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## ***Touching Creativity's Deepest Source***

I want to try to go to the heart of something here, something at the core of my life. And, I believe, the same something (which is not a thing) is the deepest source of creativity and the expressive arts.

I have written in the past that a focus on creativity – the creative spirit in all of our lives – is one of the defining characteristics or family resemblances of the field of multi-modal expressive arts and expressive arts therapy<sup>1</sup>. What I am going to try and clarify now is what I feel is at the heart of creativity. At least I can point in that direction.

The only way I know to get to something so essential is through metaphor; metaphor will be the primary vehicle of this essay. So... I shall begin by telling you a wonderful story, one of my favorites, that is found in the Prologue to the book *Free Play*<sup>2</sup>.

*A new flute was invented in China. A Japanese master musician discovered the subtle beauties of its tone and brought it back home, where he gave concerts all around the country. One evening he played with a community of musicians and music lovers who lived in a certain*

town. At the end of the concert, his name was called. He took out the new flute and played one piece. When he was finished, there was silence in the room for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

The next day, as this master was packing to leave, the musicians approached him and asked how long it would take a skilled player to learn the new flute. "Years," he said. They asked if he would take a pupil so that he could come back and teach the others, and he agreed. After he left, they decided among themselves to send a young man, a brilliantly talented flautist, sensitive to beauty, diligent and trustworthy. They gave him money for his living expenses and for the master's tuition, and sent him on his way to the capital, where the master lived.

The student arrived and was accepted by his teacher, who assigned him a single, simple tune. At first he received systematic instruction, but he easily mastered all the technical problems. Now he arrived for his daily lesson, sat down, and played his tune – and all the master could say was, "Something lacking." The student exerted himself in every possible way; he practiced for endless hours; yet day after day, week after week, all the master said was, "Something lacking." He begged the master to change the tune, but the master said no. The daily playing, the daily "something lacking" continued for months on end. The student's hope of success and fear of failure became magnified, and he swung from agitation to despondency.

Finally the frustration became too much for him. One night he packed his bag and slunk out. He continued to live in the capital city for some time longer. He tried practicing other tunes on the new flute, but he felt himself that there was something still lacking. He began drinking, and finally ran out of money. Impoverished, he drifted back to his own part of the country. Ashamed to show his face to his former colleagues, he found a hut far out in the countryside. He still possessed his flutes, still played, but found no new inspiration in music. Passing farmers heard him play and sent their children to him for beginner's lessons. He lived this way for years.

One morning there was a knock at his door. It was the oldest past-master from his town, along with the youngest student. They told him that tonight they were going to have a concert, and they had all decided it would not take place without him. With some effort they overcame his feelings of fear and shame, and almost in a trance he picked up a flute and went with them. The concert began. As he waited behind the stage in the shadow of a pillar, no one intruded on his inner silence. Finally, at the end of the concert, his name was called. He stepped out

onto the stage in his rags. He looked down at his hands, and saw that he had chosen the new flute.

Now he realized that he had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. He sat down and played the same tune he had played so many times for his teacher in the past. When he finished, there was silence for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard, speaking softly from the back of the room: "Like a god!"<sup>13</sup>

The first few times I read this story out loud my eyes would inevitably tear and my voice waver when I came to the end, when the flute player began to play, like a god, with nothing to gain and nothing to lose. My tears remind me of other times when I was moved so deeply, and had such a strong inner response.

There is a great deal that can be said about this story, about all that it evokes and all that can be drawn from it, ranging from creative blocks to inspiration and "letting go." The whole book, *Free Play*, is devoted to an elaboration of this subject, and it does an excellent job. We do not need to attempt to do that here.

Rather, I want to focus on a specific part, and shed light on these related questions:

Can we say anything more about the place where our flute player stands, with nothing to gain and nothing to lose?

What does this place tell us about the deepest sources of creativity?

Why, when the story reaches this point, am I affected so strongly?

In order to proceed, I turn to Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher, peace activist and poet-writer. I have long been struck with Thich Nhat Hanh's creativity, the quality and volume of his writings, especially his poems, short stories and historical novels. He is not only an important spiritual teacher for our times (he has founded a growing new school of Engaged Buddhism), he is also an artist who continually shares his creative works with us.

Thich Nhat Hanh's book of collected poems, *Call Me By My True Names*, begins with a frontispiece:

If you touch deeply the historical dimension,  
 you find yourself in the ultimate dimension.  
 If you touch the ultimate dimension,  
 you have not left the historical dimension<sup>4</sup>.

The poems are then divided into two sections in the book: there are 48 poems under Historical Dimension, and 67 poems under Ultimate Dimension.

In another book, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains these two dimensions as a fundamental Buddhist teaching of two truths.

According to Buddhism, there are two kinds of truth, relative or worldly truth (*samvriti satya*) and absolute truth (*paramartha satya*). We enter the door of practice through relative truth. We recognize the presence of happiness and the presence of suffering... and one day we realize that suffering and happiness are "not two<sup>5</sup>."

"Not two" is a reference to non-dualism. At this point we have a dilemma, because all of our language and thought is dualistic. But before we face that, let us look the terms we have before us:

|                           |                    |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Historical dimension      | Ultimate dimension |
| Relative or worldly truth | Absolute truth     |
| Dualism                   | Non-dualism        |

I believe it is helpful to draw from another tradition here, Taoism, which speaks of:

|                         |         |
|-------------------------|---------|
| The ten thousand things | The Tao |
|-------------------------|---------|

Taoism reminds us that the Tao that can be spoken of is not the true Tao. And yet, all of the traditions continue to speak. But they speak in metaphors, in poetry, in story, and when they try to get even closer, they speak in negatives (non-dualism, not-self...).

We now will turn to a second story, as Thich Nhat Hanh tells it at this point to illustrate the two dimensions of our lives; he repeats it in slightly different ways in different texts<sup>6</sup>. The following is my own retelling of the story:

*Once upon a time there was a wave that lived in a great ocean. The wave was content and enjoyed life. It loved the wind and the feeling of its spray, the sunshine in the day and the moon at night. It delighted in the sea birds that flew overhead and sometimes rested on its shoulders. And it played with the fish that swam and darted in its waters. Even the rain and storms were exciting to our wave. It talked to the other waves nearby, and sometimes moved as though it were dancing. The wave hummed and sang happy wave songs as it moved along the surface of the ocean.*

*One day, after a distant storm, the wave rose high into the air and could see land far away. As it moved a little closer and the land got clearer, it began to see a distant shore. Then, to its horror, waves could be seen crashing down and disappearing on the sand and rocks. After recovering from its shock, our wave began to feel afraid and confused. The wave's songs became subdued and sad, and its undulating movements more pensive and slow.*

*After a short while another larger wave nearby moved up close beside. It called out: "Hello! You look distressed and upset, and I hear your sad songs. It's such a beautiful day, whatever could be the matter?"*

*Our wave replied: "Oh, you don't understand what's going on. Look, rise up high and look far ahead. All of us waves are crashing and disappearing on the shore. And we're all moving slowly towards it. Soon we'll all be gone, we'll be nothing. This is terrible!"*

*"Yes," said the second wave, "I know about the shore, I've seen it. But it's you that doesn't understand. You're not only a wave... you're the water."*

*Our wave was startled by this statement. It began to repeat to itself softly: "The water... the water..."*

*And the wave looked down into its watery depths, and felt the dark stillness deep within. Gradually our wave realized that it was true. It was a wave that was going to crash on the shore, but at the same time... it was the water.*

We have to be careful in hearing this story that we don't take the metaphor too literally. The water does not imply a oneness or a One. The Buddha never taught that there is a One that underlies differences – and that we should come to realize that Oneness. Rather the Buddha, like all true mystics, taught that the ultimate dimension is "not-one, and not-two." This is the teaching

of non-duality, and it can only be spoken of by using negatives or with metaphors. The path that the Buddha taught to this realization is through mindfulness meditation.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes about the wave and the water story in the context of meditation:

We come to the practice of meditation seeking relief from suffering, and meditation can teach us how to transform our suffering and obtain basic relief. But the deepest kind of relief is the realization of nirvana. There are two dimensions to life, and we should be able to touch both. One is like a wave, and we call it the historical dimension. The other is like the water, and we call it the ultimate dimension, or nirvana. We usually touch just the wave, but when we discover how to touch the water, we receive the highest fruit that meditation can offer<sup>7</sup>.

Buddhism, in all its many forms that have evolved over the globe, stresses meditation practice, particularly here-and-now, in the immanent present moment, mindfulness meditation. This is said to lead to insight, insight into the truth of the teachings and insight into how to live our lives. (This is the tradition of *vipassana* or insight meditation.) Thich Nhat Hanh's role as a Zen meditation teacher is central to his many other related roles as artist-poet-writer, peace activist, and founder and leader of a new school of Buddhism.

A group of Western meditators with different practices were asked to answer the question, "Why do you meditate?" Various answers were offered until the metaphor was offered, "Coming home." On this they all agreed, meditation is about coming home<sup>8</sup>. Ultimately, meditation is not about a new, different, higher or deeper state of consciousness. Meditation is a practice to awaken to something that has always been with us, and that can be expressed by the metaphor of - home.

To return to Thich Nhat Hanh's writings:

The world of waves... is characterized by birth and death, ups and downs, being and non-being. A wave has a begin-

ning and an end, but we cannot ascribe these characteristics to the water. In the world of water, there is no birth or death, no being or non-being, no beginning or end. When we touch the water, we touch reality in its ultimate dimension and are liberated from all of these concepts<sup>9</sup>.

A particular power of this teaching is that these two dimensions of our being are always there. The realization of the world of water, of the ultimate dimension, is the realization of what has always been with us. This is why the meaning of "Buddha" is one who has woken up, is now awake to the ultimate dimension. And is liberated from all concepts!

To be liberated from all concepts - no wonder that the Buddha is said to have wondered whether it would be worthwhile to teach. Would anyone understand? How can liberation from all concepts be transmitted? In the Zen tradition there is the story of the flower sermon, when the Buddha sat for his dharma lecture and silently held up one flower. And one of his disciples smiled.

We need the relative world of the wave, but we also need to touch the water, the ground of our being, to have real peace and joy. We shouldn't allow relative truth to imprison us and keep us from touching absolute truth. Looking deeply into relative truth, we penetrate the absolute<sup>10</sup>.

The absolute, ultimate dimension, the world of water, is so close to us, so present all of the time. I am suggesting that this "world of water," the ground of our being, is the "home" that the Western meditators speak of. Thich Nhat Hanh, always a poet, expresses this teaching with a *gatha*, a verse for meditation. He tells us to say it to ourselves silently, the first line when we inhale, the second when we exhale, and so on.

I have arrived.  
I am home.  
In the here.  
In the now.  
I am solid.  
I am free.  
In the ultimate, I dwell<sup>11</sup>.



Let us come back now to our flute player, playing "like a god." Nachmanovitch began his book *Free Play* by recounting this story. In the last pages of the book we find:

With his very life at stake every time he picks up his tools, the artist can do his real work only by recovering his original mind-of-play, which has nothing to gain and nothing to lose. ...The effect is metabolic rather than conceptual...we disappear and become a carrier wave, a vehicle for the music that plays us... Addiction, procrastination, and fear are blown away by this carrier wave, and our music becomes a message about big Self. This is when we are able, finally, to disappear<sup>12</sup>.

This disappearing, which is "metabolic rather than conceptual," parallels the somatic or metabolic metaphor of touching the ultimate, touching nirvana. We thus touch the deepest source of our creativity. This being touched is then embodied in our music, our art, in the way we walk, the way we breathe, and... with our tears.

The secret is to drop it - whatever it may be. This is not deprivation but enrichment. It is dropping off hope and fear and letting our much vaster, simpler, true self show through, letting ourselves be ambushed by the great Tao that moves forever through this world<sup>13</sup>.

"Ambushed by the great Tao" - so that is what happens to our flute player, when with nothing to gain and nothing to lose he raises his flute to his lips and plays like a god. The Tao that ambushes him is the deepest source of creativity. And the Tao is the water, the ultimate dimension, beyond dualisms, beyond concepts. I believe this ambush also has the feeling tone of coming home.



At the beginning of this essay I wrote of trying to go to the heart of something at the core of my life, and at the core of creativity. I believe our metaphoric journey has brought us as close to that place as it can. Like the finger pointing to the moon, we are pointing in the right direction. The artistic image I leave you with

is of another flute player. It is the sixth of the Ten Ox Herding Pictures of the Zen Buddhist tradition, depicting stages of our life's journey in both the historical and absolute dimensions. It is titled, "Riding the Ox Home"<sup>14</sup>.



## Notes

- 1) Weller, Jack S. "The Expressive Arts Therapy 'Family.'" Newsletter of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association. I, 1, 4 – 5, 1995.
- 2) Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: The Power of Improvisation*. New York, 1990
- 3) Tarcher/Putnam. 2-3. Another version of this story is in: Leggett, T. *Zen and the Ways*. Rutland, Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle. 230-31, 1987
- 4) Thich Nhat Hanh. *Call Me By My True Names*. Berkeley, CA, Parallax Press, 1999
- 5) Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. New York, Broadway Books. 121, 1998
- 6) Op.cit., 124-5. See also: Thich Nhat Hanh. *Touching Peace*. Berkeley, CA, Parallax Press. 117, 1992
- 7) Thich Nhat Hanh. 117, 1992
- 8) LeShan, L. *How to Meditate*. New York, Bantam Books. 1., 1974
- 9) Thich Nhat Hanh. 117-118, 1992
- 10) Thich Nhat Hanh. 125, 1998
- 11) Program for "A Day of Mindfulness" with Thich Nhat Hanh, Oakland, CA, September 2, 2000
- 12) Nachmanovitch. 192, 1990
- 13) Op.cit., 194.
- 14) Reys, P., Senzaki, N. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Rutland, Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle. 178, 1957

## Sally Atkins

### Contemplating a Bridge

On the wall above my writing desk hangs an old photograph, the picture of a bridge. A long curve of stones nestles into the steep sides of the mountain. A single arch spans the whitewater of a narrow, rushing river. The bridge seems almost a part of the mountain, anchored as it is to the mountain's sides, the same gray granite. There is a participation here of bridge with mountain and river.

My original intention for this article was an exploration of crossing boundaries as a creative activity in itself. I am interested in how, in the arts, we can cross many kinds of boundaries while, at the same time, attempting to understand and honour the unique embeddedness of artistic practice in differing cultural, historical, and personal contexts. The ambitious breadth of such an effort was a wish to honour a scholar whose breadth, depth and skill in crossing disciplines, cultures, and continents is unmatched in this field. This exploration is also part of an ongoing personal journey, both literally and intellectually, that has led me to experience boundary crossings through the arts in cultural contexts vastly different from my own.