

**CRY MY SISTER, CRY THE EARTH:
ART AS PRAYER TO INVOKE THE HEALING OF THE
ARTIST'S SISTER FROM BREAST CANCER**

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Art-as-meditation becomes the basic prayer form in the practice of creation spirituality.

Matthew Fox

This paper is autobiographical, based on a period where my sister and I successfully embarked on a healing journey separated by half the world. As an artist I utilised the painting of artifacts as tangible prayers to invoke healing. This case study is discussed under a number of headings based on the sequence of events. Such events stimulate many avenues of thought which give rise to some questions about accepted beliefs. Ultimately it is a story that unfolds through the art, and about the art that was inspired by the stages of my sister's healing.

THE CONTEXT

During 1996 both my sister and myself simultaneously encountered ill health. Faith¹ in Victoria, Australia, suffered from a very dangerous form of breast cancer which is 'one of the most lethal,'² the rare inflammatory cancer, which was said to have a life expectancy limited to months. At the same time I experienced Chronic Fatigue Syndrome which occurred at the start of a five months stay in America. I felt gratitude for the opportunity to freely exercise my creativity while fulfilling two fellowships at artist's residencies, however, I also felt frustrated at not being able to support my sister in a tangible and physical manner.

PAINTING AS PRAYER

To resolve my perplexity I took refuge in painting, which for a long time has fulfilled my needs for solace and expression, as well as being a natural therapy. Because of my own weakened condition I needed to avoid strenuous activities. The age-old technique of egg-tempera painting with its

patient layering of soft glazes was perfect for my physical and expressive requirements on three counts.

Firstly, the pellucid egg glazes contributed a natural luminosity to the hues, appropriate for the subject matter of healing by prayer; secondly, the demanding technique of applying layer after translucent layer itself became a prolonged prayer, a form of praying without ceasing; and thirdly, the genre implicitly suggested the rich and long tradition of those 'vessels of the spirit,'³ medieval icon paintings. This once hallowed practice utilized symbols which transcended the mundane as an expressi guidance.

Creating art from a place of reverential introspection seemed to increase the vitality of the intended healing transmission. The art itself became a prayer made manifest. The expression of my intention to pray for healing seemed to be not only augmented, but magnified through the vehicle of art. As Caroline Myss contends, 'What does healing through prayer actually mean? It means invoking the energy of God to "grace us" in a way that allows us to feel more powerful than the illness.'⁴

THE POSSIBILITY OF SOUL COMMUNION

The decision to work with authentic self revelatory images meant that I would allow myself to be guided by my instinctual visions and trust their intrinsic value. The healing prayer seemed to emanate from a sort of soul-communion.

My prayers aimed to expel and purify attendant negativity, to support my sister's medical ordeal and her courageous undertaking to heal herself. The possibility that I could commune with my sister's psyche seemed perfectly plausible at the time. This notion would seem to be echoed by many old customs that a person's mind can intervene to heal not only his or her own body but also that of another individual who may be quite far away. For instance, the legendary Persian physician Avicenna (A.D. 980-1037) stated,

The imagination of a man can act not only on his own body but even others and very distant bodies. It can fascinate and modify them; make them ill, or restore them to health.⁵

Likewise, Robert Lawlor records,

Aborigines at the turn of the century spoke of projecting psychic powers... that were unhindered by time or space - powers that could bring healing, life, death, and knowledge, or transfer thoughts.

The lens of the painting process amplified my internal vision, transcended space and time and perhaps touched on another realm of communion.

ART AS EXPRESSION OF INNER VISION

My expression arose out of compassion and I allowed the art activity itself to 'lead' me to the visual symbols which best expressed that intention. Without forcing the imagery I embraced the process of allowing the symbols to arise in their own timing and of their own volition. Sometimes new combinations of familiar symbols intermingled and sometimes unanticipated symbols appeared. The art was a vehicle making palpable the reality of my compassion for my sister's travail. In alignment with the notion that 'Art, like life, is born from our deepest roots and centres', the paintings reflect the countenance of human expression. 'For art is life.'⁶

This inward approach to painting requires trust in the inner process. It can be related to the Zen principle of being, which advises, 'Let it settle itself - without external moulding, or cultivation.'⁷ A similar notion is elucidated by Matthew Fox when he states 'whatever can be truly expressed in its proper meaning must emerge from within a person and pass through the inner form. It cannot come from outside to inside of a person, but must emerge from within.'⁸ In preference to enforcing logical solutions, I allowed the images to emerge in a haptic manner, as a *natural* process from internal meditation. The next step was apply the artist's prerogative of selecting from the chaotic contents to portray what was my 'truth' in paint.⁹

My goal was to avoid painting the sensational, the horrific or macabre because I had no wish to exacerbate my sister's condition, although I was aware that in the realms of contemporary art, an angst approach would have given me and my work 'kudos.' Neither did I want to document the process of Faith's medical history by merely illustrating the events. On the other hand I wished to avoid the sentimental, decorative and inane art that is commercially popular, because reliance on stereotypical imagery does not address the heart.

I endeavoured to employ the vital significance of symbols to create numinance while incorporating a consensual aesthetic along with the

technical skills gained from long practice as a professional artist and lecturer in fine art. Defining numinance (from Latin *numen*, god), as 'something "wholly other" (*ganz andere*), something basically and totally different' to prosaic cognizance, creates a identification of deeper meaning, which seems to resonate in the individual as 'soul recognition.' According to Eliade, such 'experience [is] numinous for [it is] induced by an aspect of divine power.'¹⁰

Symbols with archetypal resonance were enlisted as an agent to communicate deep concern. As I attempted to reveal that which was true to my own inner vision, I approximated the archetypal, if not romantic ideal of the artist's role, that of disclosing the inner life as an epiphany; a position incongruous with the ideologies of contemporary art. For as Suzi Gablik outlines,

In our culture it is no easy task to accept the validity of experiences that are called 'visionary.' The modern personality is much more respectful of the rational aspects of the psyche. We have no prescribed way to do the vision quest, no ceremonies for meeting the gods in the magic circle; the faculties with which we might have joined them have atrophied.¹¹

SYNCHRONOUS AND PREDICTIVE SYMBOLS

Even though produced at a great distance, the symbolism in the artworks often *predicted* the events that unfolded. The paintings not only followed the stages of my sister's progress, but on many occasions I was surprised by symbolic imagery which I later found to be coincidental to my sister's psychological or physical changes.

Following the first stage paintings with interpretive symbols of denial, repression and projected anger, there came a series depicting the fighting of monsters signifying determination and courage to fight the cause of her malaise. Lastly protective symbols emerged under the aegis of prayer to safeguard Faith's life force, before the final appearance of, and the acceptance of, sanctity and grace.

After the initial stage (denial), each new phase that emerged from my meditative art-making emerged *before* the change in my sister's attitude. In most cases the new symbology was confirmed up to fourteen days after its emergence when I spoke to my sister by telephone.

An example of predictive vision follows. While undergoing months of radiation and chemotherapy to shrink the tumour before being operated on, my sister had been mourning the imminent loss of her breast. She suffered

attendant fears of loss of her feminine identity and felt sorrow remembering the pleasures of breast feeding her babies.

The 'dark night of the soul' that Faith experienced was distilled in the paintings through symbols such as the dog (a metaphor for Cerberus, the hound guarding the portals of death) waiting in the darkness of the underworld (the unconscious), while the female is as yet blind to the possibility of spiritual transcendence and remains fixated by her cut-off breast (signifying identification with material causes and outcomes).

Then, unexpectedly I painted her as the Indian goddess Kali in her devouring aspect, spear aloft, riding a tiger to strike at the portals of her restriction - in this case, the patriarchal medical institution, the great augers of doom. My symbols had signified the turn of events from an attitude of victimisation to one of fighting the foe. They portrayed my perception of the guises that the antagonistic cancer could take.

Two and a half weeks later my sister likened her breast to 'an old tooth'. She said that it was 'time to get rid of it.' It was a time for big changes, when rather than attempting to thwart the situation through resistance, she would turn and battle the cause. This was a major turnaround after five months of denial. The predictive nature of Kali brandishing a spear was in fact a perfect symbol for this confrontive action.

APPLICATION TO THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM

Surprising synchronicities were found to exist by Leonard Shlain when he compared the historic parallels between new phases in art and new breakthroughs in physics. He provides evidence that not only do astonishing correlations exist throughout history, but that 'artists repeatedly conjured up revolutionary images *before* physicists formulated visionary new configurations of the world.'¹²

Without straining credibility, this precognitive ability can be verified from a hypothetical place in physics. 'Spacetime continuum' is the concept that a simultaneous conception of the past, present and future is possible. 'Each observer, as his time passes, discovers so to speak, new slices of spacetime which appear to him as successive aspects of the material world, though the ensemble of events constituting spacetime exist prior to his knowledge of them.'¹³ Shlain establishes this phenomenon as the ability to connect with the future. 'When vision is truly *all at once*, that is, when it can see the space time condition, it can perceive all the durations simultaneously and can, therefore, foretell the future.'¹⁴

The possibility that the practice of art making could have induced a consciousness producing a vision that is 'all at once' is but one speculation, however an attractive one for this argument. The purposive nature of the production of the paintings points to a certain connecting influence which transcends time. These synchronistic parallels lead to interesting questions about the nature of our belief in 'reality' and to explorations about the healing power of compassion, and by extension, the possibility of the interconnectedness of all life, with implications for planetary healing.

In accordance with the law of cosmic correspondence - 'as above, so below' - disease may reflect states of psychological or spiritual imbalance. At another level we may question whether there is a correlation between the high incidence of breast cancer and the imbalance of the collective feminine, and by implication, the suffering of 'Mother' Earth from an overly masculinised onslaught. Grace Gawler, the remarkable woman who so turned around my sister's evolution, says, 'Our planet is also ill. She too, the Earth Mother, has the early signs of breast cancer and is in need of healing.'¹⁵

ENDURING THE 'DARK NIGHT'

It is precisely twelve months since my sister was diagnosed as having cancer. She now believes she is cancer-free, subject to continuing medical surveillance. I am proud of her courage and endurance and to know that through all her tribulations she has emerged strong. Ultimately the value which shines like a beacon is the spiritual strengthening that this experience has wrought.

According to Caroline Myss, 'Illness is often a catalyst of spiritual transformation.' Enduring the 'dark night of the soul' 'confronts fears and beliefs, consciously pursues the shadow side and challenges false gods.' She reports an AIDS patient to have said, 'I believe ironically that this virus has made me spiritually healthy. I live more fully alive each day than I ever did before, and I feel a connection to a place that is more real to me than this earth and this life.'¹⁶

FAITH'S RESPONSE

Recently Faith stayed with me and after a week she said she was 'ready' to see the paintings. As we journeyed through the symbols of healing, preserved in paint and ink, we shared tears, moved by her 'story.' The

power of the paintings amplified the communication of the revelatory meaning of her quest.

The unveiling of the stages of healing, especially those in the area of anger, denial and sacrifice, brought into focus issues which she had buried or not brought to consciousness before. She said that she now saw her whole journey in a new perspective. She was most enthusiastic about the paintings themselves and the possibilities of publishing them to a wider audience. She plans to be present at the public exhibition I plan to hold in 1997.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have provided documented opinions which indicate prayer, and indeed art, can and may heal. Because of the evolving and intuitive nature of this case study, it was not possible to apply the standard scientific method of using controls and replication to test the validity of my conclusions - ie, whether my acts of painting served to heal my sister or not.

Perhaps Faith recovers through her own will to live. My role may have been that of a surrogate mother, fulfilling the nurturing needs of a sick child. In those terms I feel that I fulfilled a psychological need, and created a shamanistic transference by way of magnification of intentions using art as the vehicle. Even if art was merely an agency for my expression of concern, I can affirm Shaun Mc Niff's sentiment when he says, 'Through art I was able to bring grace into my life.'¹⁷

In a sense my sister and I have been through this trial together, for as Plato said, 'Nothing creates 'in and by itself.' When people and things interact, they are in the process of becoming '*for each other*.'¹⁸ Whatever the supposition, the fact remains that the paintings now stand as manifestations of my personal prayers.

All you do, think, or read can be made into prayer. Great music, art, literature, ... are, or can be, forms of prayer. What is gained in prayer can never be lost. Prayer is eternity breathing in time. Prayer is 'the one thing needful'.¹⁹

(My thanks to my sister for permission to publish this material.)

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