

teaching **Art**

as

*Spiritual
Practice*

Richard Link

*We ordinary people must forge our own beauty. We must set fire
to the greyness of our labour with the art of our own lives...*

– Kenji Mizazawa

Dedication

*Dedicated to my teacher, Janet Scott-Hoyt,
and to my parents, Vic and Myra Link.*

MANY THANKS TO: Barb.....*for keeping me sane*
 Jan.....*for introducing me to the work of David Gorman*
Karen.....*for insisting that I play classical music*
Barry.....*for keeping me on the path*
Mary.....*for paving the road*
 Rich.....*for leading the way*
 and most of all
David.....*for making this journey possible.*

*There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening
That is translated through you into action.
And because there is only one you in all time,
This expression is unique.
And if you block it,
It will never exist through any other medium...
The world will not have it.
It is not your business to determine how good it is,
Nor how valuable,
Nor how it compares with other expressions.
It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly,
To keep the channel open.*

—Martha Graham

Abstract

This paper is an exploration into teaching art as spiritual practice. The author believes that the emphasis on scientific materialism throughout our culture has created a society of disconnected, fragmented, and isolated individuals. By first recognizing how the principles of spiritual practice are inherent in the creative process, and then engaging in the creative process, the author believes we can begin healing our fragmented culture. He explores the healing potential of four aspects of the creative process within the context of creating a new methodology to teach performing arts.

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Bringing My Worlds Together

*...We talked about our voices as writers – how they are strong and brave
but how as people we are wimps.*

This is what creates our craziness.

*The chasm between the great love we feel for the world when we sit and
write about it, and the disregard we give it in our human lives.*

We have to bring these two worlds together.

Art is the act of nonaggression.

We have to live this art in our daily lives.

–Natalie Goldberg

“By studying Beethoven I learn how to live in the world.” These are words my piano professor shared with me back when I was an undergraduate music student struggling with Beethoven. At that time in my life, music was about overcoming technical deficiencies so that I could “hold my own” in the cut-throat competitive world of music school. For me music was all about my ego. My teacher, however, had other thoughts on why we study music. She would tell me—over and over—that the real reason we study music is in order to learn about ourselves. Practicing wasn’t just about becoming better technicians: it provided the building blocks to develop as people. In other words, music was about “letting go” of ego. My teacher believed that music was an expression of divine love and that if one truly loved music it was impossible to act in an unloving way. She spoke of how true artists, the Pablo Casals of the world, are those who live their art. The art of their music colouring the art of their life; the art of their life colouring the art of their music. My teacher’s desire was to show me how great art can bring me to a deeper understanding of my life, so that I could live with humility, integrity and compassion. She believed that we could use the creation and performance of art as a way to give meaning and understanding to the chaos and confusion of life.

My teacher’s desire became my desire. I wanted to learn what was possible when the transformative potential of art was made the primary focus. What would happen to us physically? Spiritually? Emotionally? And so I began my journey—a journey that has so

far lasted twenty years—into learning how to embody and live by her principles as a teacher, performer and member of all my communities. As my life progressed I began to experience more and more the truth of my teacher's words; as creator, performer and witness I noticed transformation in my own life and in the lives of those around me. I realized that art does have the power to heal and that *this* was truly what I wanted to share with others.

The institutions where I taught however, were not interested in this way of teaching. Though they gave lip service to process—the unfolding of one's knowing of oneself—the bottom line was about delivering product. Creative process—and consequently the potential for transformation—was always subservient to product. My experiences with teaching demonstrated otherwise. I noticed that when a teacher and student consciously chose to relate and work from a process point of view, the resulting product was profoundly alive and beautiful, much more so than when product was the priority. *I've come to realize that in order for art to be alive and resonate with an audience, it must be fueled with the artist's truth. The rest, no matter how technically proficient, is superficial.* I realized my role as a teacher was to facilitate a student's understanding that she was the creator of her art and therefore the creator *of her life*. By honoring their honesty the potential for transformation for both performer and witness was incredible.

Eventually my dissatisfaction and disagreement with institutionalized teaching lead me to seek alternatives and others interested in my ideas. This dissatisfaction fueled my dreams of starting a performing arts school. At the same time, I was also deeply confused about how to reconcile my life as an artist with my need for social justice: many of the artists I knew lived lives that were egocentric, self-serving, and destructive to themselves and the rest of the world. Somehow I knew that this was not the only way to live as an artist. Not only is art a vehicle for spiritual and political transformation, I believe that to be an artist also means to be committed to social justice. Intuitively I knew that by accessing creativity we have the ability to transform our communities, our nations, and our world. I didn't know how it happened nor how to make it happen. I didn't know how to bring these worlds together.

Then I came to JFKU.

My explorations into holism, holistic health, somatics and transformative arts have provided me with the missing links in my understanding of the connections between creativity, spirituality and transformation. This Integrative Final Project is a synthesis of

all my thoughts and experiences about the potential of creativity with my new knowledge from JFKU. It is my attempt to “bring the worlds together.” It is the culmination of an idea that began with my music teacher many years ago: not only is it possible, it is essential, to teach from the belief of art as spiritual practice, and art as a means of transformation.

My methodology is grounded in the philosophy of Holism and is therefore pertinent to the field of holistic health and the new emerging field of holistic education. Holism, which draws equally from the wisdom traditions and living systems theory, states that all living systems (be they cultural, biological, or psychological), are interwoven as in a web, none being more important than the other and none being separable from the whole. In order to live in a manner that respects all living creatures, we need to be guided by this idea of the interconnection and unity between all aspects of our world. This means that my creativity, my connection to the sacred, my physical and emotional health, and my sense of community and social justice, are all related and interconnected: each one influenced by, and in turn influencing, the other. Therefore my health—from a holistic perspective—and *the health of all communities of which I am a member*, is a reflection of these fundamental connections; it is the result of relationship between the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological. To live holistically is to embrace these connections and experience a sense of unity or oneness with all. Furthermore, Holism believes that the world in which we live is not static, but alive. From the tiniest atom to the changing of the seasons our world is dynamic and always in process. The world is guided by a fundamental energy, a life force—*chi* to the Chinese, *pranayama* to the Hindus, quantum physics to the contemporary scientist—that propels the world constantly forward. The most powerful way that I know to access this fundamental energy and strengthen our connections is through creativity.

I believe, and will demonstrate in this paper, that accessing creativity is holistic; creativity leads to authenticity which builds connections between people and the rest of the world. My emphasis on the power of creativity to make connections and deepen relationships is similar to those of the Holistic Education movement:

Holistic Education is about balance, inclusion and connection: connection meaning exploring and strengthening relationships—the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, mind and body, relationship between various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and the community, the relationship with the earth, and the relationship between self and Self. (Miller, 1996, p.86)

Ron Miller (1997) believes that education is transformative on both the personal and spiritual levels when it addressed “the multifaceted mystery of human existence” (p. 29). Furthermore, he believes that spirituality is not some far out mystical state of being, but is grounded in the very real concerns of our modern world. To be spiritual is to be committed to social justice, healing all forms of oppression, and developing a healthy, sustainable, respectful relationship to the biosphere. I believe that by teaching kids to explore and exploit their creative process, we are doing just what Miller believes education is capable of; we are initiating healing and transformation that goes beyond the individual and affects the entire community. Art and life are integrated into a singular way of being. The worlds come together and our art expressing who we are becomes meaningful in the world.

To illustrate this thesis I will answer three questions: *why* I believe it is crucial to our survival to develop a more holistic method of teaching, *what* my methodology, art as spiritual path, is and, *how* to put this methodology into practice.

Why

*The reason why man lacks unity and lies broken in heaps,
is because man is disunited with himself.*

—Emerson

A CRISIS OF SPIRIT

It is obvious to me that change is necessary not only within our educational system, but at all levels of society. Many of the authors whom I have studied at JFKU—James Hillman, Jose Arguelles, Suzi Gablik, Fritjof Capra, John Miller and Michael Learner—believe that our world is in crisis and that transformation is our moral imperative. While offering a wide range of opinions on the most effective way to achieve transformation, the authors are unanimous that it is necessary: we need to transform if the human species is to survive. One doesn't have to look very far to experience this crisis first hand. In fact, I needn't look farther than my own heart to experience the results of a culture devoid of meaning and entrenched in scientific materialism. Disconnected from our souls and spirits we live disconnected from each other and the natural world. Isolated, we are a society in desperate need of community and yet cannot unite because we are paralyzed with fear. And it is our culture that has taught to fear: to fear the visible and the invisible. Glorifying the rational and the linear, our culture has created a society in which “we can no longer adapt, a society that is maladaptive and dysfunctional and one that requires us to be inhuman to survive” (Gablik, 1995, p. 54). My inhumanness is my fragmentation; it is the great chasm that separates my head and heart, my body and my spirit, my intellect and my intuition. I am told that reality is only what can be seen and that the transpersonal worlds of myth, dreams, souls and spirits are quaint, primitive and negligible. In a culture that glorifies materialism we have created the ultimate form of product worship: consumerism. My process however, is discounted and viewed as unessential. I am told that healing occurs through the miracles of modern science and that transformation through process and creativity is the stuff of folk tales and magic. I, and those I see around me, long to transform and be made whole and yet know not how.

EDUCATION

I believe that our crisis of spirit is most profoundly felt in the teaching profession. Because most teachers teach what the culture believes is important—the prevailing paradigms—scientific materialism is emphasized in our schools. This emphasis encourages dualistic thinking by fragmenting knowledge into subjects, units, and lessons. Fragmentation makes it difficult for students to understand the relationship between subjects, and the relationship (and relevance) of the subjects to life. The training of specific skills is the priority rather than the exploration and development of each student’s potential. As a result we produce students who feel fragmented and disconnected from themselves, from each other and from the rest of the natural world. Technique and logic are the thing, intuition and creativity have been left behind.

PERFORMING ARTS

Even within the world of the creative and performing arts this fragmentation exists. In the western world, creative expression and art has been relegated to the elitist world of the concert hall, the museum, and the artist. In our world we are told that only a select few are worthy of creating. Art is the birthright of that special genius known as the artist. The rest of us sit on the sidelines waiting and watching. Satish Kumar believes that “the dichotomous thinking that has separated life from art, segregated aesthetic experience to the exclusive realms of the museum, art gallery, or concert hall, means that we are left to live in an otherwise ugly world” (cited in Gablik, 1995, p.136). Matthew Fox (1983), suggests that our separation of life from art has created a bored culture hooked on violence. He believes that our society is so empty of spiritual vision that it is incapable of producing art. Instead, our culture is only capable of creating entertainment and will easily “succumb to the selling of the artist’s soul” (p. 186). Art is about money, prestige, and power. The world our creative artists find themselves locked into is one where the goal is to create product that makes money.

Our art schools reflect and encourage these views. The music and theater departments that I have experienced emphasize product, competition, and the glorification of the individual. They focus on technique and intellectual analysis rather than creativity and intuition. Their programs, lost in the anachronistic romantic world of the artist as genius and isolated individual, cultivate this ideal by producing artists who in turn feel alienated and disconnected from society and the natural world. Self-centered

and self-absorbed, the modern artist feels no commitment or responsibility to the community. Instead of feeling responsibility towards his communities, our modern artist experiences the community as a marketplace, and the natural world as a commodity to be exploited in order for him to be financially successful. Fragmented, isolated and lost, our modern artists have no understanding that by reconnecting to the spiritual aspect of their creative process, they hold the answer to healing and transforming our world.

What

*Ritual truths have not been expressed throughout time
as mathematical formulas,
but in art, music, dance, drama, poetry,
stories and active rituals.*

—Starhawk

Art is the creative contemplation of God.

—Stephen Mitchell

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

My proposed methodology is founded on the belief that by reconnecting to our spiritual selves we heal our fragmentation and isolation. This reconnection is accomplished through spiritual practice. The essence of spiritual practice “is to illuminate the truth of being—the flux, dynamism, subjectivity, creativity and inherent relatedness” (Spretnak, 1991, p. 24). Spiritual practice is a system by which I bring forth the truth of my being by engaging in a process of inquiry, discipline and transformation. To bring forth my truth, I must be willing to let go of assumptions and beliefs and walk into the unknown, into the mysterious to face all my fears. I must be willing to “open that which is closed, balance what is reactive and investigate what is hidden” (Kornfield, 1987, p.15). My spiritual practice helps me see beyond the limited view of my ego and rational self and connect with the intuitive, the spiritual, the creative. Through spiritual practice I bring forth my original nature and experience the “fundamental existence of unity, which in turn leads to social action to counter injustice and human suffering” (Miller, 1996, p. 26). And the original nature that I bring forth is love; the purest expression of godliness, of the divine, of the creative source.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF CREATIVITY

My connection to spirituality is through creativity: the creation, performance and witnessing of creative expression. To get to this place of experiencing art as spiritual practice has meant that I have had to abandon many of my culture's ideas on creativity, art and the role of the artist. It has been through my exploration of other cultures and traditions that I have come to this new understanding of creativity. Many of the great traditions believe that creativity is the same life force that drives the universe. The Taoists believe that creative energy is our *chi*: the life force that exists in all things and is in a continual cycle of birth and death. To be an artist is to embrace this same creative force that exists within us, and give birth to our new realities. Like the Hindi and Native American cultures, I now perceive everything as equally holy and numinous. More than merely creating things, to be an artist is a way of being. My life is my artform and my artform is life as daily prayer. When my life takes the form of daily prayer I am able to see the connections and experience the relationships. Life becomes integrated and the separations that exist between me and rest of the world disappear. "Crucial to our continuing evolution" (Wilson, 1998, p. 30), creativity is the process by which my chaos is given form: it is the journey into the mysterious, the unknowable, the ineffable, and the non-rational. Creativity takes me to world where myth and dreamtime live. And art(ifacts), as Luan Fauteck (1998) so aptly stated in a class on creativity, "are the postcards and souvenirs we collect from our creative journey." They are the direct expression of who I am, my soul. When I engage this "force in the universe" and "touch closest to the mystery of life" (Holzer, 1997, p. 18), I encounter my soul. *And what my soul is, is beautiful.*

ART AND BEAUTY

The word that most describes the connection between my soul, my art and my spirituality is beauty. According to James Hillman beauty is more than pretty things, "it is the manifest anima mundi, the very sensibility of the cosmos, the way in which the gods touch our senses" (cited in Gablik, 1995, p. 179). Beauty is the spiritual in physical form. The great passion I have for all that is beautiful comes from my yearning to connect to and experience the spiritual. Through the expression of my spirituality, I touch my soul, create beauty, and am beautiful. The most beautiful art—be it the music of J. S. Bach, the poetry of William Shakespeare, or the paintings of Van Gogh—all are concerned with expressing the spiritual: that which is inexpressible and ineffable, and that which has no name—our connection to the One. For me, spirituality is made manifest through the

expression of love. A love that is unconditional, all-encompassing, and embraces compassion, *Eros*, and *Agape*. Life is to delight and dance in the joy and beauty of the Love that is Us. And my job, my mission, the intention by which I judge my life, is to help others express their beauty; to make their love grow.

The loss of beauty in our lives keeps us from caring about ourselves, each other and nature. James Hillman believes “it is only love for the world and a desire for rich sensory contact with the beauty of sounds and smells and textures that will save us” (cited in Gablik, 1995, p. 179). Furthermore Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990), with whom I agree completely, sees a direct connection between the desire for beauty and the desire for health and political freedom (p. 189). The pursuit of wholeness, empowerment and wisdom is the pursuit of beauty. And the pursuit of beauty is living art as spiritual practice

ART AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

To create is to go deep into the spiritual center of life and experience the divine. When we reclaim art as a means of transformation, we intensify our sense of wonder, of joy and of ecstasy at being alive. We rejuvenate our spirit and feed our soul. Catholic monk Thomas Merton believed in the power of art to transform:

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve. (cited in Fox, 1983, p. 200)

In the Buddhist tradition, art is the doorway to enlightenment. It is “nothing less than the way individuals can see, hear, listen, understand and know how a new reality of enlightenment is possible for them in their life” (Samuels, 1998 p. 74). Similar to the Hindus, Buddhists do not separate life from art. They believe that the most important work of art an individual creates is her own life. Writer Eric Booth (1996) also believes that art is not separate from life. In contrast to our present understanding of art as a passive experience, Booth advocates for art to become an active experience, in other words “art” becomes a verb, not just a noun. Suggesting that these skills are lacking in our current education programs, Booth states that if we were to were to engage in this practice, “we would begin to put things together in ways that wake us all up to the complex, multidimensional beauty that surrounds us” (p. 45). Booth promotes the idea

that we become artists who accept things as they are, come to love the details, and step forward with a *yes* on our lives so there can be no more *nos* in the world, *nos* that invalidate life and stop these details from continuing. Creating art keeps us current, telling us who we are in the world. In her book *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg (1986) sums up so eloquently the power of art as spiritual practice:

Writing practice is to learn to trust your own mind and body: to grow patient and nonaggressive. Art lives in the big world. One poem or story doesn't matter one way or the other. It's the process in writing and life that matters. The process teaches about sanity. We are trying to become sane along with our poems and stories. Rimpoché says "we must continue to open in the face of tremendous opposition. No one is encouraging us to open and still we must peel away the layers of the heart. Why? Because that is the only way to be alive, to feel and grow like all the plants and animals—the other alternative is to wither and die and create a planet that is in the same predicament. (p.2)

The form—art(ifact)—that our exploration of the process and telling of our story takes is not important. Natalie Goldberg speaks in terms of writing because that is what she does, but our journey could just as easily take the form of simple talking or the more sophisticated forms of music and visual arts. The point is to explore the journey of the creative process and use the souvenirs from the journey—images, movements, words, sounds—as windows into the psyche allowing greater self-knowledge. To travel this path takes discipline, courage and stamina as we confront our fears and wounds, and as we ask ourselves *who am I?*, and "how alive am I willing to be?" (Lamott, 1994, p. 236). Art as spiritual practice is about how we affect personal and collective transformation. The power lies with the how, not the what.

How

It is an intuitive seeing, which comes about as a result of exercising and experiencing one's physical senses imaginatively, wholeheartedly and wholesoulfully. This is why artistic practice is so important in all learning and education. This is why neglect of the artist in each person is so impoverishing to society. Without this spiritual sense organ, this way of seeing the formative forces at work in a physical process, we are blind and duped by appearance.

— M. Richards

REACHING AND VIBRATING

To replace our current model of teaching by transference of knowledge, I propose a method that “will reach and vibrate the whole person” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 177); a method that encourages the development of inner knowing and intuition. Instead of imitation and repetition, I offer discovery, play and exploration. Instead of a method steeped in fragmentation and isolation, I propose a method that emphasizes inclusion, the exploration of relationships and development of community. A method that not only honours our relationship with ourselves and each other, but also honours and strengthens our relationship with nature and all living creatures. A method that cultivates connection with the divine and the sacred.

Instead of a method that is product-oriented, I propose a method celebrating and delighting in process. I propose a method that is active not passive, that is not just concerned with teaching subjects, but, more importantly, with developing a way of being in the world. Instead of a method that emphasizes the split between the head, the heart, and the body, I propose a method that encourages integration: a method that nourishes the soul and heals the fragmentation making our students whole.

Education is the building of the person. To educe means to draw out or evoke that which is latent; education then means drawing out the person's

latent capacities for understanding and living, not stuffing a (passive person) full of preconceived knowledge. There must be permission to explore and express. (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.118)

THE ART IN PLAY

Transformation is simple—we need only to explore and express our creativity. The most potent and direct way that I know to explore and express is through play: wild, unrestricted, uninhibited, free-flowing, free-falling, and all-for-nothing play. When we engage in the energy of play we are engaging in the energy of life itself, filling our bodies with endorphins and our souls with joy. We are filled with *chi*, the energy of life. Playing gets the stagnant energy that has been blocking and restricting our creativity out of our bodies, leaving us free to express who we are. By playing we open up to new ways of relating to the world. “To play is to free ourselves from arbitrary restrictions and expand our field of action” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 43). Playing—literally and figuratively—keeps us loose, and the looser we are—literally and figuratively—the better we are at dealing and adapting to all of life. To play well is not only to be open to the unexpected, but to relish and encourage it. Playing teaches letting go and letting be. It’s like white water rafting: we need to hold on tight so that we don’t fall in, and yet if we hold on too tight and are not flexible to the twists and turns of the rapids our tightness will cause us to fall in. Taking us into unfamiliar—and possibly unfriendly—territory, playing “rearranges our capacities and our very identity so that they can be used in unforeseen ways” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 43).

The Play of the Inner Child

The part of me that loves to play the most is my inner child. Last summer I worked with voice and acting instructor Shari Carlson, who taught her students that the most potent creativity, and therefore the most meaningful art, emerges when we let our inner child out to play (1998). Furthermore, by replacing early programming with positive and enriching dialogue, Shari believes that students can heal their wounded inner child and begin to express the truth of their stories. By letting the inner child speak, students become authentic to their experiences and emotions. This authenticity creates art that is not only meaningful to themselves, but also has the potential to touch others in their communities. Through the process of becoming true to their “self,” students become artists and begin the journey towards wholeness. Psychiatrist Donald Winnicott believes that psychological healing is the result of play: “it is in playing and only in playing that

the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (cited in Nachmanovitch, 1996, p. 50).

I think it’s interesting (and also rather sad) that as youngsters we are allowed to play, but as we get older playing is frowned upon. This sentiment is especially true in the music and theatre departments where I have worked. These departments are successful at producing serious young artists who have great technique but very little soul and joy in their art. They advocate a “right way” and a “wrong way” to do everything. There is no opportunity for the students to play, experiment, and figure out what is their right way.

In my teaching, play is an integral part of every lesson and rehearsal. It is in fact the most important component. This is especially true in my work as choral teacher and vocal coach. By allowing the students to play with their voices and their bodies I am able to get them to open up and to completely express what’s going on inside. Bodies and voices indicate so clearly where there are emotional and physical blocks. By engaging in play we give ourselves the opportunity to discover the blocks. Once that discovery is accomplished we can use the energy generated in playing to begin the work of loosening and releasing the blocks. By allowing this process to unfold, my students’ singing becomes honest, beautiful and meaningful.

Playing through Movement

The ability of play to release blocks and energy was dramatically illustrated to me last year in a movement class at JFKU. I and a couple of classmates were running around at top speed, playing a very silly, high-energy kind of tag. By participating in this very physical type of play, I was able to quiet my chattering mind and just be in my body. I became present and was able to abandon myself completely to the creative process. By completely engaging in this all-encompassing movement I was able to somehow loosen the blocks that had been keeping me from experiencing my true creative self. In the process I unleashed a flood of energy I didn’t know I had. I now experience life with a passion and vitality that I thought was gone forever. Many aspects of my life—school, music, relationships, spirituality and sexuality—are freer, less restricted and lighter. And there is more joy in all that I do. That class of exhilarating play made me realize that my most fundamental state of being is creativity and that I was stifling my creative self by getting stuck in my intellect and my ego. Now when ever I feel myself getting stuck I get up and play, and play hard. In fact I don’t wait till I’m stuck, I just play every day.

Playing through movement has been a profoundly transformative experience for me this past year, and as a result, movement has become an integral element of my rehearsal technique.

Playing through Singing

Another way to energize the body and spirit through play is by participating in uninhibited, uncensored and unencumbered singing. I believe through singing we experience what it truly means to be alive. Vocal expression is the physical manifestation of our fundamental vibratory state: singing is *chi* energy made audible. By stimulating this energy we transform. To see this transformation I only have to observe my students' bodies when they are singing: bodies once tight are now breathing, releasing and relaxing; bodies heavy and exhausted are now light and buoyant; bodies flighty and unstable are now grounded. Everywhere everyone begins to glow. And smile. Randall McClellan (1991) believes that by stimulating our *chi*, singing can affect our physiology and psychology in many ways:

Singing can resonate the entire physical body and electro-magnetic field, fully engage the mind, and give the emotions a vehicle for expression and produce an overall sense of well-being. When we combine the singing of sustained pitches with specific vowels and directed concentration we can, in addition, revitalize our internal organs, tone our endocrine gland system and calm our nervous system. (p.72)

I don't need to look to my students for confirmation of the power of singing because I have these experiences everyday. Each morning before breakfast—much to the chagrin of anyone in earshot—I make a lot of sound singing, chanting, toning and improvising vocally. This noisy experience grounds me and gets my energy flowing. I know from this experiences that my stress level is much lower, and that I am much more capable of dealing with my anxiety when I sing everyday. I use this playful and uncensored singing as an opportunity to get it all out, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful. By doing so I'm moving all my stagnant energy, emotions and thoughts out of my system creating space for new ideas and experiences.

Shortly after writing this section I ran off to my weekly vocal improvisation group where we create completely improvised and spontaneous music. I felt so charged and vital after the rehearsal. I believe the potency of improvised singing is magnified tenfold when experienced with a group of people. Just by basking in the energy of the extraordinary sounds that are generated by the group we begin to change physically and

emotionally. The combined voices of all the members allows for greater freedom—it's hard for the inner critic to be heard when there is so much noise going on—creating sounds that are alive with meaning and beauty.

Playing with the Intention of Love

When our playing is allowed to live and breathe in a loving, nurturing environment, the creativity and transformation that emerges can be beyond our wildest dreams. And the vitality that we experience doesn't just stay in the rehearsal hall—it flows outward affecting everyone we meet and come in contact with. When my intention is to create art that speaks from my heart, my art in turn touches the hearts of audiences. Compassion and understanding for one another is the result.

This idea was borne out significantly in my life. A number of years ago I taught in a theatre program where the tone of rehearsal was negative, argumentative and focused in the intellect, not the soul. It was the antithesis of everything I believe in (and am articulating here). All we had time for in rehearsal was to churn out an endless stream of product. There was never time to explore and delight in exploration. By creating work that reflected all this negative energy we could sometimes engage our audience's minds, but never their hearts. The consequence was discouraged and demoralized students. The creative process seemed to be an uphill climb full of struggle and hard work. There was no joy, no delight and no growth. I seldom left rehearsal feeling the energy and glow of creativity. Instead, after a typical rehearsal I would leave feeling negative and downtrodden. Unfortunately, these negative feelings didn't just stay with me; they would seep out affecting all my interactions. I was like a stone thrown into a pond, and my negative feelings were the waves.

I contrast that with an experience borne out of a need to create in a supportive atmosphere. I knew that if I created a nurturing and loving environment in which to explore the creative process, the result would be an integrated ensemble of artists producing work that was authentic, exciting and alive. So I gathered together people whom I knew had similar beliefs and we set out on a journey of discovery. Up until that rehearsal process I had never been involved in a process where there was so much joy and such exciting creative discoveries. I wish I could show you the set designs or play you some of the music because my words aren't enough to describe the beauty we created. Because we were "just playing," we were able to let go of the tyranny of the inner critic and completely revel in the creative process. The result was a cast and

creative team performing far beyond their usual capabilities. My playing during the performances was with an ease and technical mastery that I rarely experience. When I reflect back on the enthusiastic response the piece received, I know that it's not because it was the most amazing bit of music and theatre, because it wasn't. It was instead a story told with integrity, honesty and love. "By allowing ourselves to be true to ourselves and our visions, and true to the undiscovered wholeness that lies beyond the self and the vision we have today" (Nachmanovitch, 1991, p177), we were able to create something beautiful, authentic and alive. And when art is alive it resonates with the heart. Our love and belief in what we were sharing was so powerful the audience couldn't help but be swept up in it. This experience made me realize that when my intention is to create from a place of honesty and love, that honesty and love is what I receive in return. The nurturing environment allowed us to be free and let our inner child play and go wild. The joy that we experienced in creation was evident to the audience during performance. And all of us were transformed in the process. I know that the joy I felt in rehearsal and performance stayed with me long after the show was over and affected everything I did. I know that I have grown immeasurably as a result of this process: I am more confident, more loving and more generous. By playing in a loving environment I was able let go and express all that I needed to say. *The Painter's Dream* was the first time I truly expressed all of me; it was the first time I was whole.

ART AS MEDITATION

Art as spiritual practice means using art as a window to exploring process. In other words, my practicing of art becomes a meditative practice. Through meditation I bring awareness to self: I become aware of all aspects of my personality so that I may live in a way that is congruous and authentic. According to Jack Kornfield, our body, heart and mind are disconnected and the practice of "meditation allows us to reconnect all the disparate parts of ourselves" (cited in Miller, 1996, p. 168). Matthew Fox (1983) believes that the fundamental role of art is to "lead to fuller living and deeper spiritual celebration of both pain and joy" (p. 190). Art as meditation allows us to discover and then truly embody our inner truth. By journeying inward I am able to live a more satisfying outward life. "Art as meditation reminds people that the most beautiful things a potter produces is...the potter" (Fox, 1983, p. 192).

My Method

There are many different ways of using art as a meditative practice. The method of inward journeying that I would like to share with you is based on my experiences of the work of Arnold Mindell (1982) and David Gorman (1998). Both men have developed a system of revealing our inner truth by investigating the causes of our outward expressions. Studying and experiencing Mindell's work has shown me that my behaviors and symptoms are the manifestations of unconscious tendencies that need to be understood in order for me to grow into wholeness. Mindell (1982) calls these symptoms and behaviors the dreambody. The dreambody, which can be likened to a doorway into the world where our physical self and our psyche intersect, provides us with clues and messages about what is going on. This dreambody is not limited to any one form of expression; the particular form of the dreambody is determined by the specific conditions of the individual. David Gorman (1998), while not using Mindell's terminology, also believes that the form our unconscious takes is the result of belief systems that are way out of line. He believes that through exploration:

“people begin to see how their conceptions are channeling them into certain actions which don't, in fact work for them, and as they begin to see their reality differently first in the situation in which their symptoms initially arose, they soon begin to see how they have the same viewpoint and conceptions in other areas of their life. It is remarkable how much change can take place in a very short time when people really get at the source of their problem, instead of keeping on trying to change the physical or functional coordination of that misconception.” (p. 12)

My Story

A wonderful demonstration of how this method works is an experience I had last spring when I decided to perform classical music for the first time in over 14 years. To say that this decision was a very big deal is to put it mildly. I have stayed pretty far away from classical repertoire since music school because of insecurities about my abilities, and because of tendinitis in my right hand that seems to get worse when I play classical music. In the past when I played classical music my whole body would become very tense and I would have to work incredibly hard to play the piano. It's as if there were a brick wall that I had to force my way through to be able to express myself. With all this tension, performing was emotionally and physically exhausting. Usually when this would happen, I would get frustrated and try yet another way of playing the piano which invariably wouldn't work and would just create more tension and confirm for me that I

just don't "have what it takes" to play classical music. When my friend Karen insisted that I perform classical music at one of our living room concerts, I wondered if I could loosen this pattern that had such control over my life. Because of my exploration into the work of Mindell and Gorman, I was being presented with a wonderful chance to investigate some of the "unconscious tendencies" that appear as physical symptoms when I play the piano. I agreed—with much trepidation—and started practicing.

Everything went fine until about two weeks before the recital when I noticed that my body was starting to get tense and that my tendinitis (which I had been pretending wasn't there,) was acting up. I stopped playing, and instead of reacting in my usual fashion—getting frustrated and try to play differently—I decided to look for the messages behind my symptoms. I started again, this time focusing on my breathing and being present to my experiences. Well, after about four bars of music I had to stop. I was crying because I was so moved by the beauty of the music. In that moment of not trying to play perfectly, of just being and noticing, I realized that my tension and tendinitis was the result of trying to control the way I played; I was trying to make everything sound perfect and beautiful. Furthermore, I was doing this because I didn't think I was good enough. I believed that what I had to offer wasn't worthy; *I wasn't enough*. To compensate for my unworthiness I was *trying* to be something that I wasn't. Instead of becoming a better musician, I was becoming a musician full of doubt, anguish and despair. And a musician with a lot tension and tendinitis. I was trying to live up to some external idea of what it meant to be a classical musician. My ego told me I didn't; my ear—which up until this point had been so distracted by the noise of my ego that it couldn't really hear what I was doing—told me otherwise. My ear proved that I was capable of playing this music that I loved and playing it in a way that moved me to tears. This was a huge moment! I realized that all I had to was play; I didn't have to try and work so hard to make something happen.

For the next couple of weeks I experimented with this discovery noticing that whenever I became tense, I had stopped breathing and was no longer connected in body. Instead, I was completely stuck in my head worrying and feeling inadequate and unworthy. When ever this would happen, I would breathe—sometimes for quite a while—smile, gently let the thoughts go, and get back to the present by discovering what I had to express by *just* playing the music. When I would come up against technical difficulties, instead of my usual—getting all emotionally upset by thinking that I wasn't capable—I would calmly explore how to make it work for my body. By letting go of my judgments that I couldn't play, I opened up room for all sorts of possibilities on how I

could play. And it was no surprise to me that two weeks later when I realized that my tendinitis had disappeared.

Playing the recital was an extraordinary experience affirming all that I had discovered while practicing. The response I received indicated very clearly that I didn't need to be something other than me, because who I am, and what I have to offer, is beautiful. That night, reflecting on the whole experience I realized that all of my life and all my actions, not just my piano playing, were motivated by the idea that who I am was not enough. Just as I had been judging playing the piano by some very unrealistic external standards on what I thought a musician *should* be able to do, so was I doing this with other aspects of my life. Just as David Gorman (1998) suggests—"they soon begin to see how they have the same viewpoint and conceptions in other areas of their life" (p.12)— I recognized that this belief system, (most apparent in the way I played the piano), permeated all aspects of my life. Up until now my life had been motivated by the belief that I needed to try to be someone that I wasn't, because who I was wasn't enough. Through the positive feedback I received from the recital I realized that who I was and what I had to offer *was* good enough. All I had to do was let go and allow all that I am—my original nature—to shine through. This discovery has led to major re-evaluations and shifts in how I relate in the world. I feel I am finally beginning to share *who I am* with the rest of the world, and—here's the scary part—I'm also taking full responsibility for what happens when I share all that I am. Being truthfully me isn't an easy journey, but the rewards so far are fantastic. I find it is so easy to fall back into old patterns that I need to constantly remind myself to be present. I am also realizing how much courage (and stamina) it takes to stand up for what I believe in. I have even more respect now for people who are true to themselves and their visions. Though my old way of being was much easier, by being truthful I am now living with integrity. Being me has led to a much deeper and richer life: a life full of more love and joy, and also more anger and pain. In other words: a life worth living.

A New Method of Teaching

Exploring the methods of David Gorman and Arnold Mindell has led me to completely re-evaluate and restructure my teaching methods. I no longer teach by training and mimicking. Instead my teaching now consists of facilitating a process for the students so that they can become present to their experiences. Once there is presence, the students are able to discover what is right for them and their particular situations. This process works equally well for both groups and individuals. The key in either situation is to get the students not to judge their experiences but to notice. Once they have this

awareness we (the students and I) begin to explore by setting up little experiments to notice the thoughts that arise when engaged in the activity. Like my discovery, this noticing takes us into the thoughts that live behind the physical manifestation. To facilitate and lead the students deeper into their process I make suggestions and ask questions. Through their discoveries, students learn of the interconnection between their mind, body and spirit. They begin to realize that they have the ability to change and grow emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. By teaching in this manner, I am allowing the students to discover themselves and as a result learn; I am “drawing out the students latent capacities for understanding and living” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 118).

Engaged Pedagogy

This method of teaching involves the active participation of both the student and the teacher. It is not a passive experience; both are responsible participants in the learning process. Instead of being viewed as “depositories of information,” students are seen as whole individuals with complex histories which is all taken into account during the learning process. In other words, I, as teacher, am more interested in the complete well-being of the individual—the union of mind, body and spirit—than in transferring knowledge or techniques. Teacher and writer Bell Hooks (1993), believes the responsibility of the teacher is to create a pedagogy “that would enable students to use the knowledge and information they have gained to live more fully in the world, one that would speak to heart, soul, mind, body and spirit” (p. 102). Our job as Hooks (1994) sees it, is to facilitate the self-actualization of the students. According to Paulo Freire (1993), self-actualization is the practice of freedom and liberation. Freedom and liberation from the tyranny of our thoughts and the thoughts of others. And freedom comes from engaging in critical thinking—a process very similar to the method I have been describing—“thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity, thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (Freire, p. 73).

I believe that critical thinking—bringing awareness and engagement to one’s thoughts and process—is a spiritual practice. To yield productive results, critical thinking is no different than any spiritual practice in that it demands discipline and integrity. When practiced with discipline and integrity, this method can yield the same results. Bell Hooks (1993) doesn’t separate her spiritual practice from her intellectual pursuits—she believes they are the same thing. In doing so she echoes the sentiments of Socrates who in the *Apology* states that the pursuit of knowledge is a spiritual journey: “his search for greater clarity and understanding represents sacred responsibilities and obligations”

(cited in Miller, 1993, p. 74). The idea that the spiritual and the intellectual are linked, let alone the same thing, is a very radical idea in our western culture and our current education system. Yet I believe this radical notion is the key to saving our education system.

Teaching Performing Arts

Teaching from this perspective has led me to question and examine all aspects of my teaching. One question I have been wrestling with is whether or not I should continue to teach technique. This method would say no, let the students figure it out for themselves. Yet it seems obvious to me that students need some grounding in fundamentals before they can begin to express themselves. Or do they? Is there a way to introduce technique that allows the students to adapt it to their own physical, cognitive and emotional make up? My experience of teaching technique is that most teachers teach from the rational discursive point of view, neglecting the unique emotional and physical needs of the student. These teachers teach by superimposing their ideas of what works onto the student—what works for me will work for you—creating carbon copies of themselves and stifling the student’s learning potential and artistic spontaneity. In the Zen Buddhist tradition, when one becomes completely focused on technique and method, then the practice dies and the person cannot grow. My alternative is that teachers allow the technique to breathe, to adapt and grow with the needs of the student. This way not only develops the student’s ability to think critically, but allows the technique to become integrated with the individual and a natural part of his expressive self. Externally imposed technique leads to malfunction and tension and consequently, artists who are unable to express their true selves. As a interesting aside, I have noticed a correlation between the student’s success rate with the method and whether or not they had been encouraged to think critically in other areas of their life. Those that have been seem much more at ease with the method and therefore more successful, while those that hadn’t become easily frustrated and have limited success with the method.

The present world of teaching voice is a perfect example of this phenomenon of kids stuck in technique. The western singing world wants us to believe that voices are only capable of singing in one register and that each voice is only able to express certain emotions. The teaching of these ideas has meant that the voice has lost its “fundamental capacity to give expression to the full range of psychological experience and consequently the voice has been stripped of its fundamental therapeutic value” (Newham 1993, p.90). In order to become whole we need to express all that we are, and in order to express all that we are we must allowed *to discover* all that we are. After many of years

of teaching, vocal therapist Alfred Wolfsohn determined that if the voice was to be employed as an expression of the true nature of the psyche, it had to be connected to all parts of the self, including the shadow. This meant that the voice had to be permitted to yell, scream, sob and give voice to the animalistic, primal, pre-verbal utterances which are part of the rightful expression of the shadow (cited in Newham, 1993, p.89). The only way to let kids express all they are is to give them the opportunity.

I am doing this today with my students at San Francisco State University. I am giving them the opportunity to sing out all their emotions, so that they are always true to their feelings and experiences. Instead of superimposing my ideas of dynamics and interpretation, I encourage the students to be in touch with their creative process so that we discover together how to express the emotions of the music. Working in this manner allows the students to take ownership and become responsible for their work. They now have a stake in the music, because it expresses who they are. The only technique I want to teach is one of learning to discover what works for oneself. Ultimately we all have to do that anyway. And maybe if we weren't all fed so much "how to do it" when we were kids and maybe if we learned how to figure things out on our own at an early age, we wouldn't all be still looking for some one or something external to solve our problems. Ultimately, a spiritual practice teaches us how to solve problems.

Discipline

One final thought about art as meditation. This practice cultivates and develops discipline. To have an ongoing spiritual practice demands dedication and discipline. In my experience it is too easy for humans to become distracted and discouraged. By pursuing a meditative practice we develop discipline which keeps us motivated and on track. Through discipline we are better able to express that which we want to say: express our ideas, our dreams, our joys and sorrows—all that makes up our life. Discipline helps focus the mind because it keeps us present to what our body is telling us, "we move into a more receptive mode of consciousness—the listening, intuitive mind" (Miller, 1996, p. 168). To be home in the body is to open up to the sensations that are present without a lot of comment—experiencing what is, and connecting to the physical. Our most direct way of experiencing ourselves is through the felt sense. How can we move and play if we are rigid? How can we let go and fall into our movements and our music if we are disconnected and fragmented? Practicing with discipline and dedication creates connection between the body, the mind and the emotions. And unless we are one in body mind and spirit, how can we possibly experience the spiritual?

CREATING SPACE TO TELL STORIES

One of the most profound ways that art as spiritual practice can transform is by giving us space in which to tell our story. By creating the space to hold my stories, I am able to own all my fragmented parts and start the journey towards wholeness. And only when I am whole do I become an equal and vital member of my communities. Writer and performance artist Nina Holzer (1997) believes there is huge potential for transformation when a person simply uses the creative process to tell her story. Furthermore, she believes that the course of one's life depends on one's skill as a storyteller. It is more important to the healing process to be with the experience as it unfolds—to become the process—than focus on the details of the story. For in becoming the process we “enter the experience of being” (Holzer, 1997, p. 20) no longer objectifying our experience which Holzer states creates the opportunity for healing. My friend, singer/songwriter Beth Bottorff, is an example of how telling stories can transform. By expressing her deep grief through the artform of songs, Beth engages in the alchemy of transforming a debilitating experience into one of strength and power. Each time she performs her music Beth not only enhances her own healing, she is also creating opportunities for others to heal by listening to her music. Beth (1998) now believes her mission is to use her music to inspire others in similar situations to tell their stories so they may heal. Like Beth, my friend singer Dante de Tablan believes that through storytelling we can begin to heal the scars of racism and homophobia. A gay Filipino, who is also a father and an active member of the Methodist church, Dante tells his story to all who will listen. He does this because he believes that by bringing awareness, building bridges, and creating opportunities for dialogue, he is healing the rifts in our communities.

David Bohm believes that telling stories and engaging in dialogue breaks the silence: stories and dialogue “break the spellbinding business of pretending that everything is normal, and break the repression of what we know is happening to our world” (cited in Gablik, 1995, p. 85). Through hearing each other's stories we engage in their emotions and conditions; we become acutely aware of each other and recognize our interconnection. The telling of each story becomes a catalyst for another to share, leading to the breaking of the veil of isolation. When giving voice to each person's story is the focus, we are lead to a different sort of “artistic practice—oriented toward the achievement of shared understandings and what David Levin calls, the moral—transformatory process” (cited in Gablik, 1991, p. 104). A different type of art emerges, when it originates from what Catherine Keller calls the “connective self—a more open model of personality which welcomes in the other” (cited in Gablik, 1991, p. 69). It is art by which embracing differences and similarities, dissolves isolation and alienation

creating relationship, partnership and community. Similar to what Satish Kumar believes is the role of art in India, our art becomes about “defining the communal, not the individual self and expressing the unity between humans and nature” (cited in Gablik, 1995, p. 135). *And transformation occurs from the compassion we experience when we see others as part of ourselves.*

The Painter's Dream

To demonstrate the power of telling stories I will now do just that (and in the process continue my own healing). About six years ago I was having a crisis of soul. I was constantly involved in creative projects that were telling cynical and negative stories. There was no joy, no celebration, no creation of community in the creative process. There was no life, no vitality and no beauty in me or the theatre I was creating. I was being drained emotionally, physically and spiritually. I realized that in order to change I needed to create a space to tell stories that I felt were important and that mattered. The story I needed to tell was the story of how my soul was dying because I wasn't listening to my heart. So I did and it was—and still is—one of the most important experiences of my life.

The story I told was inspired by the book *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. His story concerns a young shepherd who has a dream and goes on a great journey full of many struggles where he learns to listen to his heart and follow the signs. In our theatrical version, *The Painter's Dream*, the story centered around a painter who loses his colours and needs to learn to follow his heart in order to get them back. I think it's very profound that the story I needed to tell was also the story I needed to hear. By creating this piece I was not only giving space and form to my story, but I was also giving myself the opportunity to see what is possible when I listen to my heart and follow my dreams! My journey of creating and performing this piece paralleled the journey of the painter. In fact, this was true for the entire cast and creative team. Each of us needed to tell our version of the lessons of the painter. During the process I tried not to focus on expectations or outcomes, but on the journey. I wasn't worried about creating a clever production because I knew intuitively that if we were true to our process, our production in whatever form it took would be beautiful and meaningful. And it was! The experience made me realize that creativity and love are the same. Along the way I learned the lesson of the shepherd boy: when I follow my heart anything and everything is possible. My life changed forever. The transformation that eventually led me to JFKU began with this

show. I began to question everything that I did and believed in. I stopped working in theatre that didn't tell stories I believed in no matter what they paid. I quit my job and started a theatre company that is devoted to projects of this nature. "It's amazing what can happen from just one little dream" (Thorson, 1994, p.40); when you are true to your heart, when you follow your dreams and are brave enough to tell your story.

Creating Community

A powerful example of transformation and community building through storytelling is the summer theatre school, Artstrek. One of the many goals of Artstrek is "to provide a community setting which promotes the development, not only of theatre skills, but also competency skills including problem solving, leadership, negotiation, awareness, self-esteem, respect for others and evaluation of choices" (Classen, Gynane-Willis, 1997, p. 2). Many of the students participating in this program come from small rural communities where they often experience feelings of isolation because of their interests in the creative and performing arts. Artstrek provides students with a safe, nurturing environment in which to be themselves and many occasions in which they can share their stories without censure and judgment. For some, Artstrek is the first time their stories and experiences have been validated and honoured. Through sharing stories, students develop self-esteem *and* respect for others. Artstrek also gives some students their first experience of feeling that they belong and that they are part of a community. By interacting with other students and teachers in the creative process, Artstrek provides a wonderful opportunity for students and teachers to break down their walls of isolation and create a community in which they are important, vital and active members. Students and teachers alike learn the importance and power to create change when people come together in community. And everyone is given the opportunity to closely examine and question their beliefs and assumptions by being constantly exposed to the stories and ideas of others. Having participated in Artstrek as both a student and teacher I can attest to the transformative power of this school. Everyone I have met at Artstrek leaves with a truer sense of who he is and a deeper commitment to his visions.

Creating Community through Song

One of the best ways to create community is through group singing. Singing creates community because it is our most fundamental expression of who and what we are—it is "a means to contact the depths of the soul" (Newham, 1993, p. 40)—and when we share who we are with others, we break down the walls of difference and create

community. Singing is more potent than the spoken word because it is the expression of heightened emotions. The power of singing is that it takes all those who participate—singers and listeners—on a journey to new emotional places. When we experience group singing the beauty and power of all the voices coming together expressing one emotion takes us to a place of unity and wholeness. The transfer of energy that happens among singers, and between singers and witnesses, breaks down barriers and creates instead connections and community.

I am putting these ideas into practice at Sequoia High School in Redwood City where I work with a culturally diverse chorus. The chorus reflecting the diversity of the school—Latino, Afro-American, Asian-American, and Caucasian kids—is microcosm of the racial problems that exist in the school. One way that we are attempting to break down the barriers that exist between the groups (and therefore build community), is by learning folk songs from each of the different cultures. Students from the various culture teach us their songs and share with us the history of the music. By experiencing the emotions of the music, we come together; by connecting their emotions to the emotions that are being expressed in the music of the other cultures, students are able to recognize their similarities at a felt-sense level. I believe that experiencing connection at such deep physical and emotional level is the best way to tear down the walls of isolation and fragmentation and begin healing our communities and our world. We stop perceiving “them vs. us;” we become a community. The sharing of folk songs gives each culture a chance to tell their story. In the process the culture is validated and the stories are honoured.

Secondly, we are giving the students the opportunity to write songs that deal specifically with their issues—drugs, homework, gangs, violence, sex. I believe through our validation of their stories and experiences, we are healing and transforming the students and their communities.

ArtLink

The success of my play *The Painter’s Dream* led me to create a theatre company, ArtLink, dedicated to producing theatre that tells stories that need to be heard. Currently we are creating and producing two very different pieces: *If You Could Wear My Sneakers* which is interactive theatre for elementary school children that focuses on the international rights of children, and *Passage to the Dreaming*, which is a theatre piece exploring the stories and challenges facing high school students as they transition into

adulthood. By providing opportunities for both the storytellers and the witnesses to learn about each other I believe ArtLink is working towards creating one unified community.

It's All About Love

We have to bring these two worlds together. Art is the act of nonaggression. We have to live this art in our daily lives.

—Natalie Goldberg

The most significant lesson that I have learned—and that I continue to learn everyday—is that art as spiritual practice is all about love. To be dedicated to the creative process is to commit to the practice of love. A love not fickle and conditional, but complete and unconditional: existing without the constraints of time and boundaries. A love that transcends the limitations of the ego to encompass all of humanity and all of the natural world. When I live my life from the perspective of “art as spiritual practice” everything I do and everything I am becomes an act of love. To be dedicated to art as spiritual practice is to be dedicated to doing what one does best, using all the strengths that one has for the good of all. Whether it is making breakfast, making music, or making love, I recognize that all my actions are a reflection of my love for self and humanity. All my actions reflect my commitment to living with compassion and responsibility in my world of interconnections and relationships. Art, with all its inherent responsibilities *and* rewards, is no longer something I do for entertainment on the weekends: it is my life.

Art as spiritual practice teaches me that unconditional love is the key. As a teacher it has been my experience that all I need do to get results is unconditionally love my students. Another professor of mine back when I was an undergraduate music student, used to talk about how he expected the world of his students, but accepted what ever they were able to create unconditionally and without reservation. Ron Miller (1996) calls this unconditional love and acceptance “an open-hearted responsiveness, a teaching presence” (p. 31). Without this “open-hearted responsiveness” Miller believes that teaching is empty and of no value. I judge my success as a teacher by how much I am able to provide an opportunity for my students to experience the success—in whatever form that is for them—that occurs when they are loved unconditionally. My fellow teachers at Grant MacEwan College use to ask me what was my secret. How could I get

results out of even the most difficult of students? All I'd say in response is that I love all of them unconditionally.

The best thing about all this unconditional love is that the more I love my students, the more I am loved in return. This doesn't just apply to my students because the more I love myself, the more I love my world, and the more my world loves me back. And *most importantly* the more I love, the more my world—the more *our* world—transforms and heals. Contrary to popular belief, I don't believe it is hard to heal. I don't believe that the problems facing us are insurmountable. Yes, our world is full of huge obstacles and challenges, *but* we are capable. And living life as art is a first step. The power of art to transform grounds me and tells me that we can change and it is not too late.

*When will we teach our children in school
what they are?*

We should say to each of them:

Do you know what you are?

*You are a marvel. You are unique.
In all of the world there is no other
child like you.*

*In the millions of years that have passed
there has never been another
child like you.*

*And when you grow up,
can you harm another who is, like you,*

a marvel?

– Pablo Casals

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