have little relation to what took place. In a curious way I have to plan and make notes before I begin, but these preparations have to be let go as the performance begins. The ritual of preparation gets the creative process moving and it supplies ingredients that feed the event.

I do not want to belittle the importance of ideas as guiding forces within the creative process. I asked an eleven-year-old how she begins to make a picture. She replied, "I always get an idea. First I look around at my surroundings and then I think of my favorite things. I think of colors and I look at other people's drawings to get ideas. I start with the main subject in the center and I spread out."

I asked, "When you make designs, how do you begin?"

She replied, "I start with one shape and I go on from there with other shapes and borders."

I asked, "When the design is finished, what does it look like?"

She replied, "Most of the time, it doesn't look like what I had in mind."

"Why not?"

"Because I had other thoughts while I was making it," she answered.

Then I asked, "What about the pictures you make of your favorite things?"

She said, "I always mess up and it doesn't come out the way I wanted it. Then I add new details and it becomes something like what I originally thought of."

"Were the mistakes important?" I asked.

"Sometimes, but at other times they ruin the picture."

Ideas are the seeds of creative imagination. They are mental images that stimulate us to bring them into the physical world. But in order to take material form, the idea must go through a process that produces

an amalgamation between the purely mental image and the physical action of creation. Sometimes the end result closely approximates the original idea, and often the final outcome bears little resemblance to the starting point. As suggested by this young girl, we discover things along the way, even when we are trying to render a preconceived idea. The things that we do in service of an idea generate new ideas, and the process goes on and on. And sometimes we fail and have to start again. The act of creating is a partnership between ideas and the physical qualities of art making. One thing leads to another.

When we create from mental images, there must be flexibility and an openness to the new influences delivered through the process of creation.

There are many creative artists and scientists whose work is an execution of ideas that are first shaped in the imagination. Musicians describe how they hear compositions in their dreams or reverie and transcribe them afterward. Writers often engage characters and scenes in their imaginations before expressing them in print. There are endless methods and personal styles of creating. But even the most exact representation of a mental image by an artist with consummate technical skills will inevitably involve new contributions to the work through the process of creation.

I frequently encounter people who quickly grow frustrated and angry because their expressions do not look like their ideas. Creative problem solving is a process of give and take. I have an idea that I want to execute, and I must adapt to what the materials of expression are capable of doing and what I can do with them.

What we call an "idea" may be a mental image or shadowy sense of something that we want to do in an artwork. The original stimulus incites the creative act, which I experience as a building process. I was recently working with a seven-year-old girl in a creative writing exercise. She had drawn a picture of an Egyptian mummy that we used as the source for creative writing. In her first piece of writing the girl offered an explanatory account of what mummies are, why they were created, and so forth.

I encouraged her to write another piece, focused on how the mummy itself felt and how the people in its life felt about it. The mummy became a one-year-old infant who had died. In writing her story, I observed how the girl began with the image of her drawing, which generated the image of the infant, which generated image after image within her ensuing story. Images birth one another. Moving from literal explanation to personifying the image opened the doors to the imagination. The girl stayed within the creative process and its ways of moving. Explanation, something we all do, takes us away from the wellspring.

Trusting the process and accessing the energies of creative movement is a discipline. I liken it to the practice of sitting meditation. It is not simply a matter of surrendering to circumstances and external forces. The creative process requires the active participation of the artist over a period of time. People beginning to commit themselves to creativity have to realize that important results are not always immediate. Just as the meditator practices staying with the object of meditation no matter what thoughts, sensations, or other distractions arise, the artist learns how to stay connected to the image being constructed and the process of creation, assimilating whatever occurs into the creative act.

In my studio workshops on the creative process I tell people that if they simply begin to paint and continue moving from one picture to the next, a series of pictures will emerge. The images emanate from the personal cooking that each of us does throughout the process of creation. It is difficult for the beginner to believe that an inexperienced painter is capable of making a body of work through which each picture builds subtly on the ones made before it. But when we look at a sequence of pictures, it is remarkable how what might have first looked like an insignificant and unsuccessful composition was the substructure for what was to follow. A simple squiggle or series of lines can be the start of pleasing patterns and personal symbols that unfold from humble beginnings. Because of these thematic connections among pictures,

I discourage throwing artworks away when working on a series. What first seemed irrelevant reveals the germination of future paintings.

Looking at a series of pictures enables us to view the emergence of imagery over time. We are given an alternative to judging a stand-alone picture. This perspective is just as useful in looking at our lives over an extended period of time. The bad performance or painful event might in the long run play a pivotal role in the overall effort. Hindsight is the primary viewpoint on process.

I repeatedly see people in my studios who make wonderfully expressive gestures in their first paintings and even though I encourage them to keep working with them in subsequent pictures, they revert to stiff and controlled compositions with little artistic imagination. As they grow frustrated and dissatisfied with these rigid images, the participants reconsider my suggestion to continue with the original gesture that occurred naturally and outside the scope of their mental controls.

When I see fresh and spontaneous expressions emerging from beginners' paintings, I draw it to their attention and encourage them to stay with the gestures in subsequent pictures. I suggest the repetition of a gesture and I describe how we can never do the same picture twice. Repetition encourages reverie and letting go. As I paint the same gesture over and over, it changes as I use new colors and experiment with different sizes. I amplify and diminish, all the while striving to keep the gestures alive.

A first-grade teacher told me that she and her colleagues can never really explain how an individual child learns to read. The teachers work systematically through carefully considered instructional methods, but when the child begins to read, it is always experienced as a magical moment, a time when all of the elements contributing to the process are somehow integrated. This is yet another description of how the creative process works. Whether it involves learning how to read, playing the piano, riding a bike, or writing a graduate school thesis, there is usually a decisive moment or turning point within an overall process which can only be described as magical. It is an instant when all of the frustration, seemingly futile efforts, and tedious drills play their

respective parts in a collective creation. This is what I describe as the “complex” of creativity, a condition that feels as though the individual person acts together with many other forces. A varied series of events and motions carry us over a new threshold, and we can never exactly describe how it happened.

The same thing applies to the repetition of an original series of gestures. As the artist makes them over and over, new qualities emerge from the familiar basis of expression. What might appear to some to be a monotonous drill becomes the springboard for new levels of expressive integration. Repetition provides the basis for new combinations of gestures and flights of imagination. After extended periods of playing with familiar gestures, complete compositions will emerge spontaneously. It is like a child learning to read: the process cannot be explained according to a linear sequence of acts. It occurs magically but upon the foundation of focused exercise and preparation. All of the pieces, the good and the bad, play vital roles in the creative act. However, when we reflect back upon these enchanted moments of creation, we are apt to look more upon the specific turning points and less upon the all-encompassing collection of movements that generate a cumulative effect.

Each of us finds our personal basis for exercising creative expression. What works for me may not apply to you, and discoveries made in oil painting may not translate to wood sculpture. The magic of expression emerges from the individual crucibles of personal experimentation. Hours, days, weeks, and sometimes months and years of frustrating work may be generating a realignment of elements, which gather together at a decisive moment, or in a fertile period, to generate a succession of new creations. Creativity is fed by the difficult course of events as well as by the instants of epiphany that we commonly associate with successful expression.

An experienced art teacher observed, “The biggest problem for adults and children is that everyone wants quick results. They don’t realize that you have to work at it. They have to spend time at it and be patient. It’s a commitment.”

The process of art can be likened to a long-term relationship in which we grow to understand and accept what we like and dislike. Almost every aspect of our experience has its disturbing qualities that ultimately shape the course of the creative process if we stay open to their formative influences. What I don’t like about my art is as helpful to my ongoing desire to express myself as those qualities that do appeal to me.

I have also grown to appreciate the creative role of what may first appear to be routine gestures. These familiar motions and forms are always connected to our individual and natural ways of expressing ourselves. Just as the child described how she always begins her pictures with ideas about her favorite things, we can begin to exercise creative expression with favorite gestures that we use over and over again. When I first watched films of Picasso painting and drawing, I was struck by his fluid lines and graceful body movement. He used every part of his body to achieve a total expression. The gestures on paper and canvas extended from his stance and lower body motions as much as his hand and arm. We don’t realize how the expressiveness of our paintings and drawings correspond completely to the way in which we move our bodies. Art is close to dance, and our paintings will benefit as we expand our abilities to move with materials. In order to paint effectively I need to commit myself to exercise with brushes, pencils, oil sticks, and other implements of expression. Each device, like a new dance partner, calls for a different sensitivity.

I tend to like large and bold swirls and sweeping motions. As I repeat them over and over again, they elicit complementary gestures in new directions and with different colors. The interactions among movements begin to make shapes and an overall composition. If I don’t use these gestures as the framework for a finished painting, my exercise with them is internalized and I feel increasingly comfortable and secure in making these movements. If I make a drawing of a human figure or a landscape, I move with the same spontaneity that characterized my exercise, and the resulting pictures show a unique mixture of my expressive gesture and the subject matter I am painting.

In my painting studios I observe how people benefit by first “warming up” the creative process through free body movement. They stretch their bodies and explore a wide range of gestures without being concerned with what they look like. Movement exercises help us to draw on the total expression of the body. As you move, become aware of the forces generated by your lower body. Imagine yourself painting freely on a large canvas, and feel how much your feet and legs give to your gestures. One of the most crippling inhibitions to artistic expression is the blockage of the full spectrum of the body’s expressive faculties, which support one another in an interdependent way.

Trusting the process is based on the realization that creation is a complex interaction of many elements that collectively shape the future. We have grown so accustomed to the creation myth of an individual intelligence acting alone that we find it difficult to see the deeper ecology of creation. I paint together with the expressive movements and gestures that I have adopted through years of practice. And when I succeed in my expression, it is because the movements within myself and those within my environment work together to generate an offspring that carries the traces of our collaboration.

In the real world of creation there are many solitary moments of illumination, but the creator is always a participant in a field of action. Creation is a complex interplay. I can never move in isolation from the contributing forces of the immediate environment.

In previous epochs it was assumed that individual actions were manifestations of a collective creation. The artisans and artists who constructed the Gothic cathedrals and the anonymous artists of tribal culture contributed to a more comprehensive purpose than individual expression.

I believe that this same collective purpose is manifested in the actions of individual artists when we work in unison with our environments. I experience a *participation mystique* when I am in sync with my surroundings. Today we describe these peak moments as being “in the zone.” It is a time when the “chemistry” is right. Everything fits. The process carries us as we work together with it. All of the time we have

spent exercising our creative expression results in the ability to move without self-consciousness. We respond instinctively and spontaneously to the mood of the moment, which is comprised of many contributing factors from the environment and from within ourselves.

✦ We’ve all experienced moments of synchronicity when all of the pieces of our experience fall together in magical ways. The person who you have not seen for years calls you on the telephone the moment you are writing something about him in your story; the missing tool mysteriously appears in your studio just as you need it. These moments demonstrate how experience and creation do not always move according to linear causation. C. G. Jung observed that events and relationships often take shape according to “acausal” patterns. If we persist in our creative efforts, surprising resolutions will appear when they are least expected. The creative discipline involves the ability to keep the field of activity open and responsive to what arrives.

These moments of ease are preceded by unavoidable periods of Sisyphean labor during which I confront an all-too-familiar sense of despair and worthlessness, feelings that on better days I see as “part of the process.” Creativity cannot flourish and reach its deepest potential without the participation of its demons as well as its angels.

The “process” has an intelligence that can be trusted, and the gift of creation is the ability to work with it. Envisioning the basis of creation as spontaneous movement suggests that the most fundamental discipline involves keeping the channels for expression open and responsive to what is moving within us and within our environments.

