

Life-Art and The Rational Mind
Reflections on the meaning and purpose of Life/Art work

By Dennis McDermott

When people ask me: “what is the point of this movement practice you teach?” I find it difficult to answer. Looking back on my own work, I can say for sure: yes I provided experiences that were enlivening and moving, a safe place in which to play creatively, to explore the mystery of being alive in a body.

And yet, was it enough? Talking to a participant a couple of weeks after a workshop, I hear about deep-rooted problems, abandonment, body-image, depression. The brief life-art experience – which she says she really enjoyed – seems to me like a little excursion, a day’s outing from the painful realities. Did she take home with her anything to ease or make meaningful the pain I sense? I don’t know.

I talk to a friend of mine, an experienced therapist. She says: “you can’t tell. Their journey intersected with yours in the workshop – and maybe that was *exactly* the encounter they needed at the time. There could be a seed there that will grow in some way later.” But I am dissatisfied with this answer - I have a strong desire to **know**, I want to see results. The uncertainty allows my internal critic to belittle what I have offered. I find myself wishing I was teaching a skill that was more measurable or that there was something I could hand out at the end of the workshop – like a doctor offering a prescription - that they could take home with them so that their healing could continue. ***Life-Art Medicine – to be taken twice a day. Do not exceed the stated dose. If symptoms persist consult your practitioner.*** But a workshop is more like a performance than a yoga class. It is not a set of moves that can be taught in the studio and practiced at home. It is more like a play in which everyone participates in the action, including the audience. In the safe play-space created, people give voice or physical form to hidden and unacknowledged parts of themselves. I know this from my own training experience in California: - day after day and week after week in the studio diving deeper into the language of art. This was art enriching life – I have seldom felt so alive and creative; and the sharing of this work created a strong sense of community among the students and between the students and the teachers.

But afterwards, my “normal” world reasserts its claims on my awareness. Although I have allies, most of the UK that I know feels like an alien environment for the Work. My old friends and family are sceptical or simply puzzled about Life-Art. Their prevailing wisdom is that therapy is for the sick, that self-exploration, unless you can demonstrate some benefit, is self-indulgent, “navel-gazing”. An arts- and body-based approach to life challenges a deep-rooted rational/moral world view. Yet the rational/moral element is part of me too. And reflecting on the Immersion Training, that part of me asks, just as it did about my own work as a teacher,: “How does it fit?” and “What was the point?”

As I try to integrate my new training into the roles I am accustomed to play, my habitual ways of being and interacting in the world I experience a gap between me as Life-Art facilitator and my “normal” (i.e. habitual UK) identity. When I assume the mantle of teacher or facilitator it feels like adopting a specialised persona. Once the mantle is on I feel quite comfortable in the role but the transition to and from it can be awkward - it is as if two personalities were struggling to find a way of living together in harmony. What are these personalities like? I like to think of my habitual rational self as a man in a watch tower, high above the flux of experience. From this vantage point he can look down and see patterns “objectively”. But my Life-Art self is swimming in the waters of experience, feeling his way with his skin and his flesh. He is embodied and his world is teeming with life. He expresses pain and joy freely, responding to life from inner necessity. Art is like this, spontaneous in its origin *creating* meaning in the moment, not simply discovering or embroidering a pre-existing Truth. It is its own justification, not needing explanation in the language of reason.

So there we have a polarity – two aspects of me which are also played out in the society I live in: a life-art personality who speaks an imaginal language on the one hand and a rational personality who speaks a logical-analytical language on the other. And it seems there really is no way of translating from one language to the other. Tamalpa graduates often struggle to explain in objective language what the Work is about. A frequent cry is: “I *know* how wonderful this work is – why is it so difficult to explain it to other people?”

Now it would be very easy simply to dismiss the rational intellectual tendency and advocate a life of life/art. But I would like to put in a word for the rational man (male of course!). In progressive circles he is often cast as the villain of our times. Wasn’t it rational Descartes who started off science and the whole mess that technology and capitalism have got us into? Wasn’t it rational men who in terror of the flesh, established Patriarchy and subjugated women? Yet this faculty which uniquely allows humans to model and predict, can’t be intrinsically evil. There is a danger that, in rushing to the Life-Art body, we neglect and undervalue the head. Stephen Levine, in “Poiesis and Post-Modernism” describes a Dionysian-Apollonian, Artist-Philosopher dichotomy which, crudely, comes down to the question of how and whether we can make sense of life without stepping outside it. Thinkers of the last two millennia have posited different versions of Unchanging Truth outside the muddy, never-ceasing flux of experience. For Plato it was Ideas or Forms, for Christians God, for scientists the Laws governing the physical universe. And all these believers in some eternal and separate Truth were either against Art or wished to give it a limited or subservient role. The poets are exiled from Plato’s ideal republic because through their art they imitate or reflect (mimesis) the confused flow of sense experience, thus undermining the rule of reason – they will be allowed back only if they put their art at the service of the ideal Forms. I wouldn’t like to live in Plato’s republic. But I would not like to build a Life-Art republic in which there is no place for the philosophers.

And in any case, the rational faculty is not simply an aberration of the last two thousand years as some New Age romantics maintain. The moment humans began to see that they

could benefit from manipulation of the natural world, for example by creating watercourses or making tools, they were using their rational predictive capability. You need to go back a very long way in our evolutionary history to reach a point where our relationship with nature was purely instinctive and intuitive. So this thinking part, over-dominant and split off as it has become, is an intrinsic part of our humanity. We cannot wish it away but must go forward from where we are.

This may seem like a heady and theoretical discussion but for me it is real and experiential. I have tried to exile my own rational personality and I find it doesn't work. I become a kind of life-art zealot striving to be continually imaginative, never literal. This is exhausting and futile as well because the rational man, like any excluded force, finds his subtle way of sabotaging the show. Besides, this rational part is the part of me that keeps track of the time and makes lists and operates the computer. And though it is not helpful in sitting meditation or in the middle of an experiential workshop, the rational faculty is pleasurable as well as useful in the right context. I positively enjoy the perspective offered by my watch tower and the sense, illusory as I know it is, that I am somehow detached from it all. The problem comes when I forget the way back to my body. Then I begin to feel disconnected from myself; my thoughts, lacking an external point of reference, become circular and obsessive, I don't know what I am feeling. The sense of disconnection is the more acute because I know so well what it is like to feel connected. And this is where I need to find the way out of my head, leave my watch tower and go swimming.

Now I seem to have reached the point of describing a polarity without reaching any sort of reconciliation or synthesis. Betty Edwards in "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" talks of our Left-mode (analytical, verbal, sequential, logical) and our Right-mode (intuitive, artistic, spatial, holistic) as two *separate* states of consciousness. "Oddly", she says, "the moment of shifting between (these) states of consciousness always remains out of awareness". It is like the moment of falling asleep. But she shows how we can deliberately switch from one mode to the other. At Tamalpa we learn how to make transitions into the Imaginal realm and how to navigate its waters. And for me personally a learning edge is to become more fluent in these transitions, not just professionally - taking up and laying down the mantle of teacher - but also in my everyday life.

And perhaps this learning edge is also what I can offer to others - a growing skill in leading the way into the (i)magic(al) imaginal world, playing seriously within it, and making a safe return to "normal" consciousness. What is the value of this? At the very least, the experience is enlivening and wholesome; it *may* also be transformative - though results cannot be guaranteed. But I can no more describe (in the language of reason and analysis) the value of Life-Art, or explain the point of it, than I can describe a symphony or explain the point of a river.

What I **can** do, is firstly **practice** by making space for the exercise of my imagination in my daily life and secondly, in the role of facilitator, invite others to share life-art experiences with me. Each time I do this, for all the importance of preparation, there is an

element of surrender to the unknown, stepping out into uncharted territory, requiring me to trust that something bigger than the narrow controlling “I”, will take care of whatever arises. Yet the rational man has a role too – he keeps track of the time and makes sure I have remembered the drawing materials and the bells.

Maybe “something bigger” is the transpersonal Self of psychosynthesis, working through me, the holder of the workshop, and at the same time holding the wider field which contains both me and the participants.

“Self simply holds us in being, so that we may be open to the full range of our experience - good or bad, pleasant or painful, personal or transpersonal, empty or full. Held securely in existence, our experience does not fragment or destroy us; we can be there with it”. (Firman and Gila, quoted by Molly Brown in “Unfolding Self – The Practice of Psychosynthesis)”.