

Daily Meditation 6-23-25

Art, Artist & Work in a Time of a Collective Dark Night

Good morning.

In my Saturday daily meditation, and in today's, Monday, I am emphasizing the role of the artist as prophet and sustainer in difficult times like ours, or really any time.

And of course, I'm not alone in this. Walter Brueggemann's *Prophetic Imagination* was a very important, well-received book a number of years ago. And my pedagogy that I developed over the years, includes, as a sine qua non, "Art As Meditation," that from the beginning in my master's program in Creation Spirituality, which I designed at Mundelein College. It ran there for seven years, and then ran in Holy Names College for 12 years, and then 9 years at the University of Creation Spirituality, and then two years in the YELLOW program for inner city youth, high school youth. And all those programs and workshops and retreats that I conducted over the years, Art As Meditation was an integral part of everything we did.

And for me, it really started as an intuition. But also came from the study that I was assigned to do by the Catholic Bishops of America, believe it or not, back in 1975 or so, I think it was -- where they did a national survey and about who should do this research on spirituality and education. And my *Musical Mystical Bear* book had been out and about, well-received that time, my first book. And so I was chosen.

And what I realized at the beginning is that you cannot do spirituality. You cannot teach spirituality in what I call the European model of education. And by that I meant an exclusively rational model of education, which, of course, comes from the Enlightenment, comes from Descartes: "I think, therefore I am." And it excludes the body and the heart, and excludes wisdom. It's all about knowledge. Thinking is wisdom. Is something more inclusive than knowledge. It is also feminine in the Bible, whether in Greek (Sophia), or in Hebrew, (Hochma), and in Latin (Sapientia.)

So the need for wisdom and the need to educate our hearts as well as our heads, is essential for our species' survival today.

So in designing my program, my first person I hired was a dancer, Tria Thompson, Sister Tria Thompson, who led us in circle dances every morning for seven years. And then

other artists to teach Art As Meditation to get that right brain going, what Einstein calls the intuitive brain.

But I also discovered this wonderful book at this time, when I was launching the program, by M.C. Richards, a renowned potter who later became a painter as well. She's a poet and a philosopher. *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*. This is, I think, one of the early editions. It's the one that I read, it's all marked up, lots and lots of markings. And then 25 years after this was born and gifted to the world, there was a new version, if you will. An updated, and actually 25th anniversary edition. With it, happens to be a forward by yours truly, because I was so moved by this book. It so grounded my intuition about Art As Meditation, that I wrote a lengthy review of it for Spirituality Today magazine, which is reproduced in my book, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, on Art As Meditation. And I cite her in that book and walk people through it, through the most striking parts of it. For me, I called it the Bible of Art As Meditation.

And again, to me, it's significant that it came from a practicing artist, a woman very committed to pottery. And indeed, I hired her, after a number of years, to be on our faculty at Holy Names College and then at the University of Creation Spirituality. And she was a beloved and esteemed teacher. She taught Play As Meditation, she taught Poetry As Meditation, and had students literally make their own books, physically speaking, as well as the content.

And we were good friends. We taught together in Australia. We visited Ayers Rock there, the "navel of the universe" as the aboriginals understand it. And her very first paintings were of that rock. She painted three paintings, so moved by that experience. But I want to share with you some of her wonderful teachings on Art As Meditation. And these are the elements from her book, first published in 1964.

The first one is that bodiliness and passion are part of art. It engages the senses in a total and disciplined effort. *It is in our bodies*, she writes, *that redemption takes place. It is the physicality of the crafts that pleases me. I learn through my hands and my eyes and my skin, what I could never learn through my brain.*

M.C. had a doctorate from the University of California in Berkeley, and her first job was at the University of Chicago, a very prestigious place to teach. But she left after a year. She was so fed up with the excessive rationality, the emphasis on exams, the competition. And she joined the Black Mountain College, an experimental college in North Carolina. She was there for a number of years, and she taught alongside with and became good friends of people like Buckminster Fuller. John Cage and Merce Cunningham were also faculty there. They remained friends the rest of their lives. In fact, in the 25th anniversary

for her book *Centering*, which we held in San Francisco, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, came and performed as part of the celebration. And a celebration it was.

And she says: *Incarnation, bodying forth. Is this not our whole concern? The bodying forth of our sense of life? Is this not a sense fully as actual as our sense of touch, which quickens, not only in our skin, but in our hearts. When we say that we are touched by another's kindness? That is what form is: the bodying forth, the bodying forth of the living vessel in the shapes of clay.*

So this artist's take on incarnation is so important, and she brings it right into the practice of living vessels, forming living vessels in the shape of clay, our own incarnations.

A second dimension that comes out of her *Centering* book, it is an iconic and classic book, is Claudio Naranjo talking about the way of the prophets. Now she does not say this, I'm bringing Claudio Naranjo, the psychologist, in. But she does talk about -- he talks about breaking the habituation, getting too used to things, and how imagination breaks through and Art As Meditation breaks through.

And I quote Rabbi Heschel, who says that *the prophet is charged with agitation and anguish, and has a spirit of non-acceptance. This moves the artist or the prophet more than peace. And how it's not asceticism that is the practice of the Biblical person, or the prophet; rather, the battle against hardness of heart, callousness, insensitivity. And the prophets stir us by their passion and their enlivened imagination*, he says.

All this stirred Mary Richards too in her art. She talks about visiting a beach in North Carolina, and observing the racial bias that was there. *The irony blinded me like a too bright light, as I saw those pale faces trying to get black, and in their laws, not letting black faces drink from their faucets. My entire feeling about the sun was affected. That's what I mean: you take it all in, the politics and the recreation and the social attitudes, the environment and the spring. How can we keep our recreation and our politics and our philosophy separate? How can we not see what our eyes behold? As our perceptions become more and more coordinated, we grow in justice.*

As our perceptions become more and more core coordinated, we grow in justice. And that's what Art As Meditation does. It awakens our perceptions, and it starts connecting them, getting them to connect to other parts of our minds and our hearts and our politics and our value system. So these are just a few of the gifts that M.C. Richards gives us from her book *Centering*.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.