

Chapter 1

I am working in the studio today. The weather outside is not particularly inspiring for painting. It is gray and humid. The air is leaden, pregnant with the coming rain. The large oil painting upstairs is calling to me. It is 42 inches tall and 40 inches wide, abstract, a study in yellows, yet clearly anchored in landscape themes.

The large studio painting started out as an oak tree on an island with a cerulean blue band in the background representing the far shoreline. It was based on a little painting that I made from direct observation of the tree. Now the large painting is changing into something else.

I'm glad I could paint on the island. The oak tree was majestic. Now it is gone, cleared for a new housing development that now sits half-finished, a reminder of the impermanence of our world.

My little plein air painting of the oak tree was successful enough, and so I thought about making something larger in the studio, with the vision from the plein air painting as the starting point for a new image.

In the studio, I can paint larger, which energizes me. I can spend as much time with the painting as I like, and I can let the painting evolve into something beyond the original inspiration.

I'm proud of my studio. Working in it feels like a blessing for me. Building the house and studio was the culmination of decades of work. It is my sanctuary and the crucible of my artistic process, a space for thoughtful repose and artistic tension.

Even with this sense of pride, I don't work in it every day. Sometimes I feel the pull of the studio and its invitation for an inward journey. Sometimes I feel the need to paint outdoors in nature. Other times I feel the pull to write, and sometimes I just need to observe.

There is comfort in my artistic routines, and there is challenge. There is always a pull.

The studio painting sits on an easel at the end of the upstairs room. I know it is not yet finished, but I am not sure yet what finishing this painting means. It started out as an oak tree in spring; now it is a yellow field of light with turquoise and burnt orange undertones. It still feels embryonic to me, alive but not yet breathing.

A painting may feel easy to finish. It may be just a matter of a simple flick of the wrist, painting the last white petal of a daisy in a still life.

But lately, for me, finishing a painting feels like a journey all by itself.

I tell students that a painting is finished when it is visually complete, when all parts of it are working together to make a coherent image. But this painting is asking for more. It can still go in several directions, so I have to ask myself which direction feels right. There is a process of discernment. Choosing the direction that feels right is also about not choosing the other directions. No matter which direction I try to go with this painting, some unexpressed potential will be lost, a story will not get told.

So, in a way, finishing this painting is about loss as much as it is about success and hope. It is a reminder that I will never have this moment and this choice again, a reminder of the impermanence of our world. So, I thank God for bringing me to this point. I make my choice and I move on with the potential of all the other choices echoing within the walls of this wonderful new studio.

I pray that I have time to paint other oak trees and explore some choices that I have not yet made.

What is Art?

“Art is standing with one hand extended into the universe and one hand extended into the world, and letting ourselves be a conduit for passing energy.”—Albert Einstein

Einstein’s definition of art, couched in physics, makes me smile. I think he was onto something, even if the sentiment feels somewhat engineered. The vision of art extending and reaching is important, as is Einstein’s thought about art being a

conduit. We will talk more specifically about the idea of art being a conduit later. First, let's think about Art with a capital "A".

In some ways, writing a book about the visual arts makes about as much sense as painting a picture about a symphony. Colors can evoke a sense of music, but never fully describe it. Words will never fully describe a painting, or the making of a painting, especially a great painting. Ideally, a painting pushes beyond the limits of words. A successful painting is a complete visual experience, capturing the viewer in a magical world bounded by the edges of the canvas but much, much deeper than just the surface of the paint.

In today's technology-driven, clickbait world, the magical realm of painting can be out of reach and unknown to many, especially those whose attention spans have been all but consumed by social media. Here, words can help us. Words can build a bridge to a richer understanding of what art is and what paintings can accomplish.

The making of art is partially an exercise of the mind, and that much can be explained by a pile of words. The making of art can also be a soulful exercise, and I think it should be a soulful exercise. Words are fuzzier and less reliable when we talk about soulfulness, but they are still our best tools for sharing complex ideas across time and space.

What is art? To answer this very simple question, we take the intellectual equivalent of a casual stroll through a minefield. I hope that as you take this stroll, many times, you take it without fear, accepting the fact that your answers may blow up on you and then eventually re-formulate. I hope that your answers to this simple question evolve over the years, as you develop your artistic temperament.

According to Robert Henri, "art is anything done well." For some cultures, including that of the island nation of Bali, this very inclusive definition of art still makes sense because there is a strong local tradition that anchors the concept. But I think Henri did not fully expect where the concept of "art is anything" went in 20th and 21st century Western culture.

For me, this all-inclusive definition of art feels too broad to be meaningful in contemporary Western society. If anything can be art, then everything can be art,

including feeding the dog and cleaning the aquarium. When everything is art, we dilute the definition of art down to where nothing is art. If nothing we do is art, then we invite others to build our cultural space for us and charge us admission to that space.

We could change Henri's definition to say that art is anything done with artistic intent. Of course, that is a circular definition, but it helps to separate the mundane tasks from the artistic ones. The mundane task of mowing the lawn well could, under Henri's definition, be elevated to the status of art. But for most of us, mowing the lawn well is not art because it does not reach beyond the level of everyday chores. For most of us, there is little artistic intent in mowing the lawn.

Fundamentally, art is about communication. The artist seeks to communicate something to their audience, and the audience seeks to absorb something from the art. In this book, I will focus on painting, especially landscape painting, which communicates with its audience, either partially or wholly, through nonverbal methods. Nonverbal communication is powerful, deep, and broad. One image can say so many things in so many ways.

Artists must possess something to communicate to their audience, which means art focuses on delivering a message. There is intent. The intent behind a work of art is shaped by the culture in which it was created. If we were to re-create today an ancient Greek sculpture like the Winged Victory of Samothrace, it would not have the same meaning as the original work of art because the intent and cultural foundation of the recent work differs completely from the original sculpture. The new work brings with it no historical resonance. It is like the copycat fountains of Las Vegas, where we don't feel the chisel on the stone, nor the creative determination of the artist.

Besides the conscious intent of the artist in the work of art, there are layers and layers of meaning fertilized by the cultural climate of its day. The artist may or may not be aware of these often-subconscious layers of meaning. I may seek to paint a lovely picture of a tree, rendering the trunk and branches and leaves, and that could be my conscious intent. But the fact that I am investing my time observing trees and painting them shows that I value a connection with the natural world. It shows that I have an ecological or environmental awareness that may not even be operating at a conscious

level as I paint. Painting a tree may be an act of social awareness or protest. It may be communal, or it may be defiant.

Art is expressive. The expressive content of art can be driven by conscious or subconscious processes. Immature art may be more subconsciously driven, and may express more than the artist themselves are aware of. Mature art has a depth of expressive content that reflects the complexity of the human spirit. I think the best art is understanding, compassionate, soulful, and powerful in a way that expresses the incredible range of human experience. That definition of art excludes some things that are labeled as art today.

To answer the question “What is art?”, it may be useful to think more about the word "art" as both a verb and a noun. Let’s look at the verb first. “To art” is a wonderful thing. Our verb “art” includes both the making of artistic things and processes and participation in or consumption of artistic experiences. Art can be decorative, inspirational, functional, and instructive, all of which are certainly related. The maker of art is the first user, but hopefully not the last user.

Great art invites other users beyond the first one. Some art can be used repeatedly with no impact on the artistic object. Think of how many people shuffle through the Louvre in Paris every year and strain to get a view of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. This volume of humanity does not physically consume the great painting. Perhaps it consumes it in other ways, maybe culturally, but physically, it remains. However, some art is consumed by the audience. It may be a one and done process. Culinary arts are an example of single use.

Art as a noun is both about objects of art and about processes of art. A masterful painting is widely viewed as an object of art. It sits in front of us for us to admire at our leisure. Ballet may be thought of as a process of art, a performance. The painting and the ballet differ in both medium and how they occupy time and space. The medium of art is the physical stuff that allows art to happen. It may be oil paint on canvas, or it may be the unique and fleeting movement of a group of dancers across a stage.

The time element of art is interesting. Once a painting is complete, it is frozen in time, practically the same today as it was a year ago. A ballet exists as a passage through time. It changes meaning when time is frozen. A photograph of a ballet is very different from the direct experience of the dance.

So, a partial answer to the simple question "What is art?" is indeed very simple. Art is that which "arts". But we are back to our circular definition. How to escape it? I have already tipped my hand by saying mowing the lawn does not reach beyond mundane experience. I believe it is the reaching beyond mundane experience that makes art Art. Here again, it is useful to think about art as a verb. It is the reach that is important, not necessarily that which is grasped. We are all flawed humans, and we may never fully grasp what is soulful in our world, but we can reach toward it. Participating in an artistic culture helps us reach beyond our day-to-day lives.

People have wrestled with this fundamental question of what art is for a long time. Aristotle said over two thousand years ago, "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." A large part of the inward significance of a great landscape painting is its ability to connect us to the natural world and remind us of who we are.

Much later, in 1897, Tolstoy said in his book *What Is Art?*, "...one person consciously, by certain external signs, conveys to others feelings he has experienced, and other people are affected by these feelings and live them over in themselves." Tolstoy focused on the transference of experience and feelings, reminiscent of Einstein's conduit. We can work with that.

Great art reaches toward the divine, sometimes literally, as Michelangelo's Adam reaches across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel toward the hand of God. Sometimes, the reach is not seen, not heard, but it is felt as an inner experience by both the artist and their audience. The inner movement that great art inspires in us activates our capacity for transcendent experience. I believe that is a capacity that most of us are born with, and some of us develop and learn how to use it.

Great art lifts its audience into a transcendent experience. Lesser art decorates a place or time with little lingering impact on the viewer.

For an example of a great painting, let's go back to Leonardo's Mona Lisa. One of the first things that captures me when I look at it is its visual subtlety. Leonardo did so many things with her facial structure and expression that we barely have words for. She is beguiling, enigmatic, provocative, authoritative, complete, and mysterious all at once. She is compelling, and I think she compels us toward a transcendent experience. The experience of viewing the painting moves me into a new mode of thought, if I let it. I feel like I am reaching across more than 500 years of history and joining Leonardo in his unique and incredible conception of the world. I can have an imaginary conversation with Leonardo when I look at his paintings. I think he would be a fascinating lunch guest. Ambitious, penetrating, flighty, and gruff all at the same time. Perhaps he was kind and generous too.

We can commune with an artist by viewing their paintings. We can also commune with something greater than the individual artist. As Robert Henri said, we can commune with the art spirit. In doing so, we transcend our day-to-day lives.

What is a transcendent experience? That is perhaps easiest to think about in terms of spiritual experience. I believe that we have the potential to be lifted into a higher state of awareness where we have contact with thoughts and feelings that originate outside of our consciousness. I can have a transcendent visual experience when I stare at a clear blue sky. I can wonder at the vibration of color, and delight in the immense volume of light-filled space before me. The wonder and delight did not come from me; they are gifts given to me from something that is beyond myself. I had to nurture my ability to experience the wonder and delight of the natural world, but the seed was there before I realized it.

A transcendent visual experience encourages the viewer to take a step in their journey beyond self. Ego-shattering may be too strong a term, but viewing a great work of art can be an ego-taming experience. A great painting, if nothing else, reminds us that we did not create it. We cannot claim it. We must accept it as "other", and it is a powerful "other". It can change us if we let it. Perhaps that is why great art is feared by some.

Great art can pull us toward a state of wonder and awe. Great art can also pull us toward transcendent experiences that are not so pleasant. Pablo Picasso's painting "Guernica" is a sharp-edged amalgamation of distorted images reflecting the madness

and suffering born of the Spanish Civil War. To fully appreciate this painting, the viewer must allow themselves to feel a transcendent experience of revulsion, horror, sadness, and pity. It is more sobering than uplifting.

Other artists like Francis Bacon and Anselm Kiefer can guide us into similar horrific experiences that transcend our daily realities. Francis Bacon pulls us into the horrors of humanity with his nightmarish, distorted portraits. He dropped a profound question into our laps. Where is the horror? Is it in the image, or is it in us, the viewer? Anselm Kiefer does this with his landscape imagery.

My emphasis on the transcendent qualities of art builds on seminal ideas about art from the late modern era. In the early 20th century, the English art critic Clive Bell developed a theory of visual art that came to be known as significant form. According to Bell, the significant form was supposed to convey an emotional, if not ecstatic, response in the viewer. For Bell, significant forms were lines and colors combined in a particular way. Bell's ideas were a little loose there. Notice that he focused on qualities within paintings, and not on the overall character, nor on the emergent quality of a painting.

Emergence is an important concept in understanding soulful art. An emergent quality of something is greater than the sum of the parts. The emergent qualities of a work of art are those that derive from, but are greater than, the individual components such as line, color, and form. A painting may be made by hundreds or thousands of touches of paint on the canvas. Those touches of paint may be skillfully organized to convey the likeness of a boat on a lake to the viewer. If the artist is particularly adept and a bit lucky, perhaps the image of the boat on the lake is so profoundly beautiful to the viewer that it triggers a deep emotional response. The profound experience of the viewer is something greater than the sum of many touches of paint to canvas. One touch does not convey a thousandth part of the overall effect.

Emergence as a concept and quality of great art also invites us to ponder our connection to the world, both macroscopically and microscopically. We can ponder things much greater than ourselves, and much smaller, and find the connection between the two. Emergence as a concept can lead us into the strange worlds of chaos theory and quantum mechanics.

Human consciousness is an emergent quality of our brains; it only emerges after our brains work in a mechanical sense, but it cannot be traced to one particular element of our brains. Further, I believe that soulfulness is an emergent quality of human consciousness. A soulful painting tickles our innate ability to have soulful experiences.

We can expand Clive Bell's idea of significant form to include emergent qualities of light and space and not just the forms that they contain or describe. Likewise, we can refine Bell's idea of an emotional response to include our concept of transcendent experience. An emotional response can be many things of different importance to us, such as rapture, laughter, revulsion, or compassion. Our emotional responses can be wonderfully complex combinations of different feelings.

A transcendent experience implies a ranking of values. While a funny cartoon might make me laugh, a Rothko painting may make me cry, and that is an emotional response that has a different value for me. I place a very high value on transcendent experiences, which put me in touch with the soul of the world and cause me to want to help preserve and nurture it.

Getting back to our central question for this chapter, "What is art?", we can also define art by the *via negativa*. Just as in a drawing where we can use positive shapes and negative shapes to define an object, we can define art by showing what it is and what it is not.

Something is not necessarily art simply because I declare it to be art. This over-inclusive definition cheapens art and can lead both the producer of art and the consumer of art down an unfortunate rabbit hole where fashion and ego supplant true artistic experience. To me, Duchamp's readymade urinal, which he bought from a hardware dealer and entitled "Fountain", is an interesting conversation piece. He might have been a hit at a cocktail party. His object deals in irony and provocation. It is an intellectual step toward "anti-art". Like an essay, it is conceptual, but it does not lift me spiritually, and so it accomplishes less than a great work of art. Irony is a useful tool, but we can do much more with art than simply use it to be ironic.

As time passes, the cultural significance of some art diminishes or compresses. I think this is true of many ready-mades, like Duchamp's "Fountain."

A consumer of art may think that something is great art simply because an “expert” says it is so. Meanwhile, the “art” is nothing more than a tub of lard in an expensive gallery space. Again, perhaps ironic, hopefully thought-provoking, but probably not transcendent for most people. The value of the tub of lard as an object of art also seems like it will diminish significantly over time.

Expert opinions also give us the opposite problem. A novice consumer of art may think that something is not great art simply because an “expert” says that it is not, or conversely, has not said that it is great art. We all have our biases. Fortunately, time has a way of eroding them as well. The proof of great art is in its ability to connect with audiences and lift them. This ability endures over decades and perhaps centuries.

Some people confuse art with that which is fashionable, in the trendy sense of the word. Haut couture is one thing, capable of elevating itself to high art. But polka dots for spring are not high art, and neither are many things that seem to be fashionable at the moment. Signed hubcaps might be the latest thing in Soho galleries, but signed hubcaps are not great art. At best, they can be objects that tease the boundary between art and non-art. Sometimes, the essay accompanying an artistic installation or artifact may be more interesting than the “art” itself.

Back to the *via positiva*...the making and use of art is a reach toward the infinite. Anything less than an earnest reach toward the infinite is not art in its highest form. Low art may have artistic elements, but it will not be complete.

Cathedrals, temples, and mosques can be works of art; music can be art; painting, drawing, and sculpture can be art. Indeed, any object or process that brings us closer to the divine through shared experience can be art. A religious ceremony performed without feeling is not art, but a ceremony that reaches earnestly toward the infinite may be great art.

Fortunately, great art often inspires a meditative response in its audience. Think of a Mark Rothko color field painting, or a Rembrandt self-portrait, or a Paleolithic cave drawing that connects with us across thousands of years of human history. An ancient handprint is a powerful image.

Conceptual art can be transcendent too. Maya Lin, in her Vietnam Veterans Memorial, shows how conceptual art can merge with architecture to create a profoundly moving public space that lifts its audience and honors the most somber of human experiences.

It is said that language is the medium of much conceptual art. Visual poetry can be very compelling, but just because something is presented as a conceptual art experience does not mean that it is as worthy of the label “art”. Sometimes, a concept is just an interesting idea, more of an entertainment experience, ironic, captivating, but not elevating.

Without the reach toward the divine, objects and processes have less resonant energy. They are missing an important emergent quality that reminds us of our humanity.

Sometimes suffering is associated with art. However, the suffering of the artist through the creation of an artistic object or process is neither necessary nor sufficient to create great art, although suffering can be a part of human growth. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn taught that suffering can lead to incredible things, but suffering itself is not an admirable goal.

As Mark Twain said, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable”. We must learn the truth about ourselves and our world before we can speak truth to others. Learning that truth may be painful, but the pain is not what makes art great; it is the elevation of consciousness that follows painful self-awareness that can make art great.

The letters of Vincent van Gogh chronicle his suffering through poverty, isolation, and cultural ignorance. That Van Gogh suffered did not make him a great artist. However, the conditions of his life that caused him to suffer clearly informed his art. We can say that his suffering and his empathy for the suffering of others motivated his reach for the infinite. Prior to devoting his life to painting, Van Gogh wanted to be a religious minister. He was born with an affinity for the spiritual. To me, his landscape paintings are some of the most fearless out there, fully reflecting that pull toward the divine.

Van Gogh made many paintings in Provence, putting the craggy, sunbaked mountains, called the Alpilles, in his backgrounds. In *Wheat Field with Cypress*, you can feel the heat of the Provencal summer and hear the buzzing of the insects. Everything in the painting swirls in the hot wind. The mountains look blue because of the humidity generated by the Mediterranean Sea not far away. In fact, the rock is white, but takes on a blue hue with distance. I have painted near Saint-Rémy, where Van Gogh was hospitalized. It is easy to see in the landscape there the swirl that transfixed him.

Suffering for the sake of suffering is nothing but masochism and is a denial of our humanity. Starvation is not required of the artist, but it may be necessary to reduce the distractions in our lives in order to make art. We may need to starve the dragon of our ego before we can conquer our demons and be lifted by our angels.

Here lies another conundrum. Part of the desire to become an artist and to make art may be ego-driven. It is normal to desire the appreciation and maybe the adulation of the audience when we display our art. We all want that pat on the back. Some artists chase it their entire lifetimes, and that can be very unhealthy.

In some ways, Salvador Dali was the artistic opposite of Vincent van Gogh. Dali's work remains much admired for his fantastic imagery and adolescent titillation. When I look at a Dali painting, I see a very ego-driven painter. His worldview was narrowly focused on himself. No one would ever accuse Dali of being a soulful landscape painter. His landscapes are often barren and cold spaces that simply stage his dream imagery. While Van Gogh was enthralled by the Provencal sun, Dali was distant from his landscapes, never throwing himself into them.

Thomas Eakins said, "The mark of the artist is their ability to endure frustration." The endurance of frustration is an ego-starving process. Perhaps as we stop feeding our egos, we make room for our ability to participate in the transcendent experiences that the making and appreciation of great art can ignite within us.

That implies the necessity of some serious inner reflection by the artist and by the audience as well. Without an audience to participate in the experience of art, the power of art remains only potential. Great art requires great audiences.

Great audiences are grown within the social frameworks of our geo-political structures. We see different audiences with different potentials across geographic, social, economic, political, and cultural lines. Fortunately, the potential for deep appreciation is always within the audience if they have access to that part of themselves that responds to transcendent experiences.

The desire to create is innate in humans. It operates on an individual level and also on a social level. Individual creativity resonates with the expansive nature of the universe. When I create something, whether it is a family or a painting, I am at least mimicking the actions of a universal creator in my own small way.

Indeed, human creativity can help justify our existence. Many societies have creation myths that make an act of creation or emergence the starting point for the world. The Kiowa Indian creation story says that their ancestors crawled through a hollow log one by one and emerged into the world.

The Christian Bible begins with a creation story. According to the Book of Genesis, the earth started as a formless void. It was nothing more than potential. Then came light, and the field was established. Next was the separation of light from darkness, and thus structure was built. That sounds a lot like a painter blocking in the big shapes and patterns at the start of their painting. According to Genesis, as God progressed day by day in the making of earth, God worked first from broad concepts and then moved to smaller and smaller divisions and finer detail until all the plants and animals were formed. God worked from general to specific in much the same way that a landscape painter might develop their image through field, structure, individuation, evolution, harmony, and light.

Native American creation myths are often based on godlike animals. For some, the world started on the back of a turtle. Usually, the creative act comes from something older and wiser than human civilization. If something older and wiser than us created us, that means that we are good and what we do is justified as long as we follow the direction of our creator. If nothing created us, then it is easy to say that everything that we do is self-justified, and little that we do is out of bounds. The absence of a creation story would have dire consequences for humanity.

It seems like now is the time in the world when we need to question the trend toward more self-justification and our assumption that everything we do as a species and as a culture is good. The planet is telling us otherwise. Serious reflection on our history tells us otherwise. The making of art and the consumption of art by audiences can help us reevaluate and reset our creation myths.

A creation story that emphasizes sustainability, soulfulness, and connection to the earth and to each other might be a good place to start as we try to walk through the next thousand years.

Creativity brings us closer to our god-like selves. We are best when we are filled with a sense of generous creativity, and worst when we are not.

Tapping into the creative force within us can be as natural as breathing for some of us. It may be a fearful experience too for some of us, invoking a sense of dread and risk.

The risks associated with creativity come from several directions. There is a risk that our ideas will not work. We risk spending time, effort, and money for no apparent and lasting good purpose. We risk ridicule if we display our creative projects, and they are not seen the way we see them. We may risk alienating ourselves from our tribe if we act or appear different. We risk challenging the ideas and social mores that tell us who we are and what to do. We risk being overwhelmed and failing, even if our ideas are good.

Painting can be an overwhelming experience. Landscape painting, in particular, can be very overwhelming because we are trying to connect ourselves to the natural world, which is infinitely complex. We cannot possibly respond to all of nature all at once. When we paint a landscape scene, we must ask ourselves, faced with overwhelming information, what are we trying to paint? Where do we start? Where do we stop? What do we include? What do we ignore?

I think the best landscape painters are strong enough to allow themselves to be overwhelmed by nature, and they are experienced enough to take the next step or two in solving the puzzle before them. The best painters do not paint just an image of nature; they paint an immersion into the natural world, like J.M.W. Turner did.

Joseph Mallord William Turner was willing to be overwhelmed by nature. He even had himself tied to the mast of a sailing ship during a storm so that he could observe and experience the full fury of the gale at sea. Turner captured that sense of overwhelmment and translated it into beautiful visual images. His paintings were incredibly creative and wonderfully abstract compared to the often-stodgy landscape paintings of his 18th-century British predecessors and 19th-century counterparts. He often kept the horizons low in his paintings, often giving us a dizzying perspective from which to observe the swirl of nature. Later, French painter Claude Monet would follow Turner's lead and push the horizon line all the way out of his paintings.

Turner's mature paintings have just enough attention to architectural detail to ground his viewers in a culturally acceptable "reality". Then he sends the viewer soaring into a fantastic and dynamic atmosphere. I wonder how many of his patrons lost their balance looking at his work.

Turner is an iconic example of a gifted artist whose paintings reach across centuries with ease. They enthrall us today as they enthralled the first viewers over 150 years ago.

It is important to note that not all creativity is good or positive. Toxic creativity is aligned with evil willfulness, and manifests in destruction, pain, and suffering. Toxic creativity fuels war. Sometimes, the act of creation is entangled with a need to show off to the world in a way not aligned with our god-like selves. Toxic creativity may result from a narcissistic wound. Alienation from one's true self, and the fear that results from profound alienation, motivates much toxic human behavior.

So, we can say that, counter-culturally, creativity is not necessarily and always such a wonderful human attribute, and it is not always motivated by wonderful things.

The need to create can be married to a need for approval from our tribe. This need for approval is a constant craving only temporarily quenched by flattery, wealth, and other physical comforts. We can do much and consume or accumulate much to avoid our uncomfortable feelings, and still they come back.

I may desperately want the world to admire my paintings. That desperation can feel like a dry hole that never gets filled. It takes great endurance to tolerate that emptiness

and to allow it to become a deeper well for artistic inspiration. Instead of trying to climb out of the well or stuff things into it, it may help to turn around and face the depth of it.

For me, painting is the artistic medium that pulls me closest to my god-like self. When I paint, I am engaged in a dance, and sometimes a wrestling match with something that is much greater than me. When I push on the canvas with my brush, there is something pushing back which is far beyond a merely reflexive force. It can feel like the hand of a dancer guiding me. It can feel like the hand of an angel pushing me back until I persist in wrestling away its secrets. More broadly, generous creative activity, under the right conditions, allows us to approach the best in ourselves, our god-like selves.

What do I need in order to approach my god-like self? Both activity and inactivity. I need the activity of painting to process ideas. I also need some fallow time in order to prepare myself to paint, observing, reading, and thinking. By sitting still in the dry cave of my soul and not clawing for a way out, I allow the walls to dissolve. Plato knew what it meant to stare at the cold stone walls of a cave; so did Leonardo.

Asceticism may be part of the answer, but, like so many other things, self-denial can also turn into a trap. A certain amount of self-denial may help to achieve the balance and space necessary for contact with my god-like self. Too much self-denial simply becomes ego-driven self-punishment.

Balancing self-denial is self-nurturement. Adequate physical and social sustenance is as necessary as the minimization of ego-driven distractions. Balance. It is always balance along the path of the middle way.

Nature tends toward balance, and balance allows the complexity of life to reach toward abundance. However, humans can ignore and counteract the balancing forces of nature. Because we have evolved so quickly, developing technology and political and economic systems in the recent blink of an eye compared to the long history of our species, we are susceptible to imbalance. Personal imbalance is a tragedy. Cultural and social imbalances threaten our very existence.

Generous creativity is both the result of and causal agent for personal and cultural balance. Only at a point of balance do we even stand a chance of meeting our god-like selves. Only at a point of balance do we stand a chance of living on this planet past this current age of social and environmental stress.

Great art is both necessary and balancing for us. Our future depends on it. Great Art is that which humans create to remind themselves of their own soulfulness and the soulfulness of the world.

Art can help heal a broken planet. It can help to heal a broken spirit, too.

Healing the planet is a daunting challenge. The challenge of healing ourselves is still daunting, but easier to face. That is where artistic power is most potent, in its ability to help heal the artist and those who will follow the artist in transcendent experience.