

By providing the tools to reach a person's underlying spirit, or essence, Bill Rossi's approach enables teachers to bring forth aspects of students' being that truly humanize them. This volume is well worth reading.

— Wander de C. Braga, Ph.D., Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

# Venturing Together

Empowering Students to Succeed

WILLIAM  
ROSSI

## BOOK ONE

Fanning an Inner Flame:  
A Case for the Effectiveness  
of the Creative Arts In  
Human Services and Education

## BOOK TWO

Enlivening the Creative Spirit:  
A Strengths-based Educational  
and Mentoring Approach  
Using the Creative Arts

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CREATIVE EDUCATION  
**Merge**<sup>™</sup>

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## BOOK ONE

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Creative Arts in Human Services and Education

By William Rossi

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BOOK ONE

**Fanning an Inner Flame:**  
A Case for the Effectiveness of the  
Creative Arts in Human Services and Education

Venturing  
Together

Empowering Students to Succeed

WILLIAM ROSSI

This volume has been designed as a primer for the **Rossi Educational Approach**, one component of the **Merge System for Creative Education**.

We also recommend our evaluation software, **SETS: Student Evaluation and Tracking System**, which in addition to evaluating and assessing students, teachers, and programs, and is an excellent aid for those who want to substantially develop their ability to utilize this approach.

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# Introduction

Doing art I can be myself, and not  
feel I need to be anybody else.  
—Student

We all need to feel acknowledged as human; we also have an innate drive to find the avenues we can travel to grow and realize our humanness. Creative growth is necessary for us to find out who we are, and if deprived of this we will have shallow relationships with ourselves and others and will be unable to express and share our nature, which is essential to happiness. If this growth isn't allowed, we will feel trapped and upset and will possibly become injurious to ourselves or others.

This book describes some of the societal conditions from which so many people suffer today, conditions that have been exacerbated, in part, by our inattention to the importance of the artistic creative process. It also delineates how development and implementation of that process could very effectively address them. Many of these conditions are the result of a dominant aspect of our culture that is based in self-centeredness, intolerance, materialism, and a lack of empathy. As a result of this focus we have insufficient time or motivation for the introspection needed towards the realization of inherent qualities that are so necessary for human development. There is also very little support for the many parents in the greater society who are struggling to counterbalance the negative influences bombarding their children.

I believe these attitudes have reached the extreme level of being oppressive because as they have become increasingly pervasive they have diminished other aspects of our society which at one time provided more of a balance. Not only does the absence of opportunities for creative growth intensify our problems, the lack of real efforts to broaden our perspectives—which could lead to more equitable communities—continues to contribute to the challenge. This in large part explains the increasing numbers of and degree of challenge in at-risk youth and adults today. It also points to the remedy.

Graffiti artists are an excellent example of an oppressed people: racism, poverty and other abuses have denied these young people the acknowledgement of being human and deprived them of opportunities to develop or grow. Their graffiti is a reaction to their plight, a primal scream that says *We exist. We are humans, too.*

The world has experienced varying levels of oppressions at all times in history. Some, like the Nazi Holocaust or African slavery in America, are patently obvious; others, such as that of many youth and adults today, are less so. I have chosen here to draw correlations with the African American experience because today's challenged populations share a similarity with the early African American in the way their circumstance limits acknowledgement of their humanity. Paradoxically, this also provides them with a singularly potent way out.

Considering the African American experience is helpful here for two reasons:

- By understanding the conditions that presented challenges to people in the past, we can draw correlations from those conditions to those of the present.
- By understanding the mechanisms used in past circumstances for emotional survival, we can create an approach to effectively address similar conditions today.

One of the most difficult conditions challenged people face today which has also historically been a reality for most African Americans, is their inability to be absorbed and assimilated into the dominant tenor

of the culture. But as Leroi Jones states in *Blues People*, the separation of the Negro from White society was at once a curse and a boon:

*There was always a border past which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. The Negro could not ever become White and that was his strength: at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the White man's culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was the boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music.<sup>1</sup>*

The same is true for today's at-risk and challenged people: their curse is also a potential strength. The question is, How can we help them fully utilize that strength?

Conditions like slavery and at riskness can force creativity: this is a powerful potential which we should recognize and promote. When I speak of fanning an inner flame, I am talking about providing oxygen for a person's humanness, the creativity or light that is within us all. Creativity has the ability to transform instead of maintain, and that's what our society needs to do to grow out of its current malaise. As I see it, the first steps are to acknowledge and more deeply understand our own humanity: we can then begin to acknowledge it in others and move forward together, contributing to each others' growth.

This book explores the value and historical use of the arts in the U.S. as a means to rise above trauma and oppression. It also looks at the problem of a growing at-risk population and addresses the need for adults to embrace change in order to bring about a healthier society. We do not intend for our manuals, trainings and consultation to serve as technical instructions for adding another method to a current mélange of interventions. Rather, we hope to provide the stimulus and support for original thinking and initiate and

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1 Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), 80.

facilitate an ongoing *process* by offering a path worth pursuing and by encouraging like-minded people to come together. This, we believe, is necessary in order to proactively implement effective interventions and solutions.

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Creative growth is a necessary ingredient to producing good communities—sharing the human spirit provides the cohesion.

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For those of you who have experience with the arts, we hope to offer some new perspectives and add to existing knowledge with the intention of strengthening and corroborating your work. We hope that those of you with little or no artistic experience will gain a tangible understanding of the creative arts' effectiveness from a therapeutic and educational standpoint. We also hope you will begin to feel the arts' capacity to lead you into yourself to deepen your satisfaction with life, which will in turn enable you to offer others with whom you work new ways of thinking and opportunities to learn more about who they are.

A key facet of our work is to help adults understand the value that the arts can potentially bring to life and realize that involvement with the arts is essential for all people, particularly those who are emotionally challenged or traumatized. We are well aware that this is new thinking to many. Perhaps this is due to the fact that while there are numerous studies documenting the arts' often dramatic effects on cognitive functions as related to intelligence or learning, there are relatively few studies that scientifically document their psychotherapeutic benefits. Actually, at this point in time there are only a few arts programs that combine the elements of long-term mentoring with a progressive fine arts curriculum, a combination that is essential in order to attain the level of effective therapeutic intervention and educational initiative.

After a lifetime of teaching and playing professionally, in 1994 I founded a non-profit arts organization, previously known as Youth Advancement Through Music & Art (YATMA) and now as Educational Mentoring through the Arts & Humanities (EMTAH), to

serve youth and broadly demonstrate these capabilities. During the 14 years we implemented the program our students often became so stimulated, involved, and successful that they were willing to transcend their difficulties and fears, express themselves, and learn who they were. Time and time again we saw the most beautiful dance of all—someone who was headed towards trouble turning and walking in the opposite direction.

*During my 21 years as a pediatrician I have never seen a youth program that turns around lives as well as this one does.—Dr. Eleanor Graham, Medical Director, Children and Teens Clinic, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, WA.*

A 1999 evaluative study conducted by Education 21, Inc. (Troy, NY) confirmed our success, finding the program to be “impressive” and stating:

*Students showed a statistically significant decrease in overall negative behaviors . . . and highly significant improvements in positive attitudes and behaviors . . . the program is a persuasive intervention and has had a powerful and statistically significant impact on the students.*

Results of our ongoing internal evaluations also corroborated our experience: the success of our students made a conclusive statement about the value of the creative arts in general and of our approach in particular.

*His involvement [with private and ensemble instruction] has helped him to mature and focus on the important things . . . My son has literally turned his life around.*

—Mother

A very pragmatic reason to consider an artistic mentoring approach is that it can be a cost effective investment that not only benefits the student but also will yield much for the public good.

As Marion Edelman from the Children's Defense Fund states:

*Education costs far less than ignorance, preventive health care costs less than emergency rooms, preventive family services cost less than out-of-home care, and Head Start costs less than prisons.*

Ms. Edelman also provides the following economic considerations:

- The cost of providing a year of employment training for unemployed youths is \$2,492.
- The annual per child cost of a high quality after-school program is \$2,700.
- The average cost of ensuring that a low-income family has affordable housing is \$6,830.
- The average annual per child cost of Head Start is \$7,028.
- The annual per child cost for a high quality comprehensive full-day, early childhood education program is \$13,000.
- The average annual per prisoner cost is \$22,650.

It only makes sense to consider and utilize the creative arts as prevention and intervention as well as an integral part of general education. The creative arts are a vital dynamic of individual growth, human communication, and community building. In this book we explain the arts' potential to facilitate one's ability to communicate with one's self and others, positively channel emotions, use imagination, develop focus leading to relaxation, create relationships, contribute to community, and energize the learning process, among other values.

We also attempt to shift the paradigm from that of perceiving challenged people as problems or victims to seeing them as a symptom of and potential remedy for our society's underlying problem. In exploring their at-riskness as a public health issue, we view it as a communicable disease that's spreading in this country (hurt children

hurt children), an epidemic that's running rampant and will have serious long-term repercussions for America. We also offer a solution in which the adults take the lead so that we can, to paraphrase Gandhi, be the change we want to see.

We hope these readings will deepen your understanding of some of the issues we explore, stimulating you to think in new ways and perhaps even consider how you can promote the arts as a valuable enhancement to schools, institutions, and other educational and therapeutic environments. Ultimately, we hope to provide an avenue to support personal, creative growth, with or without the arts, as the cornerstone for good education and relationship.

Book Two, *Enlivening The Creative Spirit*, describes the teaching approach I have developed to redress the issues, conditions, and potentials we discuss here. If you would like to learn more about our turnkey system for program replication or our other materials and curricula, please contact us at [www.merge-education.com](http://www.merge-education.com).

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## CHAPTER 1

# At Riskness: A Public Health Issue?

An increasing number of people are severely challenged in today's culture. Having been traumatized and devalued by abuses and oppressions, they have little or no self-esteem or success in their lives and they are suffering. It is not my intention here to paint a picture of hopelessness, but rather to present the reality of today as I see it so that, through facing it squarely and examining causes, we can move into the future with determination and optimism.

All people have innate needs that must be met if they are to grow into mature, strong individuals, but for many today these needs are not being filled. Childhood is the perfect time, for example, to find out who you are and develop your abilities so you can fully participate in society. But when we examine the situations in which most children find themselves, such as schools that deliver education by rote, generic after-school programs, hanging out, constantly being plugged in, or worse, it's clear that many kids have very few positive avenues for finding out who they are. Add physical and sexual abuse and today's reality of disintegrated families, and it's no wonder so many people are having such a hard time.

The fact that this is a very difficult environment in which to grow up is underscored by these statistics for America's children:

- 1 in 3 is born to unmarried parents
- 1 in 3 will be poor at some point in their childhood

- 1 in 8 is born to a teenage mother
- 1 in 24 lives with neither parent<sup>1</sup>

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also refers to the current condition as an epidemic:

*Violence has become increasingly prominent [in the United States], which has the highest youth homicide and suicide rates among 26 wealthiest nations in the world and one of the highest rates of homicide worldwide. While there is a general decline in U.S. homicides nationwide, violence, and violent injuries among children have not decreased.*

*Homicide and suicide have become the second and third leading causes of death of all teenagers and the leading cause of death among black youths. Homicide rates for males 15 to 19 years of age increased 113 percent between 1985 and 1995. Teenagers today are more likely to die of gunshot wounds than of all natural causes combined.<sup>2</sup>*

This report also cited a 2-year national study that found that high risk behaviors such as sexual activity and drug and alcohol use among teens are also troubling:

- The U.S. teen birth rate is the highest in the world, three times higher than that in the European Union.<sup>3</sup>
- 28 percent of teenagers regularly (at least twice per month) engage in two or more risk behaviors such as

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1 The Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children Yearbook 2001* (Washington, D.C.).

2 *Teens at-risk*, Opposing Viewpoints Series (Greenhaven Press, 2003), 35.

3 *Family Planning Perspectives*, 2001, 33(5):251–258, 289, which also states: *Comparatively widespread disadvantage in the United States helps explain why U.S. teenagers have higher birthrates and pregnancy rates than those in other developed countries. Improving U.S. teenagers' sexual and reproductive behavior requires strategies to reduce the numbers of young people growing up in disadvantaged conditions and to help those who are disadvantaged overcome the obstacles they face.*

using alcohol, illicit drugs, or tobacco, having sex, or engaging in violence.<sup>4</sup>

Alcohol and drug abuse threaten a teen's well-being, partly because being intoxicated hinders good judgment. *That puts you at-risk for making poor life decisions*, contends Alan Leshner, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse:

*For example, teens under the influence of drugs or alcohol are more likely to engage in fights, destruction of property, date rapes, car accidents, and unprotected sex—which can lead to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases—than teens who are not under the influence.*<sup>5</sup>

Recent work to educate youth about the dangers of risky behavior has resulted in some improvements. The 2003 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicated modest reductions in sexual activity, smoking, and alcohol use among teens.<sup>6</sup> Teen pregnancy has also declined somewhat, in large part due to condom distribution. While these interventions are helpful, however, they are in many ways fingers in the dike: they can't alleviate our children's suffering because don't address the underlying problems. Consider the following statistics from a study of youth suicide:

- 8.5 percent of high school students had actually attempted suicide one or more times during the 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>7</sup>
- 16.9 percent of high school students nationwide had seriously considered attempting suicide during the 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Ibid.

5 *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2000.

6 Sexual activity—47 percent, down from 54 percent in 1991; smoking—20 percent, down from 28 percent in 1991; alcohol use—75 percent, down from 83 percent in 1991.

7 [www.suicide.org](http://www.suicide.org)

8 [www.myfirstlink.org](http://www.myfirstlink.org)

- In 2000, suicide was the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds.<sup>9</sup>

*We are seeing things today that we never saw before . . . children as young as 4 and 5 wanting to end their lives . . . saying it over and over.*

—Robin Siegal, Executive Director,  
Albany County Department of Mental Health

*Child-care advocates claim that up to 15 percent of 16-to 19-year-olds are at-risk of never reaching their potential and simply becoming lost in society, said Gene Stephens in a 1997 article in *The Futurist* magazine entitled *Youths At-risk: Saving the Worlds' Most Precious Resource*. He continues: *Others would add at-risk children of any age to this category of not becoming self-supporting adults, heading for a life in institutions for delinquency, crime, mental illness, addiction, and dependency . . . children lose hope for the future.*<sup>10</sup>*

Why are so many of America's students in trouble today? One reason is that as America's social fabric has continued to fray over the past few decades many students, rich and poor alike, have been "growing up" with little or no experience of basic human values such as empathy, respect for self and others, or the desire to contribute to one's community. Indeed, these traditional values are so far removed from some students' grim reality that they are seen as something from a fairy tale.

- Only 37 percent of 70,000 students surveyed said students show respect for one another.<sup>11</sup>

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9 A. M. Miniño, E. Arias, K. D. Kochanek, S. L. Murphy, and B. L. Smith. *Deaths: Final Data for 2000*, National Vital Statistics Reports (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2002).

10 *Teens at-risk*, Opposing Viewpoints Series (Greenhaven Press, 2003), 20.

11 National Center for Student Aspirations, *The Students Speak Survey* (University of Maine, 2001).

- Only one-third said that students show respect toward teachers.<sup>12</sup>

Another factor is that as our country's emphasis on personal acquisition has grown, so has our acceptance of violence:

- More than one-third of students surveyed said they don't feel safe at school.<sup>13</sup>
- The United States has the highest rate of firearm death for children aged 1 to 14 in the industrialized world—a rate nearly 12 times higher than that for children in the other 25 countries combined.
- The U.S. homicide rate for persons between the ages of 15 and 24 is higher than the combined total homicide rate of 11 industrialized nations.<sup>14</sup>

Violence is nothing new to America. We have come to accept it as a way of life, responding to violence with violence and even glorifying it as a form of entertainment. Television and screen games, saturated with violence, have become a basis from which students form their identities—a drug, a barrier to self understanding and personal development, and a substitute for real relationships.

What sort of identity can people form from our media? Instead of creating an environment of acceptance and feelings of high self worth, most programming encourages a downward spiral leading to rejection upon rejection, negating the vital needs of accepting oneself and others and of being wanted and valued. This erosion tears a person down and cuts a path towards self-destruction, anti-social behavior, and violence. For these people, the world becomes a hostile place filled with enemies. We run a great risk of people losing hope and the ability to dream which will only lead to more desperate acts of destruction.

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12 Ibid.

13 Josephson Institute of Ethics, *Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth* (2000, 2001).

14 K. D. Peters, K. D. Kichanek, and S. L. Murphy, *Deaths: Final data for 1996*, National Vital Statistics Reports (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 1998).

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development summarizes the basic conditions children need to successfully complete the transition from childhood to adulthood:

*They must have sustained, caring relationships with adults; receive guidance in facing serious challenges; become a valued member of a constructive peer group; feel a sense of worth as a person; become socially competent; know how to use the support systems available to them; achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices; find constructive expression of the curiosity and exploration that strongly characterizes their age; believe in a promising future with real opportunities; and find ways of being useful to others.<sup>15</sup>*

In short, children and youth need caring families and communities. I think we can foresee our future by looking closely at the present because this isn't a new problem, just one that is worsening. Products of their environment, as children grow into adulthood their difficulties only compound. Many adults today are struggling to survive without the benefit of a good foundation: mental health challenges abound, even among adults who are able to hold decent jobs,<sup>16</sup> and this will adversely affect all of us until we come together to begin to reverse the trends.

The good news is that we most definitely can begin to reverse current trends. Like many others, I believe that the remedy exists within the challenge and that by providing a healthy emotional base to our students we will give them the springboard they need towards a new direction. I hope that as you read on, through examination of underlying causes to options for the future, you too will become energized by the potential inherent in the problems of today.

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15 *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*, report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995, [www.carnegie.org](http://www.carnegie.org).

16 *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1993; 50(2): 85-94 state: *An estimated 22.1 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about 1 in 5 adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.* (Regier DA, Narrow WE, Rae DS, et al.).

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## CHAPTER 2

# Rising Above Circumstance

### The Culture That's Gotten Us Here

What keeps the cupboard bare in even some of the most affluent homes? What causes so many young people to become emotional beggars on our streets, screaming for some honesty and basic human caring and understanding? They aren't asking for anything that isn't their due. We adults have a responsibility to try to understand what's missing and what will fulfill these basic human needs, to find answers and put them into action.

In this country, materialism has become a substitute for a more humanistic and soulful way of life that contains the nourishing elements necessary for human growth. Even the commercialization of art denies us the opportunity of more pure and practical expressions. Coupled with a cultural prevalence of individual and group exclusivity, materialism is one of the underlying causes of our predicament.

Most of us who are alive today were raised in a culture in which self-centeredness and materialism became increasingly valued. Not only does this emphasis not work well in raising children, but when passed on it compounds into a situation like the one we see today. As self-concern grows, so does the perceived need for security, precluding ways of thinking that go much beyond an over concern for one's own survival or welfare. Many now so thoroughly believe that safety lies in

material security and a “me first” attitude that they find it difficult to form or sustain meaningful relationships and *inclusive* groups or communities. Too many feel alienated and upset, dissatisfied with life.

This self-concern not only worsens our society’s problems, it also denies people with challenges the very thing that could be therapeutic for them. Instead of drawing challenged people into our communities we as a culture perceive them as polluting the group and withhold from them the chance to integrate. This marginalization causes more damage and denies us the opportunities to benefit from the catharsis and strengths of those who are challenged. We recreate the conditions that produce at-risk and traumatized populations rather than creating conditions that heal and prevent. We promulgate the same detrimental culture that created the trauma in the first place, a group re-enactment of unhealthy (or in kids’ terms, unsafe) behavior.

Sharing experiences and concern for others creates healing, when it takes place on an emotional level, but many adults today feel uncomfortable and defensive with emotional honesty due in part to suffering hurtful experiences in their childhood, experiences that have stayed with them. As a result, children continue to turn into adults who are incapable of opening up to and empathizing very much with others.

*What we are as adults is the product of the world we experienced as children. The way a society functions is a reflection of the childrearing practices of that society. Today, we reap what we have sown.*<sup>1</sup>

If we understand that the over-concern for ourselves is not necessary, society and community can, in everyday business, be a healing experience. Until we recognize this, however, it will be very difficult to find effective directions to meet these challenges and the costs to society will be great.

Education can offer opportunities towards these ends. The good news is that not only are many of today’s educators trying to im-

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1 Bruce D. Perry, M.D., *Neurodevelopmental Adaptations to Violence* (Baylor College of Medicine, 1996).

plement progressive reform with an eye to serving the whole child, there is also a growing awareness of the importance of preventative programs. At the same time, however, there is a strong initiative towards a system that endorses and compounds counterproductive and harmful elements of traditional education. This initiative is referred to as standards-based education.

## Standards-based Education: One Size Fits All

With its focus on a narrow, one dimensional performance, standards-based education not only misses the point, it compounds the mistakes of traditional education by discouraging and repelling those students who can't relate. According to the Gates Foundation:

*... recent educational reforms with their emphasis on raising standards have had the unintended consequence of pushing thousands of young people out of school, often into the juvenile justice system.<sup>2</sup>*

One explanation for this is that in its drive to be efficient, standards-based education often approaches students as if they all learn in the same way. This creates a sort of psychological profiling and prejudice that can put students at risk because it doesn't allow them to learn in the way that is natural for them. As a result, they're denied the positive experiences they need to build their self-esteem. When we deny them the experience of what is positive within them, we diminish and even disable them: they have nowhere to go but to the negative.

Standards-based education also puts students at risk by teaching them *what* to learn instead of *how* to learn, treating them more as silos for information than as dynamic organisms designed to be creative and to learn on their own. Suffocating this healthy dynamic and substituting information for knowledge deflates the creative

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2 [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org) (November, 2003).

process and disallows the opportunity for students to put the world together in a way that is meaningful and sensible to them. Instead, these students become anesthetized from verbosity and develop a narration-induced glaze.

Imposed knowledge never becomes real knowledge—that can only come from within a person. With its focus on imposed knowledge, standards-based education greatly minimizes students' chances to develop into whole human beings. By teaching primarily information, education can break the spirits of students who learn differently or have learning disabilities. To illustrate this, I would like to relate an experience I had early in my teaching career when presenting two very different students with a new piece of piano music.

One of my students was what we traditionally identify as a quick learner. As I gave him the parts to a song, he systematically put them together in good order and quickly accomplished the learning of the piece. In this respect, he was easy to teach, and I would guess that he probably did well in traditional learning situations.

In comparison to him, the other student was not as quick to put the pieces together and would pause and sometimes seem to be out in space. He couldn't make the connections as quickly and seemed to approach the piece with trial and error, initially content to explore it and not particularly concerned about playing it back perfectly.

This continued for a few lessons until I began to wonder if he was ever going to get it, but he then completely surprised me and taught me a most important lesson which has become an underpinning of my approach. Not only did he come to his lesson and play the entire piece of music with a depth that was very surprising, he played the piece more fully and creatively than the other student had. There was richness in the way his hands produced the sound, he was all there and hearing everything he was playing, and he could play variations that included louds, softs, and inflections that were not in what one might call the "better" student's playing.

I came to realize that the second student's spaciness was not spaciness at all. He was *listening* at a deep level, allowing himself to give in to what he was hearing and then processing this information in his own way. He taught me how important it is to give students

the ground to do this on their own and not impose upon them a uniform way of learning or expect that things should be learned in any one particular way. I also began to develop into a far more effective teacher as I learned to approach my students from the perspective of understanding the often subtle nuances of the ways they learned.

Over the years I've seen variations on this theme and process over and over again. This type of student is often put down in a traditional learning situation as being slow or not being with it. This attitude damages these students and look at what we lose! By not allowing for the different ways people learn and therefore, ultimately, the ways they can give to us, we not only take opportunities away from them but also deny ourselves the richness they would add to the learning process and to our lives.

Standards-based education also often fails students as individuals because teachers are rarely encouraged or trained to determine what is relevant to each student. Not addressing students from culturally and emotionally relevant standpoints can have the same result as planting good seeds in sand. In its drive to produce a particular score, standards-based education can beat the life out of students and put them at risk or, for those who are already at risk or traumatized, further the problem.

Education should encourage self-discovery and enable students to engage with themselves and think for themselves. It should fill the students' emotional needs along with the intellectual. Students need to be able to create an inner dialogue and converse with themselves in order to form a foundation that makes them whole and turns the tide of fragmentation within, i.e., to heal or fully grow. Many students turn away from education and actually turn against it because they are not engaged, stimulated, or motivated and because it is not an opportunity for self-development or healing.

We all learn best by example, one way or another, so through our actions as adults we can both provide and advocate for an educational process that exemplifies positive, growthful ways of being that students can follow. Since education reflects what our society values, we must first of all adopt these values in the way we act as a greater society. Once we create this orientation ourselves, we will

be able to integrate it into the educational system, into doing business, and into creating community. As we change the psychological environment in which we live, other necessary changes will find their way into the educational milieu, linking educational change to social change. Teachers will not only be able to model but also to facilitate efforts among student peers. Students will have an opportunity to gain experience in many facets of life. Teachers can allow and stimulate individual students to think creatively, to think for themselves, and to discover natural resources within themselves.

Perhaps we need to broaden our perspective of what constitutes an educational environment. Actually, since children and youth are constantly learning, everything that goes on around them is an educational environment—adults and peers are their teachers, for better or worse. Unfortunately today's environment contains many negatives. Hopefully in time we'll realize the meaning of the saying, *It takes a whole village (community) to raise a child*, and we'll understand that educating a child means building a community that allows them to think individually and to have certain feelings—not only allows it, but encourages students to be who they are.

*It's [EMTAH] more positive than school because in school it seems like I'm always rushed around. It seems like everybody's supposed to be the same. At EMTAH I'm encouraged to be an individual.*

—14 year old student

Our experience has proven that the creative arts can contribute effectively here, providing an opportunity that is enriching for students who aren't yet at risk and a critical intervention for many who are. An educational environment that fully utilizes the various dimensions of the arts will naturally fulfill many of the students' educational needs. Substantially integrating the arts into education would also fill teachers' needs by stimulating them, adding opportunity to the ongoing process of self-discovery that would directly benefit their students. Teachers would be modeling something valuable for the students, enhancing and building on an environment that would have more life in it, giving that environment more meaning.

*I would very much like to be involved in this arts program. Straight academics do nothing for the kids as far as therapeutic value.*

—Special Education Teacher

## Trouble's Gettin' into Me

They got that backwards: trouble's gettin' into me.  
—At-risk student

We want to emphasize that people who are at risk are not the problem: they are the victims of a problem adults are creating or recreating. However, as trauma pioneer Bessel van der Kolk writes in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*, most of us like to believe:

*. . . that the world is essentially just, that 'good' people are in charge of their lives, and that bad things only happen to 'bad' people . . . Victims are the members of a society whose problems represent the memory of suffering, rage, and pain in a world that longs to forget.<sup>3</sup>*

Many of the challenges people face today are the result of a society that victimizes them and puts them at risk by a lack of attentiveness to that which matters in life. Understanding this will enable us to help them best. Challenged people can be seen as society's canaries: like the fragile birds that once alerted miners to toxicity, the numbers of at-risk people today, and the severity of their challenges, are warnings that the human spirit is being ignored and neglected.

As products of their environment—*our society*—challenged people reflect areas to us which we can seriously consider so we can

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3 Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996).

gain an understanding of what we're doing that's producing this kind of "product." This will illuminate concrete, individual steps we can take, steps that in and of themselves will create a healthier and more positive environment. The first step might well be to make empathetic efforts towards understanding who these people are so we can develop the new perspectives that are necessary for initiating change. Considerations could be an ongoing assessment of:

- Personal assumptions, attitudes, and understandings
- Personal actions
- Our relationship to others
- Our appreciation of others' strengths
- Our fear of others
- Ways of finding commonness
- Ways of being more inclusive
- New ways of using language
- The value of understanding and treating others equally
- How others learn and how we as teachers, parents, and other adults in students' lives can provide for this to happen authentically.

Much traditional education asks students to externalize instead of finding the natural places within them that contain the desired structures or attributes. The following story of one of our students, just one of thousands of such stories told by teachers who work with challenged people, gives a personal picture of how important it is to provide an approach to education that is stimulating and suits the student. It also shows why making authentic artistic experiences available to all is in the best interest of our culture.

D was upset in high school, fighting with teachers, having a lot of trouble learning in classes, and struggling to stay in school. He had a background of homelessness, broken family, and drug/alcohol abuse.

He was also very intelligent and could speak of historical events and aspects of life in ways that were quite knowledgeable and insightful.

He loved music, and before we met him he had tried to join the band. This had, however, been yet another negative experience. The band teacher needed a clarinet player, so he had given him a clarinet. D didn't like or have a feel for the instrument, but he was given no choice. To make matters worse, he was also given some paper which had, as he related the story, "a lot of black dots on it" which were very difficult for him to understand. You might guess the result: the music manuscript, coupled with an instrument he didn't like and the band director's rejection of his resultant attitude, made for another failed situation for him.

His mother learned of our program and brought him to his first lesson. He presented depressed and detached, but under the lethargy he was selectively interested and alert. He was interested in drums—rhythm is usually a good place to start—so the teacher sat with him at the drums and they tried beats. No written music, just an oral, get-acquainted conversation where feelings were exchanged through the sound. It was fun, satisfying, and stimulating for both of them to the point that he expressed an enthusiastic interest in coming the next week.

He was right on time for the next lesson and expressed a desire to play the bass, an instrument that really attracted him. He learned fast—by ear at first, then gradually making sense of the "black dots." In time he did learn to read music but he always relied very much on his ear, as any good musician should. When he was ready to learn in a group situation, we created an ensemble with other program students who were emotionally and musically at pretty much the same level. With our consistent guidance, he and the others began to thrive and in no time they became successful. He also started his own band and recorded and played on the local music scene. He graduated from high school, worked a steady job, and maintained a relationship.

This youth had lots of assets—you just had to get to know him, and *he* had to get to know himself. He had been traumatized and was highly at-risk, but with an opportunity to exercise his strengths,

to learn in the way which was natural to him and build his confidence, he became a valuable community resource instead of a costly community liability. Of course a lot of care, consideration, and work went into this young man as it did into all our students, often over many years.

There are so many like him; we need only to intervene and cultivate in the right way so the fruit won't rot on the vine. If we will feed people in this way, we will empower them to grow up and out of being victims and to develop into the natural resources they truly are.

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When we don't give youth what they need to mature, it's as if we give them adult clothes before they've grown, thereby creating emotional orphans who feel that their stunted growth is due to a lack in them.

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## Cultivating Natural Resources

. . . great art has always come when people are held under a hell of a lot of pressure and have to deal with great difficulties and transform whatever they got . . .<sup>4</sup>  
—Alan Lomax

We don't need to look far to find practical solutions to the problem: the messages and cries all around us are the keys for the changes we need to make. The creative arts and strengths-based educational approaches have an inherent ability to promote the kinds of fundamental and structural changes that would be beneficial to the system.

Recent educational initiatives related to the arts have been largely unsuccessful because they were layered on a system that needs structural change rather than integrated into the system to promote change. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats who influence educational policy of-

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4 Alan Lomax, quoted in an interview with Arnold Rypens, in *Back to the Roots* no.14 (May, 1997), 33.

ten stand to gain from maintaining an underlying status quo, and the potential of the creative arts and alternative teaching methods makes them uncomfortable. As a result, a lot of lip service has been paid to the arts but little has changed in the system's inner workings where policy decisions are made and upheld. The arts remain diminished while resources go to academics and sports.

There is actually a lot of documentation proving the effectiveness of the creative arts that does go beyond common sense. So we come back to the question of personal change, and at some point the smokescreens must be seen as just that. New thinking is needed here to bring about an effective evolution in the present system.

There are areas of the arts and strengths-based teaching that awaken certain sensitivities to beauty, balance, sexuality, empathy, acceptance, compassion, and patience. If change is meant to happen here then perhaps the people who want to bring it about can continue to look deeply into these areas.

To achieve the change we seek, if we are to give the creative arts or strengths-based teaching a role in this change, we will need to act without craving the same old securities from the system in return for our efforts. But there's no doubt our willingness to make those efforts will be of value. Through our sincere efforts we will achieve a personal, active way of modeling the qualities which will, in turn, enable others to experience what the qualities have to offer. If we are able to act without the need to do an emotional form of business—the need to always get a personal return—we will create and reinforce the change we desire.

We don't need to look far for the solutions; we just need to look deeply. A constant self-examination here is important for us as we work with others: the more we understand ourselves, the more we will understand them. Gandhi's words (*be the change you want to see*) pose a challenge we would do well to accept.

We won't be able to give others the qualities we do not ourselves have, and we can't ask them to act in ways they don't understand. Real-life experience and not simply academic understanding is needed—through working with challenged people we can reach out in learning how to support the positive in each other. This involves learning how

to listen and respond, learning language beyond language, learning to deeply respect emotional needs, differences, and circumstances.

Giving ourselves the opportunity to do what is necessary in order to gain understandings of some of the many different personalities and circumstances in life will allow us to approach the ground of commonness in people. Perhaps this understanding might even pave the way for a redefinition and a new connotation for the concept of commonness. If we are willing to do this, we will usually earn the respect of others rather than having to demand it.

As our understandings change, we will interact with at-risk people differently, and they will feel the generosity that's key to a healthier society. Perhaps what is meant by being "giving" could be understood as a generosity of spirit as in "giving the benefit of doubt" or "giving the chance to know." As we begin to fulfill some of their needs, we will model the importance of reaching out to others to get to know them better and to empathize with their experience of life. By setting an example that is different from amassing ever more and only giving whatever little bit we perceive we don't need, we can begin to change the climate.

For those willing to engage with people who are challenged, these opportunities can also lead to more of an engagement with ourselves, and as we learn more about ourselves we will gain their confidence and allow them to put a better foot forward. One good thing can then lead to another, as in any mutually beneficial relationship. We may well discover that we have been misinterpreting behaviors based on beliefs we held, and this is where opportunities for change will present themselves. It is through this process of interaction that we will be able to go beyond the mode of crisis control into deeper understandings that foster preventative, proactive solutions driven by the students or clients themselves.

Challenged people can contribute much toward the solutions. Years ago, when I asked an at-risk child how he would design an educational environment, one of his many answers was that the younger students would be allowed to go to the older kids' art room and learn from them. This was a good idea—experience has shown that many older kids love coaching younger ones and the younger like this

as well. He also suggested that students would be able to work and experiment on their own—he was at no loss for words or ideas.

By spending time with and deepening our understanding of “problem” people, we will also be able to trace their challenges to root causes that will allow us to resolve or prevent future difficulties. We will come to know these people more deeply as individuals and to accept them and their feelings as they are, with no judgment, which will build trust and safety. Most important, we will also begin to discover their creative strengths and potentials so we can begin to work with them from that perspective. An approach that addresses them as healthy can significantly contribute to getting them that way. Such an approach paves the way for them to develop their natural instincts and to understand their own positive and innate qualities. With the right guidance, at-risk or traumatized people can rise to their strengths and use them to overcome their circumstances.

These people have great potential and talent now dormant within them, potential and talent that just needs the right cultivation and environment to develop. Most have high capacities to learn, but in too many cases these capacities are allowed to lay fallow.

People who find their strengths will no longer see themselves as problems or victims, and when this happens, we will be fully able to do the same. We will come to respect them as people who are not only overcoming difficulties, but are also becoming contributors to the solutions. When we treat them more as partners in growth, we give ourselves opportunities to further develop and refine our own qualities and abilities. Deepening understanding involves listening and sensitivity beyond words. It also involves awareness of how *we* are really feeling in the situation, accepting our own vulnerability and reactions.

Discovering new directions for them will also require us to understand their personal and cultural circumstances better—what has caused their trauma and what is important to them. As isolated as these people often are, they are still part of a culture, and understanding that culture and how it evolves means understanding the risk and protective factors in it. Remember, they are the victims here: it’s not their fault they’re like they are.

As concerned adults, we can try to understand the causes by listening to their cultural stories. Culture tells their stories by speaking of the malady. It also offers a cure for those really willing to learn the language. This language is an emotional one, the language of the human condition, an honest statement of circumstance, the primal scream of a child crying for food.

Not only does their real-life experience contain valuable insight for those willing to look and to understand, it also brings to them a maturity that can be developed to benefit everyone. This maturity will enable them to offer insight, to teach, and to strive towards a leadership role. What's more, because they wear the mantle of survivor they can exemplify and model resiliency, strength, and the ability to rise above circumstance, promoting hope for other lost people trying to find their way. In a society where at-risk students say they *live for today and see no hope for their future*,<sup>5</sup> this is of great importance.

Although change is often difficult and denied when it comes too close to home, I don't see any real alternative. And while facing this challenge can be difficult, it can also be stimulating and exciting. The people with whom we work will be the best representatives and reflectors of hope, regeneration, and new pathways that *anyone* willing to grow can choose to take. As with most creative endeavors, there will be joy in the process of discovery and the universally welcomed feeling of inclusion.

What is true for them is true for us: the more we understand about ourselves, the more we understand what's going on around us. So we're not just looking and listening in an effort to avoid being "hit" by others, we're trying to cross our personal boundaries to reach the side of greater empathy and self knowledge. We're engaged in a sincere endeavor that in itself will send a strong and positive message. Here we can get on ground that will take us beyond treating the symptoms to curing the ill. This can be difficult, and our supporting each other in the effort can be helpful, indeed.

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5 Alan Lomax, quoted in an interview with Arnold Rypens, in *Back to the Roots* no.14 (May, 1997), 24.

We all have the ability to personally assimilate and organize our worlds in a way that enables us to search for our own meaning, our own truth. To realize this ability and to become truly creative, the spirit has to find its own way. We can only achieve a real depth of understanding when we arrive at it on our own. This depth of understanding is internally common to those who are allowed to learn in this way because, rather than learning from a purely intellectual basis, they have learned a common structure from a natural place within themselves.

Many schools and other organizations are very hesitant to give students or clients this kind of individual freedom, afraid that loosening a control they believe they have over them would lead to anarchy. I am not advocating for a lack of external guidelines, but I don't believe the issue is so black and white. We need clear guidelines, but these are most effective when they are developed and implemented based on a mutual understanding, and for this to happen we must allow our students and clients to explore and arrive at understandings in their own way. Student autonomy is an important component of effective education.

Learning in the more natural way can be far more satisfying to student and teacher. Because it can take a little longer, this method does require our patience and our trust, but these will be rewarded because what has been naturally internalized will be easily externalized. If we allow others to develop in this way it will put meaning to structure, and they will be able to effectively and creatively use their learning in many different situations.

Exploring and implementing practices brings people the peace that allows for the self-development necessary for good esteem and confidence. These will be the stepping stones into understanding ones' self and others and the development of the qualities that make up a "psychological immune system" that will promote healing and well being. Many times at-risk people feel that their strength has been buried; they take on the blame for their negative lives, feeling there's something wrong with *them*. By emphasizing what's right with them, this strengths-based approach shows them that there's something good inside them, a natural creative area, an inner flame.

Our job as educators is to fan that flame. Teachers become mentors who attempt to endow students with abilities that can facilitate their survival, contribute to their own healing, and give them creative strengths with a sense of dignity so they can become self-reliant. Success brings success and enables them to increasingly build and apply this process *on their own* until they are personally and fully enabled by the creative process and endowed with abilities that can cross boundaries and be used in all areas of life. They will have abilities to be resourceful and to use their natural resource, which is really a resource for all society. This will be liberating for them.

I'll provide a case in point, which is excerpted from a student profile written by one of our teachers, years ago.

*At 16, G came to EMTAH as a referral from her high school crisis intervention counselor. She was sad and shy without a spark of confidence. It soon became apparent that G had much to express and was searching for someone to give her the tools to do so.*

*G has had more to deal with than seems fair for any 16 year old. Family relations, housing, school, depression—these are all areas that G had to struggle with in different ways. There have been times when getting to the program proved too much for her but she continued to keep in contact and would periodically attempt to come to class. Through the roughest times I was in contact with her counselors and leaving weekly messages on her voice mail.*

*The darkest hours for G also overlapped with an EMTAH gala art show and musical performance at the city art museum. G hung her work and was able to attend the event to see all but one of her pieces sell to people that fell in love with her sensitive articulation of her world. That night G was also awarded a full scholarship made possible by a national corporation. Unfortunately, right after this, G's life got even tougher and she again had to take a break from EMTAH as she found a new place to live and sorted*

*out her too complicated life. Through this time we continued to stay in touch all the while talking about her return to classes.*

*Back in program—she has a job, is finishing high school, and working toward putting her portfolio together to get into a visual arts or design college when she graduates. G's classes are about building her confidence in her ability and giving her tools to further her transition into adulthood. G has a wonderful combination of sensitivity and strength in her personality that is coming out now in her work. She is a quick learner and has huge potential to do whatever she will with her ability. We have outlined what her portfolio will consist of and are working on its systematic completion. I am talking to her about the reality of art school and the potential she will find there, and more importantly the potential and realization of her own inner resources, of which she has many.*

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## CHAPTER 3

# Creativity Grown Out of Oppression and Trauma

Many of the difficult problems in the Black community that pervaded the early blues songs—the breakdown of the family, uprootedness, isolation, and the despair that comes with the loss of cultural values and rituals that band people together—are now prevalent in contemporary life.  
—Ed Flaherty<sup>1</sup>

## A Historical Perspective: The African American Experience

The feelings of oppression so many people of various ethnicities experience today can be compared to those experienced throughout history by African Americans. Because understanding the story of Black Americans can give us insight and new understanding of the effectiveness of the creative arts under adverse circumstances, I would like to explore some of the African American history in detail.

I don't think anyone could imagine a more traumatic human experience than slavery, but unfortunately we can draw many simi-

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1 Ed Flaherty, *The Blues Alive* (AZ: Hohm Press, 1999), 8.

larities to the experiences of the at-risk and traumatized people we see today. When we allow ourselves to consider their ordeals, it's amazing to see the strength and resiliency of the human spirit. If we look closely, we can learn from their experiences.

We can learn how to take advantage of the human creative instinct as a means to promote the tolerance and healing needed to survive and transcend such circumstances. We can also discover an avenue for teaching victims new ways to rise above their circumstances, for positively affecting the immediate environment, and for empowering them with the ability to take advantage of opportunities for an improved life.

*I show my students that, like other people in hard times, they can find something of value within themselves. My work is to nurture that which is healthy in a child.*

—Katherine Charbonneau, teacher

When teachers use the approach referenced here and detailed in Book Two, *Enlivening the Creative Spirit*, they work to show people that the resiliency of the human spirit can be a springboard for rising above circumstance. Students learn that they have abilities and strengths that they can develop through their creativity and their spirit and receive very specific tools to deal with and help overcome their difficulties or trauma so they are better able to care for themselves—just developing the desire to care and starting to hope is a major step.

We show them how Blues, Gospel, and Jazz, some of today's most universal art forms, evolved from the traumatic circumstance of slavery and racism in America because people turned to the human spirit out of necessity.

*Like all genuine art, the blues belongs to a specific time, place and people which it then, paradoxically, transcends.*

—Charles Simic<sup>2</sup>

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2 Charles Simic, "No Cure for the Blues," in *Antaeus on Music* no. 71/72, Autumn, 1993, ed. Daniel Halpern.

*The art of Jazz originated from the Blues, and as such we're always prepared for tragedy.*—Wynton Marsalis<sup>3</sup>

## Expression and Communication in the Black Experience

It is helpful here to consider slavery and the African American experience from different perspectives, including the almost total dependence these individuals had on music, so as to fully appreciate how valuable the arts can be as a means of survival. Africans were rounded up by fellow countrymen, put in holding pens, and then transported by ship in the most dehumanizing manner. Families were separated and individuals were beaten into servitude and treated in ways that are hard to imagine. Any one of these experiences would produce severe trauma, not the least of which was the fact that the White culture was so very different from their own.

*. . . to be brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was and is in terms of purely philosophical correlatives, the complete antithesis of one's own version of man's life on earth—that is the cruelest aspect of this particular enslavement.*

—LeRoi Jones<sup>4</sup>

The historian Hermann Haarmann was referring to this when he said, in trying to explain why the German immigrant Alfred Lion had created the now famous Jazz recording company called Blue Note:

*Some people say that the central feature of Jazz, the Blues, is an expression of grief of mourning for the lost home or country. This memory is found in the Blues. Maybe Alfred Lion's preference for the real Blues is also a sign of this grief.*

—Hermann Haarmann<sup>5</sup>

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3 Wynton Marsalis, when asked if his approach to Jazz changed after September 11th.

4 Jones, *Blues People*.

5 *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns*, 2001.

Yet countless numbers of African slaves were able to produce the emotional and psychological environment necessary for survival. They did this by drawing upon their inner spirit and by creating community through the arts, particularly music. Not only were these abilities natural to them but, because the arts had been a well-developed aspect of their life in Africa, this nonmaterial asset was all but impossible to eradicate.

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Expressing difficulty brings relief.

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Just as it had been an essential part of their culture in Africa, music became an essential part of their survival in a trauma-laden circumstance. The slaves who were put to work in fields on the plantations of the South eased their work and their pain and gained strength by singing. Because most of the slaves were from West Africa where they used a call and response form of music, their early songs used field hollers and shouts. One person would sing a phrase (call) and the others would answer it (response). This was the music of the fields.

*Music changes your feelings! If you're feeling bad you can play music.—J, age 7*

In addition to singing, slaves expressed and communicated with the drum. African music is highly rhythmic, and the rhythms can be very complex and sophisticated. Drumming and dancing were main ingredients of the culture, and drumming was actually a form of language. The drum not only accompanied dances but was also, along with field hollers, a very powerful communication tool.

Because of this, the slave master recognized the drum as a dangerous instrument and, afraid of its being used to create a communal strength with the potential for revolt, confiscated drums and forbade their use. But the need for this form of communication was so great that replacements were continually found in such things as pots and empty buckets.

As time went on and Africans started to assimilate American/European influences, Blues and Gospel music evolved. This musical

evolution clearly marked the peoples' transition from being African to African-American, and the continued growth of this music led not only to Gospel, Blues, and Jazz, but also to Rhythm & Blues, Rock & Roll and many other forms of American music including classical compositions grounded in the music of Africa. As a matter of fact, it's hard to imagine much music produced in America that hasn't been influenced by Blues or Gospel music or a combination of both.

For Africans in America, songs expressed many things about daily life along with providing relief for pain. Songs expressed the meaning of different activities such as hunting, fishing, or weaving and expressed religious devotion as in Gospel music. Hymns expressed a hope for relief from oppression and suffering in a life after death that was free from the earthly bondage. References were even made to the suffering and hopes of the Jewish people in hymns like *Go Down, Moses*.

Of course any good communication using *words* is naturally full of rhythm and emotion and, as rhythm was a main aspect of musical communication for the Africans, it was specifically used to create a new language, beginning with the field hollers and shouts I spoke of earlier and evolving into work songs. One of the main requirements of their music was that it communicated emotion. Slavery gave much to be emotional about, as did the racism that accompanied the Emancipation. As time passed and circumstances changed, this form of communication changed and became incorporated into the new culture of America.

After Emancipation, secular music became a form of protest music. Black churches acted as social centers, the only places Black people could freely express honest feeling. Music also played a major role in spiritual expression as there was a strong belief that the spirit could be expressed exponentially in the context of community. Being happy and full of spirit was considered to be a very desirable and religious way of being. Call and response was a common and important technique used in the church, between singer and chorus as well as between preacher and congregation.

Music could alleviate suffering through truthful yet graceful expression, could open up the person to feel alive and relevant as a

human being, could stimulate insight and understandings of one's individual potential towards life's higher purpose, and could bring people together for a higher degree of communal support, all of which could help people rise above their circumstances.

Music was a dynamic expression of the meaning of being human, one of the only means available under the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and racism. Being human inherently means expressing and striving for fulfillment and growth; being human means being creative. The Blues offer a fine example.

The Gospel, Blues, and Jazz music that developed out of the African slave and African American experience became a universal voice capable of reaching out to embrace and express the existential pain, crisis, dilemma, and hope shared by all human beings, including people in less severe circumstances than those in the early Black experience in America.

*Blues as a verse form has as much social reference as any poetry, except for the strict lyric, and that is also found in the Blues. Love, sex, tragedy, interpersonal relationships, death, travel, loneliness, etc., are all social phenomena. And perhaps these are the things that actually create poetry, as things, or ideas: there can be no such thing as poetry (or Blues) exclusive of the matter it proposes to be about.*

—LeRoi Jones<sup>6</sup>

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The modulation of troubling thoughts can be seen in the Blues, a form of music that helps encompass the pain, manage it, and bring it to some focal point. It soothes, pacifies, and helps process pain and depression.

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## From Oppression to Repression

Born in slavery, the Blues began to develop after the Emancipation into the universal form we know today. The Emancipation left the African American with 200 years of a slave mentality and conditioning to contend with in a society that was still hostile to a Black person. This new freedom was totally foreign, full of new dangers and experiences for the ex-slave to express.

*The Negro, during those few years after the end of slavery, just before the exodus to the Northern cities, stood further away from the mainstream of American society than at any other time.*

—LeRoi Jones<sup>7</sup>

After the Emancipation, purely African musical forms died out as the Blues continued to evolve and be influenced by White music, using 8, 12, and 16 bar song forms. The Blues had grown out of the shout and spiritual, and this was echoed in a format in which the first two lines of a song were repeated and the third line was different, a use of the English language that could be communicated to more people. Other instruments were added, especially the guitar, to accompany the singer. In time more instruments were learned and used in solo roles, without vocals, towards the growth of Jazz.

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The arts decrease marginalization by addressing the need to belong.

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Along the way, as Blacks became somewhat freer to find their way into society, the theme of self-determination to achieve something more in America became a prominent expression albeit of an almost hopeless desire in such a racist climate. Other common themes that came about were the need for money, the social conditions, and the challenges of personal inner struggle. Where African music spoke more about community, the Blues spoke about

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7 Jones, *Blues People*.

the Black individuality; it was the voice of the Black's experience in America, a voice that became capable of speaking the truth and hope of many people.

*Music and lyrics became important ways of helping to survive, endure, and ultimately overcome the experience of slavery. What's interesting is that the messages in this art form transcend the specific trauma and speak to people throughout the world to this day.*

—Maya Angelou<sup>8</sup>

In understanding this art form we find a powerful tool, a way of dealing with the many challenges life gives us. It has the power of hope and the power to transform circumstance so life with spirit will somehow prevail. There is great value in deeply considering that the Blues, Gospel, and Jazz helped sustain an entire American subpopulation suffering from the residue of slavery and repressed by Jim Crow.

There are valuable lessons here for those who wish to learn more about effective means of helping people who are suffering from emotional challenges. There's no doubt that life can be especially difficult for us all at times. Indeed, there's a loneliness in us all, a longing for a truth about ourselves, our life, love, and the truth that we ultimately face life alone. To understand and accept this is to understand how to really be alive.

But there is a unique, dark loneliness that abused and traumatized people feel where hopelessness and desperation prevail, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that many people today have been traumatized. It is here that special help is needed, an effective means of overcoming this circumstance not only to make life bearable but also to give opportunities of hope. We can offer this through the development of creative impulses.

Like many of life's effective solutions, the forms of music discussed here grew out of necessity. Just so, these forms can be applied universally because they contain basic truths—they speak to the

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8 USA Today, December 18, 2002.

human condition everywhere even though the outward circumstance can seem quite different. There is healing in an expression that contains deep personal truth voiced in a way that is sincere, trusting, and communally understood. This is therapeutic and contains beauty. Developing these skills further can be empowering and can give a person the ability to deal with and overcome trauma to varying degrees, to become more functional and self sufficient.

*In all forms of art, part of you is in the trauma, and part of you is a step away from it. You learn something as you create or appreciate the creative contributions of others. The message becomes, 'someone was here before me—someone survived—and that means I can'.*

—Maya Angelou<sup>9</sup>

Use of the creative arts to develop character and skills, manage challenges, and facilitate healing will be discussed in following sections of this book.

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## CHAPTER 4

# The Nature of Trauma

Considering some of the causes and symptoms of trauma can create a context for understanding why the creative arts can be an effective therapeutic treatment for it. Victims of trauma have experienced situations such as physical and mental abuse, neglect, divorce, homelessness, exposure to violence or death, sexual molestation, rape, serious accident, war, terrorism, severe aggressions and other types of disasters.

These experiences cause internal fragmentation, cause the person to disconnect and disassociate from others, and disable full constructive participation in life. A traumatized person suffers depression, anxiety, and numbness. Trauma brings fear of life and an inner chaos that produces anxiety as he loses control of his life. This stimulates an impulse to escape in order to find relief and protection which in turn renders him incapable of filling his basic human need of creating order in his personal world.

As Dr. David V. Baldwin writes . . . *traumatic experiences shake the foundations of our beliefs about safety, and shatter our assumptions of trust.*<sup>1</sup> Trauma results from situations that are highly threatening or catastrophic and can produce a kind of phobia, a psychiatric disorder known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, approximately 55 percent of Americans have lived through at least one traumatic event and an estimated 7.8 percent of people in the

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1 David V. Baldwin, PhD, Eugene, Oregon, [www.trauma-pages.com](http://www.trauma-pages.com).

U.S. will experience PTSD at some point in their lives. (Unfortunately, these statistics do not include the high numbers of soldiers currently returning from conflicts who suffer from PTSD.) Studies indicate that among those with PTSD, roughly 30 percent go on to develop a chronic form that persists throughout a person's lifetime.

As a trauma victim's mind becomes governed by overwhelming suffering, he or she creates a false personal reality in order to cope. This adversely affects perceptions so responses to people are irrational and paranoid, based on the misconception of needing to protect oneself unnecessarily to survive. Victims are hypersensitive to "cues" outside themselves that they inappropriately associate with their traumatic event(s), causing irrational and inappropriate responses to new situations. They are haunted by intrusive, repetitive memories that recollect, reenact, and re-experience the event(s). They are powerless to control these inner experiences or regulate their emotions and so they are helpless in much of their outer interactions with the world. These symptoms can lead to anger, acts of aggression, and panic. Drugs, alcohol, and other unsafe behaviors are often used to alleviate the suffering which, without proper help, will inevitably lead to a downward spiraling of victims' lives.

Of course, this is overwhelming to people who are victims of trauma. They become weakened human beings who feel odd, isolated, and lacking in the social skills to trust and establish sustained, healthy relationships. This then leads to feelings of shame, of not being worthy of love, and to unbearable loneliness.

To manage this chaotic inner landscape, some victims will turn towards self-injury. This action helps mitigate the overwhelming influx of negative feelings and gives a sense of personal control and relief from the emotional overload. This self-destruction is a way of communicating a story that can't be verbalized, a cry of need for understanding and a means, though extreme, of exercising some control. What these victims need is someone capable of empathizing and willing to offer empowering opportunities to help them manage their feelings, regain true control, and heal.

*If we can sing or play what we feel at that moment, in our blackest despair, we have found a kind of healing . . .*

—Ed Flaherty, *The Blues Alive*, pg.19

*My grandson has so much anger in him, but since he started with the program we've seen that playing the piano can actually change his feelings. It's such a good involvement for him.*

—Grandmother

## The Trauma Trap

Fundamentally, words can't integrate the disorganized sensations and action patterns that form the core imprint of the trauma. Treatment needs to integrate the sensations and actions that have become stuck, so that people can regain a sense of familiarity and efficacy in their 'organism'.

—Bessell van der Kolk

There have been many studies of and articles on trauma that focus on the psychological aspects of traumatic events, and new research is extending our understanding of trauma's physical effects. A 2000 article in *Cerebrum*, a journal dedicated to brain science, describes the work of Dr. Martin Teicher, Director of the Developmental Biopsychiatry Research Program at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. Dr. Teicher's research findings document the physical effects of child abuse and neglect, specifically changes in brain structure that were linked to such abuse.

In research studies, just over half of the adult patients seeking mental health care who were interviewed reported childhood physical and/or sexual abuse. Researchers found a strong connection between adult patients who reported symptoms similar to those of

temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) and those who also reported early abuse. Researchers believe this suggests disturbances in the limbic system which affects memory and emotions, particularly fear.

Electroencephalograms bore this out. Patients who had been abused were . . . *twice as likely as non-abused patients to have an abnormal EEG.* EEG abnormalities were associated with the left hemisphere of the brain, which controls language. A larger study provided evidence that deficiencies in the development of the left brain hemisphere . . . *may contribute to the development of depression and increase the risk of memory impairments.*

Other McLean studies have demonstrated additional changes in brain structure that affect emotions and personality of abused young people and in damage that would lead to diminished control of fear and anxiety. The McLean team . . . *theorizes that the stress caused by child abuse and neglect may also trigger the release of some hormones and neurotransmitters while inhibiting others, in effect remolding the brain so that the individual is 'wired' to respond to a hostile environment.*<sup>2</sup> As Dr. Teicher says, *We know that an animal exposed to stress and neglect early in life develops a brain that is wired to experience fear, anxiety and stress. We think the same is true of people.*<sup>3</sup>

These studies suggest that not only does traumatic experience result in deep mistrust, anxiety, depression and a sense of loss of control, but it also physically rewires a person's brain to be on guard, suspicious, and far from ready to accept the idea that life could offer genuinely positive outcomes.

Not only do the findings of this significant work provide yet another answer as to why some traditional forms of therapy are not particularly useful to people struggling to overcome trauma, they are also helpful in understanding why, regardless of their intelligence or learning style, victims would have a hard time learning in traditional school settings. It seems obvious that students who have their focus and attention on their emotional or physical survival, something that

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2 McLean Researchers Document Brain Damage Linked to Child Abuse and Neglect, Press Release, McLean Hospital, Belmont, MA, December 14, 2000.

3 Ibid.

is far more critical to them, will process information from their environment quite differently from other students around them who don't suffer this kind of state.

*Until a child is given the opportunity to heal no learning will ever take place and we will fail—as teachers, as citizens, as souls. We are responsible for providing opportunities for learning—arts open doors.<sup>4</sup>*

There is a widespread belief among trauma experts that trauma resides where it is experienced, which is in a non-verbal, more reflexive, intuitive, primal and fundamental area, and that people suffering from PTSD return to that area in themselves when threatened. This area functions more with regards to body language, i.e., voice inflection, body movements, and facial expressions. It processes information in a non linear, more visual way, associating parts with a whole. For the PTSD person, this is accompanied by varying degrees of anxiety and fear and either hyperarousal (heightened emotions with physical responses) or dissociation (withdrawal, disconnection, emotional numbness). It seems logical that problems need to be addressed from the same areas in a person where the problem was experienced and resides, and this might serve as a good explanation as to why talk therapy is often ineffective for persons suffering trauma symptoms. If trauma resides in this kind of primal area then an effective intervention, solution, or activity that addresses that area should have a positive impact.

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4 Special Education Teacher, participating in an EMTAH training.

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## CHAPTER 5

# The Arts as Facilitator for Human Services

### Triumph Over Trauma and Oppression: The Creative Arts in Mental Health

Art in its many forms provides people with an anchor, a point around which they can weave the strands that make up for personhood, something beyond the superficial ‘enhancing good self-esteem’, something essential that gives them hope. Without hope negativity wins the battle, and art is on the positive side.

—Wander de C. Braga, M.D.<sup>1</sup>

Countless studies have proven the effectiveness of the arts as an aid to academics, and there is a substantial body of anecdotal evidence that points to the arts’ effectiveness for character development. Use of the *progressive fine arts* as a mental health intervention, however, is rarely considered, perhaps due to limited scientific evidence or,

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1 Wander de C. Braga, M.D., Child Psychiatrist, formerly with Parsons Child and Family Center, Albany, NY.

until recently, documented protocol available to enable practitioners to utilize its effectiveness. A growing number of professionals in the psychotherapeutic field are becoming frustrated with the limitations of current modalities, however, and while few would argue that the number of damaged people is rising, there is little agreement about what to do to help them.

Although an incredibly dark cloud, trauma also contains a number of characteristics that create a sort of silver lining which, when viewed through the lens of creativity, can be used as an asset. Trauma experts state, for example, that it is the nature of trauma to urgently reorganize and correct itself, and further that it is so self-motivating that it acts as a survival mechanism to further the process of evolution. These conditions substantiate the view that at-risk and traumatized people not only house the darkest of fears and emotions, they also contain the components and processes necessary for healthy growth. We also know that the brain has the capacity to create an image of betterment for the future, creating a most necessary ingredient—hope. Considering trauma from the basis of these understandings makes progress truly viable within the context of new creative opportunities.

As Sigmund Freud said:

*He who has eyes to see and ears to hear will be able to convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent he chatters with his fingertips. Betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.<sup>2</sup>*

Because a person's feelings are physical sensations and most believe that trauma resides in the body, it makes sense that the solution to trauma would involve a sensory motor orientation with a real kinetic and visceral connection to it. We need to pay attention to activities that can connect the various parts of the person: the left side of the brain with the right, the intellect with experience, the heart with the hands and head.

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2 Sigmund Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905 [1901]), S.E. 7:77-78.

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The arts entrain, resonate, vibrate, and synchronize.

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Cutting edge research about some of the physical factors affecting our social intelligence also offers fascinating, albeit unconventional, insights that can greatly contribute to our discussion.

*Drawing from the latest research in neuroscience, Lewis et al. demonstrate that our basic social intelligence—our ability to discern what other people are thinking and feeling, to read their cues, and to connect emotionally with them—is mediated not through the cortex of our brains, the seat of rationality, but through subcortical structures, particularly that which is known as the limbic system.*

*. . . We learn about who we are and what we should expect in relationships through our attachments to others—first and foremost our parents—and this learning is not usually conscious. The knowledge is subcortical, limbic, and intuitive. If we're loved for who we really are, we develop the capacity to love and be loved by others in relationships of true mutuality . . . If we're not understood, if we're inordinately rejected or overpowered, we grow up with a sense of ourselves as embattled and disconnected.<sup>3</sup>*

These and other current findings can be embraced as pointing us towards more effective modalities, and there are a myriad of specific reasons why the arts can contribute greatly here. Being able to gain insight and a personal voice while being stimulated by new thoughts through the arts creates light at the end of the trauma tunnel. Having a means to share emerging feelings and ideas provides the ground for feeling happiness instead of fear, and this enables students to take steps away from trauma and into the world, because not only do they begin to realize their own possibilities, they also put themselves in position to understand and take advantage of

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3 Excerpt from a review by Michael Bader of Thomas Lewis, M.D., Richard Lannon, M.D., and Fari Amini, M.D., *A General Theory of Love* (Vintage Books, 2001).

new possibilities available around them. Developing their humanness will give them abilities to navigate future obstacles as well. All of this will result in the means to understand other people and the desire to respect them, which will create better relationships. These are avenues that can heal.

The following student profile written by an EMTAH visual arts teacher gives an idea of the continuum of this experience.

*K was living at a local Children's Home when she first came to art class in a small group of other Children's Home residents. K was going through a very difficult withdrawal from a major drug dependency and recent diagnosis of bi-polar disorder. She did not want to be instructed. Because of K's aversion to input concerning her work, I took instruction in small spread-out steps and only around areas that would help her say what she was trying to say. I also used exposure to different materials so that K could experiment and let the teaching happen in ways that would not feel intrusive to her. K produced a good deal of powerful emotive work during this period which she displayed at the local art museum show, along with selling one as well. When K told me she was leaving her residential facility to live with her mother again, that was great news for her and her mother agreed that it was important for K to continue art classes.*

*Since K has come into private instruction her work has taken off. She is growing by leaps and bounds in her ability to convey the human form and the emotion she attaches to it. The emotion that pours out in her work is being supported more and more by talent that is allowing her to convey her vision clearly and thoughtfully. K is still in a tough transition as she comes up on her 10 month anniversary of her sobriety. Art for K is a way to keep her dark clouds at bay—an escape and a voice for all of her experience and strong feeling.*

*K's classes do not consist of the typical dynamics of lesson oriented instruction. Instead, we work project by project as an "art team" exploring what expression K is striving to convey and adding new challenges organically as the need for them to further K's expression emerges. Some sessions we may talk more than we draw and that's ok, because art is not separate from life, it is intimately entwined with it.*

*K recently displayed her work at another EMTAH art show where it attracted so much attention that we had to remove it after the opening night to keep it from being harmed. The unexpected and wonderful reaction to K's pencil drawings of people was that people wanted to touch them over and over again. I think that says so much—art is like touching the part of someone that you may not be able to see otherwise and it is very powerful.*

All people need to feel empowered as effective and useful contributors, valued for their ideas and respected for their abilities. Meaningful and stimulating creative opportunities can be most effective for the development of these assets in people with mental health challenges. Something new opens up inside us when the creative process is rekindled, a process of discovery with the stimulation a meaningful experience brings, a process of problem-solving, of dealing with the unknown and the ordering of it, of finding a way through it, of tolerating uncertainty, of coming to frustrating challenges and overcoming them, and of eventually equating this experience with other aspects of life. This is especially important for anyone who has had overwhelming experiences and is in need of deeper experiences that reinforce the ability not only to survive difficulty but to thrive as well, experiences in which the individuals discover that they can find oxygen somewhere within the chaos of the abyss.

*Until my retirement last year I had worked as a child psychiatrist at Parsons for close to 25 years. I was directly involved with the Residential Program on a daily basis. I knew the children and adolescents well—their problems,*

*their pains, their family difficulties, and their liabilities. Most kids came from backgrounds of abandonment, horrible abuse, poverty, multiple losses and little hope for the future. As a psychiatrist I was, of course, concerned with complicated treatment issues: therapies, medications, the daily management of anger and destructive behaviors, suicidal gestures, anorexia, depression, ADHD, psychosis, etc. At the end of the day I came home surrounded by a cloud of negativity, the distillate of unremitting human misery and suffering that is the lot of most of those youngsters. It was hard to see where there was hope, the bright spot, the assets.*

*Occasionally, however, there were special celebrations in the organization. At a Christmas party I was astounded to see my autistic patients (both little children and adolescents) putting on a Christmas pageant, with props, costumes, pretend Magi, kids singing and all! These patients hardly spoke. How did they manage this? At the opening of a new Gym [an EMTAH performance], I saw M, the very same 15-year-old abused boy I knew as impulsive and belligerent, a slow learner who coped with depression. Yet, now he was joyfully playing the drums and introducing his music to the audience. How could that be possible? The official classificatory DSM-IV label assigned to him did not quite factor that.*

*Decorating one of the walls in my home is a simple but charming floral painting. I was attracted to it because of its cheerful and hopeful impression. It was made by a girl 17-year-old who had stayed with us at Parsons several years because of her serious assaultiveness. She was psychotic and mildly retarded. She had frightening "flash-backs" connected with the memories of sexual abuse endured from her father. She was deeply traumatized by the murder of her 16-year-old younger sister (who allegedly was prostituting herself and selling drugs in the streets). In short, a deeply*

*troubled girl with little prospects for the future. Yet, how did she come to produce such a beautiful, bright painting?*

*When studying psychiatry we were told about the “clinical gaze”—the skills needed to detect signs, symptoms, patterns, meanings etc. Towards the end of my career as a clinician, I became convinced that the clinical gaze missed something very important. This is the underlying spirit or, for those who do not like the term, the human essence. I learned that art can reach out to that essence. It can bring forth aspects of our patients which, when well cultivated, truly humanizes them. In my mind M became a drummer and musician, well beyond his official PTSD diagnosis. In my mind, the 17-year-old is a girl who can do beautiful paintings; the autistic children are kids with abilities and talents I could not see in the day-to-day clinical work.*

—Wander de C. Braga, M.D.

Perhaps the main reason that stimulating the creative process can be so meaningful is that this provides a direct path to the creative human spirit. The creative spirit contains our essence and is a most intimate place in us. Over time, given the right opportunities and environment, challenged people can allow themselves to expand that place and to experience and express who they are beyond their difficulty.

*Trauma and terror, pain and grief could be transmuted into the joy of performance, the creation of beauty, the healing rhythms of dance and song, story and poetry, not forgotten but changed and changed together. No longer a recurrent terrifying fantasy of the solitary victim, but the newly transformed addition to the culturally shared reality, another chapter in the cultural mythical system.*

—Sandra Bloom<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra Bloom, *Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma: Victims, Artists, and Society* (Community Works, May, 1996).

Through the arts we can create the emotional environment necessary to guide the person in a manner that's at once nurturing and stimulating. People of any age should enjoy the journey, and the relationship that can develop as a result of this shared enthusiasm supports them in a way that they have probably never before felt supported. But we can't leave them then. We need to dance with them, supporting and guiding them as needed, ensuring that they make it through the inevitable difficulties until they are truly strong. Along the way we too will grow.

Following is an in-depth exploration of just some of the ways the arts can address emotional challenges of nearly any severity.

## The Arts Provide Opportunities for Positive, Meaningful Self-Expression and Communication

Since trauma creates tension that often feels unbearable, people have no choice but to find a release. A hallmark feature of trauma and other emotional disorders is the fight-or-flight syndrome, brought about by the intense feeling of being trapped. Another is helplessness leading to hopelessness. People suffering from serious emotional disorders need intense, positive outlets for releasing and channeling overwhelming feelings such as these. Unfortunately, positive outlets are typically limited, especially on a consistent basis, so these emotions are usually expressed and energy released in negative and destructive ways.

A potent answer lies in the artistic mediums whose very essence is communication. Being able to express the truth, however difficult, is an important part of healing and finding a new direction. The arts allow for many different, positive ways of releasing and expressing without the stigma or concern of what is the right or wrong way to feel.

*In fact, the more difficult it is to say the words about what hurt them, the more important it is to have other ways for*

*children to express themselves and get their story told.*

—Joseph Benamati<sup>5</sup>

It is important to be in touch with all feelings and somehow express and communicate them, whether it is to oneself or to others. The arts can be very effective and in many cases may be necessary to help people tap into the real persons they are behind their defensiveness. Once they have done this and confronted difficult feelings they can reach through to their positive ones.

Of course that expression can be uncomfortable for everyone involved. I remember a meeting of child care workers and artists in which we were discussing an upcoming photography unit. As we began to discuss the range of emotional responses the students might experience during the classes and how to guide them, some of the child care workers became visibly nervous. One of them expressed this discomfort by asking if they couldn't *just encourage the students to take nice pictures*. We encounter this reaction fairly frequently, but it's self-sabotaging. Any attempt to avoid, divert, or deny feelings—to specifically disallow people to express from an area that is meaningful and come to terms with what is really going on within themselves—will only lead to more difficulty . . . for everyone.

*It's good for people in trouble to be around artists. You unravel a bit when you make art—it's like creating order out of chaos to make something unique. We artists have something in common with troubled kids. We also understand rage . . . artists aren't afraid of rage.*

—Katherine Charbonneau, EMTAH teacher

Expression that enables people to become proactively and positively self-directed to find meaningful resources within themselves provides a way to transcend difficulty and head towards normalcy and good emotional health. A person who is engrossed in playing music, painting a picture, or dancing, for example, can travel to another world where stress is alleviated, imagination is stimulated,

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5 Joseph Benamati, CSW, Parsons Child Trauma Study Center, Albany, NY.

good feeling is produced and new areas are discovered within—all-important ground where a person's innate intelligence will thrive and where painful feelings can be processed and channeled. Strength and hope also have residence there.

*S wouldn't be doing what he's doing without this program. EMTAH helps students step outside of the box, by which I mean go outside of routine ways of approaching situations so they can experience new horizons. This process and experience with EMTAH has helped S recognize that he has an appealing future, a future with possibilities that are meaningful and productive.*

—Social Worker

As shown earlier, emotional turmoil can be a great creative spur. George Bernard Shaw wrote, *If you can't get rid of the family skeleton, you might as well make it dance.* Many artists, both professional and amateur, will attest that their involvement with the arts is necessary for their very survival because it gives them control and meaning in their lives, a reason for being, and an expression that keeps them going. The love of doing and creating is no small part of this, for where there is love there is healing. The following personal life experience of one of our teachers provides a case in point.

*Music is what I turned to: it was a lifeline to me. As a child it was a place I could go—I could play music and make sense of the world to a certain extent. I could find comfort there, I could find progression there. It helped me understand about going beyond certain feelings that I had about myself, or at least cope with certain traps that I might have felt in my environment. So it was important just to be involved in music whether it meant I was to be a professional musician or not. I could feel it in both my emotional state, my feelings, and I could feel it in my intellectual state. It made a lot of difficult feelings at least tolerable for me at that time.*

*And then as I grew I met other musicians. I found that this was a theme, and the creative process, whether it was music or art, had the same effects on other people. We'd share that with each other. As I got more involved in the teaching aspect I could clearly see how important involvement in the creative process was, not just for youth, but for anybody. I could see my students' need for expression and how that could carry over. It could make them feel stronger and happier in other things, especially with kids who had more obvious difficulties. It's something that I've grown with all my life.*

Loss of language, known as alexithymia when it relates to the inability to verbally express ones' feelings, is another major symptom of trauma. This can range in severity from an inability to use language effectively to not being able to speak at all. Research suggests that trauma not only impairs the functioning of the left side of the brain, the side that processes language,<sup>6</sup> but also creates a schism between the two sides of the brain by short-circuiting a part of it, leaving the victim with no means to bridge this gap. As a result the victim is unable to process or effectively communicate his or her trauma verbally; in other words, words and language are simply not available or useful in "thinking" about or processing a traumatic experience with the intention of healing.

*The loss of language function is critical to our understanding of what happens to the traumatized person. Language serves many functions including social communication. Perhaps most importantly, language allows us to order reality.*

—Sandra Bloom<sup>7</sup>

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6 The two hemispheres of the brain process information differently: the left side in a linear, logical, sequential, verbal, and concrete manner while the right side processes in an intuitive, random, nonverbal, and symbolic manner. The left side processes from part to whole: it takes pieces, lines them up, and arranges them in a logical order to draw conclusions. The right side processes from whole to parts, holistically, starting with the answer: it sees the big picture first, not the details.

7 Bloom, *Bridging the Black Hole*.

The arts address the loss of language syndrome by allowing for the expression of important feelings that cannot be sufficiently expressed verbally.

*I think the trauma in Vietnam had a lot to do with the way I internalized things. When I came back from Vietnam, I had a speech impediment and I really couldn't talk. So I expressed myself through art. It was more of a survival thing. It really wasn't a career move.*

—Paul Goodnight, artist

As discussed previously, it is also currently believed that the overwhelming stress of trauma may put the victim in a more primal survival mode. This mode resides in an area of the brain that existed before verbal language, as we know it, was developed.

According to David V. Baldwin, PhD: *In the 'purest' sense, trauma involves exposure to a life threatening experience. This fits with its phylogenetically old roots in life-or-death issues of survival, and with the involvement of older brain structures (e.g., reptilian or limbic system) in response to stress and terror.*<sup>8</sup>

As long as the victim is unable to process the traumatic experience—to order it, share it, and experience some catharsis—he is doomed to recreate the past. The situation then compounds and leads to further damage and the development of neurosis.

*Without a cultural context, without some way of translating between the language of the right and of the left, integration cannot occur. Instead, the psyche, like a broken phonograph player, keeps replaying the same fragments from a post traumatic tune, unconnected to a melody line.*

—Sandra Bloom<sup>9</sup>

The creative arts can offer a pathway to and communicate with this area and have shown to be very effective here. They affect many parts of the person from many different perspectives. Historically, art

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8 Baldwin, [www.trauma-pages.com](http://www.trauma-pages.com)

9 Bloom, *Bridging the Black Hole*.

developed prior to words, and at all times children have had involvement with art before they learn to talk. The arts can bridge and harmonize a victim's cognitive and non-cognitive areas through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic means.

It is my undocumented yet solid experience that an in depth, progressive, authentic approach with the arts can enhance neurogenesis and prompt the integration of different regions of the brain. Charles Figley, Ph.D., professor in the School of Social Work at Florida State University, also believes the arts can play a vital role in reintegrating the brain:

*The creative process . . . activates both the hemispheres of the brain, and allows both the analytical and emotional sides to achieve some balance in creating meaning out of the experience. What happens is that art creates 'soothing' reactions that allow people to face these memories in a less painful way. The main thing is to use the arts to let students find out who they are and to use that success to pursue what they want.*

—Charles Figley, Ph.D.

## The Arts Catalyze our Ability to Know Ourselves

The process for which we are advocating also illuminates various facets of a person so as to provide opportunities for them to experience, explore, and understand their inner makeup and discover avenues towards self-knowledge. This can be called “communication with oneself.”

The 1996 President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities provided an eloquent summation of the arts' ability to actuate a human being's innate ability to pursue self-knowledge:

*Creative art activity allows the adolescent to gain mastery over internal and external landscapes by discovering mechanisms for structure and containment that arise from within, rather than being imposed from outside. The artistic experience entails repetition of actions, thoughts or emotions, over which the adolescent gains increased tolerance or mastery. While providing a means to express pain and unfulfilled longings during a distinct maturational phase, the arts simultaneously engage the competent, hopeful and healthy aspects of the adolescent's being.<sup>10</sup>*

A student profile written by one of our teachers further illustrates this.

*B came to EMTAH in June of 1999 through a local mental health agency with the understanding that he would not be allowed to be alone with me in the studio during his lessons. B has been diagnosed with a developmental disorder called Noonan's Syndrome. Noonan's Syndrome is not his only challenge—he also struggles with anger management and appropriate behavior in social situations. On his first day of class, the three of us sat down together. Ten or fifteen minutes into the lesson he requested a private audience with the staff person that accompanied him. When they returned to the room I was asked if I felt comfortable conducting class with only B in the room; the staff person would be right outside the door. I agreed. This was the beginning of my relationship with B, and the first step of his journey as an artist.*

*Now, 9 months later, B has not only become an artist, he has turned 18 and taken many steps toward living more independently as a young adult. In his classes we focus on the areas he is naturally in tune with—color, pattern, and design. His strengths lie within his wonderful imagination*

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10 President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, *The Coming Up Taller Report*, [www.pcah.gov/cut.htm](http://www.pcah.gov/cut.htm).

*and his ability to find relationships between images that create lively, joyful compositions that people respond to. Drawing from life or using perspective, if dwelled upon as in traditional visual arts classes, would make him miserable and cause his self esteem to plummet. What makes sense to him are patterns on the color wheel, patterns of nature or the design created through experimenting with composition.*

*As B has navigated his way through growth, learning challenging material, changing homes, getting two jobs, grocery shopping and learning to balance a checkbook, there have been classes with outbursts, intimidation, confusion or anger. Just as important as his artistic development has been his development as a student. He has learned the boundaries between the role of teacher and student, how to control his behavior so that he can get the most out each class, and if he has had a tough day, how to discuss and control his negative feelings instead of letting them control him in class.*

*B is a perfect example of an artist that lets the work live on its own. By this I mean that if he is given a starting point and the support and freedom to move forward he will consistently let his creativity lead the way to success. B comes to class now ready to work. If he is in a horrible mood he does not let it interfere and sometimes surprises me at the end of class with the confession that he came in full of anger and feels better now. I would not have known. He has hung his work in two EMTAH art shows, and sold work at both events. People that have never met B respond naturally to the charm and imagination in his work. He has learned how to discuss his artwork with his audience and take pride in his strengths and unique understanding of his world. His art defines his personality and gives him a context to be his best. B connects other parts of his life to his art—he sees relationships between art and cooking and*

*loves to compare his two passions. B's class meets during the Jazz Ensemble and he never fails to comment on the music, the performers, do a little dance and employ the rhythm in his work.*

## The Benefits of Involvement with a Substantial Arts Program

The approach I developed to effectively harness the creative process incorporates the qualities of being strengths-based and mentoring-based, culturally relevant and progressive, and long-term. The following sections communicate some of the benefits to be gained from this approach and explain how it addresses the issues of an at-risk or traumatized person. For details on the specific approach itself please see Book Two, *Enlivening the Creative Spirit*. There are four overarching benefits to students participating in a substantial, in-depth arts program:

1. They thrive from the attention they receive from a mentor-teacher in an individual or small group lesson
2. They learn to modulate their thoughts and actions
3. They feel the continuum so necessary for development
4. They learn through cultural relevance.

### 1. Students thrive from individual attention

Emotionally challenged people are starved for the right kind of attention and need to learn positive ways of receiving it. During their art, music, or dance lessons, particularly in individual or small-class instruction, the student is at the center of positive attention from a caring adult who appreciates and facilitates their natural creative tendencies and encourages their individual voice. With the guid-

ance of another person, students in this environment are able to begin building a relationship based on self-worth. This relationship with the caring adult mentor is critical for the student's success because good mentoring contains components necessary for healing to occur—it's long term, consistent, progressive, and mutual. This is a totally new or infrequent experience for most, and this attention and validation can cause an unwinding and enthusiastic unfolding of who these students are.

It's important to provide an especially fertile soil in which the traumatized, at-risk person can participate. With mentoring as the main nutrient of this soil, the student will experience a high degree of receptivity and the teacher can transfer his<sup>11</sup> understandings as he participates in the art with the student. The more a teacher can become attuned to the student and the art at the same time in a given moment, the more the teacher can transfer. As the student becomes more trusting of her involvement in this mutual dance, she allows her creative process more freedom. The more creativity a person allows—especially with another—the better the chance of healing.

Vulnerability is a healthy component of a positive relationship, one which can produce a feeling of liberation. The feeling of positive vulnerability is transferred through art when a person has the experience of receiving (sensitivity) and of giving (expression). To experience success and growth in this state is a basis for stepping onto new ground.

One of the most important abilities in understanding another person and creating relationship is the effort made to understand another's point of view non-judgmentally, to take the person seriously without trying to diminish or avoid their reality. This is especially true for people who have psychological and emotional challenges. Being allowed to express themselves in their own way and in their own time (and allowing themselves to receive that expression internally in a non self-hypercritical way) is an essential interaction if students are to feel validated and develop a sense of self worth.

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11 For consistency the female gender is used throughout for students and the male gender for mentor teachers.

The ability to listen non-judgmentally, to take the person seriously without trying to diminish, fix, alter or avoid reality, is crucial for creating good relationships. Sensitive listening is one of many critical skills that are developed in a creative mentoring relationship.

Many years ago a highly depressed youth was referred to our program by a health clinic in a local high school. Clinic staff reported that "P" would come to the clinic in the mornings and just sit with his head down in silence. They were understandably concerned about the possibility of suicide. When we met P he was quite depressed and detached and told us he had no interest in school or much else, for that matter. He said he liked music and had always wanted to play the piano but his family had little money and could not afford lessons or an instrument. We arranged a scholarship so that he could study piano.

He was very sensitive and learned quickly, and he soon began to open up. He came to his lessons consistently, and in a short time he was back at his high school and looking into a career in music production. When he was interviewed for a newspaper article about the program about a year after he began his lessons, P told the reporter:

*I look at him [his teacher "R"] more as a friend than a teacher . . . this is the best time of the week for me. I love the piano. I love hearing it, playing it and learning new things to play. Basically, I like hanging out with "R." I'm a lot happier now, ever since I started going to lessons. I can't really explain why, but it's a whole new door opening for me. I used to think why bother, but now I can see things as fun.*

He just needed the right opportunity which, coincidentally, was a good investment for the community in the long run. The price of the scholarship for this youth was far less than the cost of mental health or social service treatment and maintenance programs he would have needed, or the amount of money it would have taken to arrest and bring him to court for possible incarceration if he had headed for trouble. It was also far less than the community would

have lost in terms of the contributions he is now able to make. When these costs are considered, the price of a scholarship for a substantial, high-quality arts-based mentoring program is quite a bargain.

## 2. Students learn to modulate their thoughts and actions

Because the arts can organize and regulate one's emotions, artistic experiences can help people regain control of their lives and find better ways of handling stress. Known clinically as *affect management*, the ability to manage your feelings brings hope and the opportunity to transcend difficulty or trauma. Also, as people develop balance through working with the arts they can let go of some of their egocentricity and emotional overload. This paves the way for the channeling of impulsivity and hyperactivity into constructive expression which in time can erode isolation and reoccurring negative feelings.

One of the most effective tools for self-help that can come from an involvement with the arts is the empowerment to commit one's self to one's own health. As Jennifer Bradley so aptly states in *Managing Self-Injury Among Youth in Residential Placement*:

*The most effective intervention with clients who self-injure does not involve taking extreme steps to stop the client from self-injury, but rather helping the client gain control of her inner experiences in a more adoptive manner, thereby rendering the self-injury unnecessary. This distinction has enormous implications for the caregiver's approach to a client. Encouraging the client to maintain and work to increase self control must be the primary goal. In this way caregivers work to empower their clients.<sup>12</sup>*

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12 Jennifer Bradley, "Managing Self-Injury Among Youth in Residential Placement," Residential Group Care Quarterly, Fall 2003.

Many years ago, the mother of a teen who had a history of cutting herself came to us distraught, asking for help. When we interviewed her daughter we discovered that she had an interest in writing as a way to express herself and also liked the idea of playing the guitar. We gave her the opportunity to compose songs, write lyrics, and put them to music as she learned the guitar. This naturally opened the way for her to sing her lyrics, so she was able to bring together her interests and strengths quite well in order to learn new things.

It was exciting to watch all of this coalesce for her. She excelled and was put in a group with three other girls to form a quartet of two guitars, bass, and drums, in which she sang and performed original compositions. This became a good social unit, a collateral benefit of her musical development. This young lady stopped the destructive behavior, got a part-time job working directly with the public, and continued with her schooling. Needless to say the relationship with her mother found a new, more positive, level. In conversations with her mother many years later we learned that she was continuing her education and thriving.

We consider these to be dramatic results from such a simple, positive opportunity. The key components we provided in this were:

- a relevant activity in which she could define herself and release real feelings
- an avenue for communication
- the opportunity to utilize her strengths
- a consistent committed relationship (mentoring)
- in-depth, quality instruction suited to her learning style that exposed and developed her strengths and potentials.

*EMTAH was definitely the first thing in my life that I was consistent about—my practice and coming to lessons. I*

*learned to get in touch with my internal rhythms so I could focus on what I wanted to learn. It became a rhythm in my life that I could organize everything else around.*

—Former student, who went on to earn a masters in computer science at a leading university.

### 3. Students feel the continuum so necessary for development

Self esteem comes with striving for and achieving success. Through gaining proficiency in the arts and experiencing success as a result of effort, a person perceives value in striving for further achievement. A strengths-based, long term approach enables students to personally assimilate what they are learning and to understand their unique learning style. This process increases their ability to gain the security inherent in a stronger, healthier sense of self. A director from an agency using our program once observed:

*I have seen many initiatives for treating traumatized children come and go. Many interventions were based on sound psychological principles but failed to capture the imagination of both clients and staff. EMTAH is the exception. I believe it has tapped into the desire of our clients to be competent and creative. It has allowed them to see themselves and be seen by others as more than a collection of problems and diagnoses.*

*They can now call themselves artists, or sculptors, or singers. What a marvelous and wondrous change from always being the scapegoat or the 'problem' child at home and in school to being the center of (positive) attention at a performance or recital. How much more magical it is to mix colors and textures on canvas or play quarter and half notes on an instrument than to study those things in science or math class (where you probably can't sit for very*

*long anyway!) Who wouldn't want to be seen as 'together' enough to express themselves by wailing on the drums rather than banging down a wall? EMTAH has provided the avenue for our clients to perform, express themselves, and succeed.*

*A national leader in the field of treating traumatized youngsters once said that most troubled youth don't have too many behaviors to choose from but too few. And they tend to use the few things they know in a repeated cycle of failure and social ineptness . . . one positive behavior can spell the difference between failure and success.*

—Joseph Benamati, CSW, Ed.D.<sup>13</sup>

A therapeutic foundation needs to be a gestalt of all surroundings. A multi-faceted long-term, progressive approach creates this kind of interconnected safety net for the student by providing the creative continuum so important for growth. Through the progression and successes that a good, emotionally sustaining relationship can bring to bear, a student comes to create an accepting relationship with herself, thereby forming a basis to more readily accept others and to share who she is. Sharing your spirit and having it accepted are necessary for a healthy life—essential ingredients in the recipe for happiness.

This is a natural and fundamental principle, readily available if we choose to put the necessary efforts into bringing it about. By promoting these essential relationships, we are at same time providing people with the means to develop another natural element in the growth process—the ability to give. To share and give makes us happy, and there must be happiness in the healing process.

Another benefit to the continuum of relationship is that of having one thing lead to another—one stage of experience is connected to and provides a stepping stone to the next which leads to increased awareness and understanding. Experiencing this

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13 Joseph Benamati, CSW, Director, Residential Mental Health Services, Parsons Child & Family Center, Albany, NY, August, 2002.

connectedness is empowering and can lead to increased self-exploration and development of deeper meaning and to the actualization of inherent human qualities.

Because this approach is long-term and multi-faceted, we are able to guide our students beyond the first stages of self-esteem, enabling them to truly succeed. Once students begin to feel good about themselves, for example, they can thrive by coaching other youth. One of our students demonstrated this quite beautifully. “C” was doing poorly in school and was on the verge of dropping out. He liked music and found a voice, a very expressive and particular one, through playing an instrument—a voice through which he was able to communicate and be appreciated by many people. His drug and alcohol use drastically diminished, friends and relationships increased, and after a few years he had achieved real accomplishment.

One of the happiest times for him was when he was sitting beside younger musicians in an ensemble coaching them on their instruments. He beamed and benefited as he gave and received, while the young musicians stretched out and often flew with his support, which they knew they could trust. He was a role model who brought out the potential of others. It was beautiful to see, something only students could do for students, something everyone in the experience benefited from as would so many who came in contact with the students outside the room.

#### 4. Students learn through cultural relevance

When the arts are properly implemented there’s a connection between learning and what is lived that creates a living culture. Cultural relevance is especially important for at-risk and traumatized students because it creates a sense of inclusion. There’s a lot to be gained when students feel validated. As they build the skills of something they’re connecting (or resonating) with, be it a sound, picture, or whatever, they also learn the culture or tradition from which it grew so they feel that they’re a part of something, and they begin to understand

history and culture. They start to understand the context of how that tradition was created, and because they connect with it they have the chance to feel an emotional part of something, and that's validating.

There is an opportunity here, for those who want to look and listen, to consider the "what and why" of recognizing messages in the culture—to search for some understanding of the root causes of conditions that in many ways have become more severe for people today and, for youth, far beyond simple adolescent rebellion.

It's important to make learning relevant for all students, but to engage the disconnected student, this is vital. Culturally significant programs, that is to say programs that are connected and related to the young person's experience, provide grounding that's necessary for meaningful learning.

As mentioned previously, the art form of the Blues is based in the ability to rise above personal or social circumstance. Through connecting their feelings and experiences with traditions such as this, students come to gain or regain a most necessary ingredient for living—hope. Hope can be the capital for an investment in life, or perhaps a reinvestment, and having positive creative art experiences can provide youth with some important tools to put this capital to work for them. When their investments pay off, everyone benefits.

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The Blues borne from pain produces a depth of  
realness, a depth of expression, and honesty.

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Music and poetry have always been a common and especially strong voice in expressing the goings on of the culture, as exemplified today by Hip Hop. There are many levels on which we can listen in order to hear the messages. We can listen to the beat to make us feel good or to want to dance. We can listen to the lyrics to know that others share our hopes or heartache. We can listen to the angst to help relieve our anger. We can listen to clear our head, clean the slate, and redirect our feelings. We can listen to motivate or sedate. We can experience this more in some music than in others, but in most cases, it's a cathartic experience that's readily available today for our selective pleasure.

Today's art also often communicates to us on another level by expressing a story of the plight of youth, a story that clearly describes their need. In a culture that has so many challenges, I think it is a wise investment to try and understand what is being expressed in youth art and why. There's a tradition in the evolution of all cultures. Today we can see such a tradition in the Hip Hop movement where Rap and Spoken Word were reinvented. We can trace the roots of this particular kind of expression back to slavery and the beginnings of the African American assimilation into White society as we described earlier.

We can see the evolution continue through the Blues, Rhythm & Blues, the Beat movement, Rock and Folk music, through to the evolution of Jazz. These genres express a condition—a condition of people at given times in history that nevertheless still speaks to us today. As poet Charles Simic so beautifully said: *Like all genuine art, the Blues belongs to a specific time, place, and people which it then, paradoxically, transcends.*<sup>14</sup>

## Circle of Support: The Arts Create Community

We think it's evident that any modality which can cause such healing could also mitigate or even prevent illness. Unfortunately, Western culture has segmented the arts, putting them into a specialized, "privileged" position through commercialization. An integral part of virtually all societies, the arts often serve as a sort of cohesive fluid in which the community operates and the performance aspect of art is secondary to a self-participatory way of being together and socializing. When people in these societies get together through music, dance or song, they do so casually or informally to relax and enjoy themselves and each other. These largely unstaged, inexpensive, and often impromptu gatherings create a feeling of

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14 Simic, *No Cure for the Blues*.

community in which all can share the human experience in an upbeat way through a universal language. This resonance with others can be reassuring and therapeutic.

In fact many cultures understand that communal energy is a truly healing substance. In these societies, such as the Native American culture, when parents don't have the capacity to properly take care of their children, the community comes together through song and dance to help them. The whole absorbs the parts into it, addressing the dissociation right off, and the greater family benefits from a healing along with the challenged member. If you consider a dysfunctional family to be a toxic environment, you can see how the child healed by the greater community would feel as if she had been taken out of polluted water and put into a purer body of water into which she could become absorbed. There is no reason why our culture can't learn to share this responsibility, too, but we will first have to change some of our perceptions.

We have caused the extended family, which carries tradition, to disintegrate, and instead of taking more responsibility for dealing with our children's issues we now often hire professionals. This is rarely truly effective, partly because we often act too late. A currently emerging treatment known as wrap around or community-based treatment, for example, which enlists the child's entire community into her therapy, does so after the challenges have been compounded: when everyone is finally brought together we hear that because nothing has worked with this child she is now medicated, in special education, and in system placement. This means that she is probably already fragmented and has lost the ability to trust anyone. Why not go to the common sense solution first and provide the community as the first line of support? This will also increase the critical dimension of prevention for the community.

The world can be a threatening and fearful place full of anxieties for an at-risk or challenged person. Progressive trauma experts believe that non-clinical community resources, such as people with no specific psychological training, can provide the most "therapeutic" interactions with challenged people. The desire and ability to care and consistently share your skills are good starting points. This orientation

also gives at-risk people the very “therapeutic” opportunity of being educators to broaden the awareness of their new friends who are not at risk. Together, they might even be able to explore how the actions of a person suffering from trauma are misunderstood by others, thereby making for more negativity for everyone. This would not only offer the opportunity for the challenged person to make changes in their actions, but the new friend would most naturally share his experience in the community as an advocate. It’s a win-win situation.

An effective means for integrating people into the community could be community resource centers to provide students and others with information about non-school programs and people in the community who are willing to mentor. These centers could be managed by the people they serve in schools and community centers, with the guidance of others.

Having vibrant arts programs as a part of community services would be an ideal resource for challenged populations. It would also add an upbeat dimension to the challenges so many of these communities face. The drive to create is universal, and the arts have been a necessary and vital ingredient of many activities in life, not the least of which has been simple survival. Creating, interacting with, sustaining and accepting basic sustenance from a community are all necessary behaviors for survival. Through numerous kinds of artistic expression, the group or community identifies itself, enacts ceremonies, creates architecture, exchanges information, and provides entertainment and an overall aesthetic atmosphere. The community then becomes capable of providing various securities, socialization opportunities, and an organization to life.

Because the arts can convey meaning without words they can create common ground, connecting and bonding people together in ways that transcend culture, race, language, negativity, and other often divisive factors. Participation is generally a much easier (and more fun) way to move forward as an individual and as a society. It can also be a way of expressing feelings that are difficult or make the individual feel too vulnerable, a way of expressing love and a need for others, a way of alleviating a lot of the pressures that life normally and naturally brings.

Because the creative arts heighten feelings, they are capable of moving us out of our normal frame of thinking. When that happens—even momentarily—we are more apt to let in something new, to accept things outside ourselves. When we share a really heightened experience with people whom we perceive to be different from us, for example, an experience that so impacts us we are taken out of our normal sense of reality, we will jointly experience a new reality and a new commonality. We all value this kind of experience.

The healing process of a creative community also involves an external experience that reduces the isolation, a way of translating and processing with others. It's an experience that is strengths-based and upbeat, beyond psychopathology, and not burdensome to others. So much in life is communicated without words, goes beyond words, and is beneficial for all people whether they have suffered trauma and severe challenges or not.

One good place to start employing the arts as a preventative measure would be with caregivers who work with the victims of trauma. These professionals can suffer secondary or vicarious trauma, the symptoms of which are similar to (though less severe than) those experienced by the primary victims of PTSD. These symptoms can adversely affect the caregivers' work and relationships. Understanding this, creating a balance, and finding protective factors are essential for ensuring the caregivers' ability to be productive at work as well as for their emotional survival outside of work.

Here the arts can be helpful for the same reasons they help victims of PTSD. Even if the caregivers aren't suffering from secondary traumatization but simply need some relief from a very stressful profession, the arts offer a wonderful release of stress. Many of the training participants with whom we've worked often state that they feel they will gain as much as their clients from an artistic involvement.

Addressing fundamental human conditions and finding positive, common, truthful ways to express them will cultivate the soil to put us on new ground. This will allow for emotional understandings which will be educational for all involved, enabling us to go beyond an orientation of treating symptoms towards one of gaining an effective understanding of underlying problems. While it's true that

the current intervention of colorful condom distribution provides protection and controls one particular crisis, for example, we need to try to go beyond protection into prevention, and this can only occur through understanding root causes. In the same way, we need to have a deeper engagement with at-risk and traumatized people, a more contemporary, grass-roots, flexible engagement that takes their feelings and strengths more seriously.

There's a story I heard in my youth that has stayed with me over the years and influenced this approach. It's a spiritual tradition that I believe communicates an underlying truth of all religions and ethical behavior.

*A wise man was asked the difference between Heaven and Hell. He told the inquirer that he would show him, and in an instant they were walking down a hallway towards a great room. The man smelled the aroma of delicious food, and hearing no voices he presumed the hall was empty. To his surprise, when they entered he saw that the rows of tables were filled with people. They were frail, pale and haggard, their mouths turned down in frowns, their eyes averted from one another. The air was thick with frustration and despair.*

*No one was eating, and the man looked hard to see why. In the center of each table was a large bowl of steaming stew, and each person had a long handled spoon to reach the stew. But the man saw that although each person held a spoon, the handles of the spoons were so long they couldn't get the food into their mouths. The man saw they were starving, and was told that this was Hell.*

*At once they were walking down a hallway towards another great room, and just as before the man could smell the aroma of delicious food. This time he heard voices talking and laughing, and felt that there was happiness in the room. He hurried forward and as he entered he saw the same pots of stew in the center of the tables, and saw people*

*with the same long handled spoons. But here the people were healthy and well fed, even happy. How could this be? How could everything be exactly the same but so completely different? Then the man saw the difference. In Hell, the people had been trying to feed themselves with the long handled spoons. Here, they were feeding each other.*

What we are offering certainly isn't anything new. Perhaps it's just something that many people have forgotten about as our culture has become preoccupied by the demands of materialism. It's the rare person who doesn't face some sort of challenge in his or her life; how much better for us all if we could reassess some of our perceptions and look deeper into ourselves and each other.

*Trouble in Mind,*

*Lord I'm blue*

*But I won't be blue always.*

*You know the sun's gonna shine*

*In my back door one day.*

—Lyrics from *Trouble in Mind*, a traditional Blues song



CHAPTER 6

Full Circle:  
The Creative Arts in  
General Education and  
Human Development

Art isn't just a thing . . .  
It's who I am deep inside.  
—Former student

The arts are highly valuable in general educational and humanistic endeavors. When implemented in an in-depth and authentic manner, the arts can create an environment that promotes the growth of high standards, personal knowledge leading to personal choice, and productive community involvement. Going beyond their entertainment value is their ability to touch a deep part of our emotional psyche and open up that part that is “us”—the core of our being. The arts can also be used as a means of developing creative relationships between student and teacher. With this kind of education, the student has an enhanced opportunity to achieve balance and equilibrium in the world.

## An Educational Intention for the Individual

The arts are a natural for educational facilitation because children and youth are inherently disposed to them through their play. As children grow they dance, impersonate and create dramas, play rhythmic games in the school yard, or make up songs and chants. Many seem driven to express themselves with paint and paper and pictures, others with storytelling and poetry. Students' predisposition to something they're already good at can go a long way towards having fun in their education, and isn't having fun the best way to learn something?

Although the arts are often the one thing many students really *want* to do they are usually, at best, minimally available to them—and often when they're offered they are presented in such a stock, soulless way that many students want no part of it. *It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing*<sup>1</sup> is a wonderful phrase that says it well, but what students are typically offered throughout their many years of education doesn't even have a beat.

In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner states that music is one of the basic intelligences and can therefore be a powerful way of learning for many students. Due to the creative arts' inherent ability to stimulate multiple senses, intense artistic activity can immerse us in a subject, thus integrating our learning experience.

In speaking about his theory of relativity Albert Einstein said, *It occurred to me by intuition, and music was the driving force behind that intuition. My discovery was the result of musical perception.* Serious consideration of Einstein's statement can begin to change one's idea about what education can and should be.

*Neuroscientists often study how we hear and play music  
because it is one of the few activities that use many func-*

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1 Lyrics from the 1931 Duke Ellington composition, *It Don't Mean a Thing (If it Ain't Got that Swing)*.

*tions of the brain including memory, learning, motor control, emotion, hearing, and creativity. It offers a window into the highest levels of human cognition.*

—Dr. Robert Zatorre<sup>2</sup>

Because the arts so stimulate the imagination, they naturally teach creative problem solving and flexibility. These learned skills in turn engage perseverance to reach the desired result. Many approaches are possible, allowing the student to freely express and discover natural laws in the world (physics) and to learn from their experience.

*Understanding depends on the child's ability to think by analogy and to group often through metaphor what needs to be understood. Poetry may indeed be closer to the most sophisticated forms of cognition than many people suspect.*

—Elliott Eisner<sup>3</sup>

When the artistic process is alive in a human being, learning is facilitated because the person has access to many avenues that wouldn't otherwise be present and available. As former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett said:

*The arts are an essential element of education, just like reading, writing and arithmetic . . . music, dance, painting and theater are keys that unlock profound human understanding and accomplishment.*<sup>4</sup>

Many studies document the role of the arts in improving basic skills, and because they touch many aspects of life, they can act as a fluid that helps a student swim more freely and flexibly through subjects and learning experiences. According to research:

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2 Robert J. Zatorre, "Music and The Brain," *Annals of The New York Academy Of Sciences* 999 (The Neurosciences and Music), annals 1284.001, (2003), 4-14.

3 Elliott Eisner, *The Misunderstood Role of the Arts in Human Development* (April, 1992).

4 The National Arts Education Research Center (1986).

- Students improved an average of one to two months in reading for each month they participated in the “Learning to Read through the Arts” program in New York City.<sup>5</sup>
- Vocabulary and reading comprehension were significantly improved for elementary students in the “Arts Alternatives” program in New Jersey. A strong connection between drama skills and literacy was found in this program, which involved role-playing, improvisational techniques, and story writing activities.<sup>6</sup>
- Students in the fourth grade made significant gains over the control group in language mechanics, total language and writing on the California Achievement Tests after participating in a special music and poetry program.<sup>7</sup>
- “Humanitas Program” students in Los Angeles high schools wrote higher quality essays, showed more conceptual understanding of history and made more interdisciplinary references than non-Humanitas students. Low-achieving students made gains equivalent to those made by high-achieving students.<sup>8</sup>

*Art fits in with the world. If there was no art, people wouldn't be interested.*

—Student

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- 5 *Developer/Demonstration Program: Learning to Read Through the Arts*, Chapter 1, 1992-93, Office of Educational Research (New York City Board of Education, 1993).
- 6 Annette F. Gourgey, Jason Bosseau, and Judith Delgado, *The Impact of an Improvisational Dramatics Program on Student Attitudes and Achievement* (1985).
- 7 Carolyn Carter Hudspeth, *The Cognitive and Behavioral Consequences of Using Music and Poetry in a Fourth Grade Language Arts Classroom* (1986).
- 8 Pamela Aschbacher and Joan Herman, *The Humanitas Program Evaluation 1990-91* (1991).

Visual art can aid reading through recognition of symbols. Students begin to derive meaning of words and sentences when building vocabulary from their own drawings. The arts help students learn to recognize patterns used in mathematics, to develop writing skills through journaling, and to create a basis for learning a new language. Song and poetry make facts memorable, drama makes history more vivid and real, and creative movement makes processes understandable. Music is very helpful in creating phonological awareness which aids reading and language arts; and it is also based on mathematical principles.

Poetry, with its focus on meter, rhythm, and abstractions has been compared to music and has the same power to make important changes in young minds.

*In fact, at present only some forms of advanced science—particle physics, for example—allow a young mind to experience the paradox, ambiguity, irrational thought, associative “leaping” any good poem teaches us to think and feel in. It opens those synapses in the brain . . . Once open, such minds can think differently in any field.*

—Jorie Graham<sup>9</sup>

The relationships of patterns, fractions, and other divisions can be easily shown through music in a direct and fun sense. A whole note, for example, can be broken down to a half, quarter, sixteenth, and so on, and a good way to introduce fractions in math is to have students beat out and play the rhythms based on various divisions of a simple whole note. Students often use the flow, beat, and movement of rhythm in their play by clapping, singing, and dancing, so it’s a great aid to memorization. For some students, this can be one of the few ways that facts can be remembered.

Rhythm can greatly facilitate learning mathematical tables, which must be memorized. Years ago, when my daughter had difficulty learning the tables, we found a tape in the library of some-

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9 Jorie Graham, *The Glorious Thing: Jorie Graham and Mark Wunderlich in Conversation*, Interview by Mark Wunderlich, Poets.org.

one singing them in Rap style with a very catchy rhythmic pattern. My daughter danced and sang her multiplication tables around the house, thoroughly enjoying them and learning them with ease.

Music can also instill an understanding of patterns because the song form itself is based on standard patterns. The Blues, for example, contains a 12-bar pattern which is oftentimes felt in three distinct but equal phrases of four bars (units of time) each. The first phrase has a base or home feel, the second has a feeling of moving away and the third goes the farthest away with an urgency to return home. In vocal Blues, the first phrase is often a statement, the second phrase is a repetition of the first, and the third phrase is a concluding statement (or answer) to the first and second phrases. Here's a good example of the crossover power of the arts: because the Blues evolved as African slaves became African Americans, we can integrate social studies and math while demonstrating interconnectedness and relevancy. The 12-bar Blues pattern becomes the structure for both as well as a metaphor for the life cycle.

There are many ways of breaking down these musical forms to show patterns within patterns and beats within beats, and because these forms are natural to students, they will not only learn the principles but also become inventive with their own dances, lyrics, and melodies. This will turn the experience into one that is very engaging for everyone, including the teacher.

*The act of moving beyond simple knowledge acquisition towards true assimilation of learning is the challenge for most children, and the process of assessing their learning in a way that stimulates that growth is my challenge. True knowing means transformation and change, and it is that level of learning that I hope for but often find difficult to offer as a possibility to the children.<sup>10</sup>*

Every person has the innate capacity to be artistically expressive. The arts require students to draw upon and deepen their creative abilities. The benefit is that creative thinking, once learned, lasts for a lifetime and can be applied in other endeavors.

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10 Ann Gallas, *Arts as Epistemology: Enabling Children to Know What They Know*, 26.

- Total creativity measures were four times higher for elementary students in an arts curriculum than for the control groups in two Ohio school districts. Gains continued to improve in a second year evaluation.<sup>11</sup>
- Preschool students with disabilities scored significantly higher on tests of originality and imagination after participation in a dance program than did their peers after participation in the physical education program.<sup>12</sup>
- Classes were more interactive, there were more student-initiated topics and discussions, more time was devoted to literacy activities and problem-solving activities in schools using the arts-based “Different Ways of Knowing” program.<sup>13</sup>
- The open and exploratory nature of the arts lessons in New York City’s “Arts Partners” program allowed students to explore their regular subject areas more actively. The students drew upon their learning from the “core” disciplines for much of the content for their art works, thus reinforcing academic achievement.<sup>14</sup>

A ringing endorsement of the arts by D. Hodsoll, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), appears in the Foreword to *Toward Civilization*:

*Arts education can help elementary and secondary school students to reach out “beyond prime time” and understand the unchanging elements in the human condition. It can*

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- 11 Richard L. Luftig, *The Schooled Mind: Do the Arts Make a Difference? An Empirical Evaluation of the Hamilton Fairfield SPECTRA+ Program, 1992-93* (1994).
- 12 Danielle Jay, *Effect of a Dance Program on the Creativity of Preschool Handicapped Children* (1991).
- 13 James S. Catterall, *Different Ways of Knowing: 1991-94 National Longitudinal Study Final Report* (1995).
- 14 Carol Fineberg, *Arts and Cognition: A study of the Relationship Between Arts Partners Programs and the Development of Higher Level Thinking Processes in Elementary and Junior High School Students* (1991).

*teach them to see and hear as well as read and write. It can help them understand what civilization is so that as adults they can contribute to it. In a culturally diverse society, it can generate understanding of both the core and multiplicity of America's culture. In an age of television, it teaches our children how the arts can be, and have been, used. In a world made smaller by modern communication and travel, it can teach them how the cultures and civilizations of other countries affect attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. It can help our children develop the skills for creativity and problem-solving and acquire the tools of communication. It can help them develop the capacity for making wise choices among the products of the arts which so affect our environment and daily lives.*<sup>15</sup>

Yet despite the numerous studies and endorsements that prove how fundamentally important the creative arts can be for shaping well-rounded, community-oriented, thoughtful citizens, the arts continue to be marginalized in schools. They are often held as reward for those who can earn them through academic success and/or those who can afford them. Ironically, those who most need opportunities in the arts in order to effectively participate and succeed in society are often the least likely to be able to afford or earn them.

Years ago we worked with an alternative school serving highly challenged students, many of whom presented with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Our charge was to work with middle school students with reading challenges. The visual artist with whom we were working, who was highly experienced with this population, chose as her medium the production of a play based on the book *Beauty and the Beast*. Although she was told that this population could never accomplish such a feat and it would never come together for performance, she persevered.

For months the students made the props, created their costumes, and learned their lines. One of them would read the story aloud

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15 National Endowment for the Arts, 1988.

as they worked and they would all carry on about it with boisterous and good natured conversations. They became immersed in the subject, discussing the real meaning of beauty and what kinds of human qualities it entailed. They were excited and engaged, and when they performed their work in front of the school, they did a terrific job. Their schoolmates loved the performance. Unfortunately, the teachers and administrators felt it took the students too long to settle down and focus on their “school work” once they returned to their rooms, and these, along with other music and dance performances, were relegated to twice-a-year events.

How much better it would have been for everyone if the staff had used the students’ enthusiasm to enhance their learning. At the very least the staff could have processed their experiences and described their feelings. These students, many of whom were unable to sit long in their chairs, could have benefited greatly from a creative harnessing and expansion of their positive energy.

We had a similar experience with an after-school program at a high school serving a predominantly non-White population. We found that many of these youth, most of who were considered high risk, not only responded to the arts but were highly motivated by them and excelled. Shortly after we began working there, the school came under increased pressure to raise their academic scores just as their budget was cut. Not fully recognizing the connection between the arts and other subject matter (or what a great part they can play in improving students’ motivation) this school, like so many others, responded by cutting out their arts program. They not only terminated funding for our involvement, but also cut the music department so they could use the funding for after-school academic tutoring.

Many evaluative studies of programs for students who were not predisposed to excel have documented remarkable improvements in cognitive and language skills, better school attendance, increased grade point average, gains in academic recognition, increased focus, and enhanced ability to plan and work towards a goal, all because of the students’ arts involvement. Most music and art teachers can name several students who succeeded in school, often for the first time, because of their involvement in the arts.

As the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities points out:

*Imagine what might happen to Leonardo da Vinci today if he attended an average American public school. This illegitimate son of a poor woman, a left-handed writer who loved to draw and challenge conventional thought, would be labeled an at-risk special education candidate . . .*<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes the arts are underutilized due to a lack of understanding about them or an inability to harness their benefits within the classroom. Sometimes students are just given a few experiences, but not the time they need to develop. In implementing a curriculum to address that, we have seen wonderful changes:

- The environment becomes stimulating and alive
- Students become focused and interested
- Behavioral problems are markedly reduced, as students become engaged and able to learn in their individual ways
- Learning improves because students feel they're directly involved in what's being taught
- Involvement appeals to a combination of their senses
- State standards are met because students want to learn—and they do.

The following letter from one of my former students provides a summary for many of the skills we can learn through the arts:

*Without a doubt, music has had a positive effect on my life, not just in esoteric ways but in tangible ways. I can personally attest to the fact that I have been able to accomplish things in my life that would not have been possible if I hadn't been exposed to music throughout my school life.*

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16 *Eloquent Evidence: Arts at the Core of Learning*, 1998.

*Presently, I work for a public television station and deal with budgets and other financial matters. Skills I learned through music have been invaluable to me throughout my professional career. Creative and abstract thinking as well as listening and teambuilding skills can be learned through music. They come into play every day of my personal and professional life. These are skills that are marketable in the business world and are integral to good relationships, fostering not only better lives but better communities.*

*Often in music, a player gets a skeletal explanation of what a piece of music requires, but must develop the rest themselves. In a sense, one is given a goal, but is left with the task of finding a way there. To do this, the player must rely on their own creative talents to come up with the answer. They soon realize that there is no one answer, but many answers. This is a talent I often must call on in the business world. I may have a problem such as trying to make a project work within a given budget. Although there are general rules such as, "increase revenue and decrease expenses," it is only through creative thinking that I can accomplish this with the necessary sensitivity to meet not just the financial objective but accomplish the project's overall mission as well.*

*I also found that abstract thinking, the type of which is used in Calculus for instance, has been fostered by my years of drumming. There are relationships between Calculus theories such as limits, functions and graphs that can be made with, for example, James Brown's famous musical theories of Funk, in which the first beat of a measure (one) is a choice for the player (He liked it as late on the "one" as possible.) Complex? Abstract? Absurd? It's just math and its relationship to music. Calculus uses math as a complex and abstract system to reach a tangible, purposeful goal. Music, as well, uses complex and abstract systems to reach a tangible, purposeful goal—making enjoyable sounds. I am*

*convinced that if I hadn't studied music, I wouldn't have received 4.0s in Calculus for both my quarters of college study in that area.*

*Lastly, musicians can't live in a vacuum. They must listen to and interact with others. They must accept ideas of others and present their own ideas in a way that cultivates trust and respect from their fellow musicians. This is the only way for a band to create and excel as a unit or a team. This is not at all different from the workplace or the family.*

*The arts are much more than they seem on the surface. They can bring out skills that people, particularly youth, never knew they possessed. All four of the skills that I have listed are sought by employers. They add to self-value and self-esteem. They are basic elements of happier lives and communities. I can't stress enough how important it is for young people to be given every opportunity possible to participate in programs, like yours, that offer them musical instruction.*

—CW, Bothell, WA

We have no doubt that the arts are a substantial enhancement of and support for core academic learning, and I hope the foregoing has stimulated you to think about new ways you might utilize this value. I strongly believe, however, that the arts should also be applied in stand-alone experiences because they have many advantages that are independent of their ability to integrate with other subjects.

As a matter of fact, I see academic integration as a minimal use of the arts. The arts should stand as an academic endeavor in and of themselves and, as CW so gracefully stated in the above letter, as an integral ingredient for happier lives and communities. I hope the following perspective will enable you to better see their truly great potential.

## An Educational Intention for the Group: Celebrating Difference

*Each group brings a wide range of life experience to school, and though we are often initially separated by language, culture and racial barriers, I have learned that the creative arts, rather than labeling our differences, enable us to celebrate them.*

—Merryl Ruth Goldberg and Ann Phillips<sup>17</sup>

Working with others in the arts offers opportunities to take risks, to use imagination, to experiment, and to think differently while adhering to basic rules and guidelines for group participation. The arts also offer many opportunities to nurture individual identity while the individual is being part of and contributing to a group.

A music ensemble is always a good example of how involvement with the arts can affect one's ability to be with and communicate with others. In an ensemble we are all trying to produce music together. In order to do that, we need to practice making sounds together and we also need to practice silence. We need to listen to each other and respond to each other. We need to be equal in the situation. We need to be cooperative and sensitive in our spiritedness—the whole experience has to have democratic value. We are creating a conversation among our peers and a dialogue within, and when we realize all the good principles of social interaction in this context we make good music.

*Last year my 11 year old daughter had the opportunity to begin percussion lessons and ensemble with EMTAH. Within less than a month I watched and heard my child's communication skill adeptly grow in musical and emotional terms. EMTAH has impacted the depth and quality of the relationship I share with my child and the hope for her successful tomorrow.*

—Parent

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17 Merryl Ruth Goldberg and Ann Phillips, eds., *Arts As Education*, Reprint series no.24, Harvard Educational Review (1992), 20.

The group arts experience also provides a non-competitive environment where mastery can be achieved with the focus on the process towards mastery rather than on winning and losing. When making art, we begin to respect and value unique individual contributions within the group: we see how important our various strengths and talents are when used in combination. This leads to a very real, internalized understanding that the whole is greater than the parts, that there is a balance that one should always honor in all aspects of life. For many people, this may be the first way they learn to really understand good social interaction. It is then that tensions can heal, cultural understandings can occur, and we can go beyond mere tolerance and acceptance of others to an *appreciation* of diversity.

*Being in a group of people (ensemble class) has shown me that lots of people have different ideas, and that my idea isn't always the best and isn't always right. When a group plays together, you have to work with each other to make it happen. It helps me understand how to listen to people, even outside of EMTAH in the other parts of my life.*

—16-year old student

## After-School Programs: An Important Educational Environment and a Good Place to Increase Artistic Activity

*The need to provide professional development support for non-school youth organizations becomes evident in the face of the substantial difference in the amount of time the young spend in school and out of school. Students spend only about 26 percent of their time in school; of the*

*remaining time, older children and youth have discretion over about 50 percent of their time.*<sup>18</sup>

Research has shown that youth engage in the riskiest behaviors in the afternoon or early evening when they are most likely to be unsupervised. This is also the time when most adolescent suicides occur. This would be an ideal time to offer young people a variety of substantial artistic activities.

Many at risk people are looking for something real in the world, something they can trust that contains honesty and speaks to the “cross they have to bear.” Children and youth especially look for this honesty from adults. They need to have authentic, rooted, and multifaceted experiences which, when offered with genuineness, will build both trust and abilities. The creation of good art demands honesty—creative programs taught by caring adults in this way will create an environment of safety these students need if they are to take chances in positive expression and communication and to explore who they are.

Creative, stimulating after-school youth programs can result in the kind of an environment that helps build substantial assets for students because these programs can:

- Provide kids with an experience of community
- Give kids more opportunities to form positive relationships with adults, and provide them with multiple positive role models
- Give kids the feeling of being individually recognized and cared for
- Give kids the experience of having a useful role and place in their world
- Create an atmosphere of safety

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18 Shirley Brice Heath, *Living the Arts Through Language & Learning*, Carnegie Foundation for The Advancement of Teaching. For further data on this point, see the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development’s 1992 publication, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*.

- Create structure with a clear code of choices and boundaries
- Provide constructive use of time with goals, expectations, and responsibilities
- Provide youth with multiple positive peer influences
- Provide an important substitute for family.

An in-depth progressive arts program easily meets the above criteria and more. Yet despite these benefits, adults and professional artists who work with young people operate within a shifting and largely uncharted area of practice. Those who work in arts programs soon realize that few support systems exist for them. Most are deeply committed to their work and would welcome opportunities to know more about how young people learn, what their cognitive challenges are, and what artistic responsibilities and technical levels of knowledge will engage them.

It's foolish to leave to chance the creation, maintenance, and enrichment of these learning environments which have been shown to be so valuable, particularly for young people in economically disenfranchised communities. Much planning goes into preparing those who teach in schools; it makes sense to provide resources for those who work with young people in the non-school hours. Concern about costs seems unrealistic. When we look at this, we must take into account that young artists and other productive kids aren't drains on resources, they *are* resources. We should also be realistic and compare the price of positive creative interventions with that of arrest and jail time.<sup>19</sup>

As we consider out of school time more seriously we should take the help of youth to find and develop solutions, using the practical power of our life experience as elders, if you will, to administer,

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19 *The direct costs of incarceration range from about a thousand dollars a month for a minimum security, dormitory-style lock-up with no significant counseling, to about three thousand dollars monthly for a high security suicide-watch, and the indirect costs to the community are even higher. When the person who is imprisoned needs mental health services, add about \$50 per hour to these costs. On average, it would be much cheaper to give a person a year in college than a year in a juvenile hall, jail, or prison. Source: Alternatives to Imprisonment, Friends Committee on Legislation Education Fund.*

guide, and share our skills. Adult evolution and continued growth are critical here.

## The Creative Process in Human Development

*“For some time I had been experiencing a deep feeling that a piece of me was not being fulfilled. Then last year I realized that this missing piece was my creativity. I now see that in my mind I separated work / accomplishment / success from creativity, but when I think about memorable learning experiences I have had, I realize that the common thread is that I used creativity to solve the problem. Now that I see myself as an artist in all parts of my life, I am seeing potential and possibilities where I previously saw roadblocks. I have connected with myself in a way that I didn’t know was possible, and I’m having a blast.”*

—34-year-old professional woman

The arts can act as a real integrating and grounding point in people’s lives, providing a very important sense of security. This all creates a sort of architecture within which they can function, an architecture that helps them create an enriched personal identity with responsible control of their lives.

The arts can be a tool for shaping new reality, transforming polarizations in society, and building a citizenship in the world. The arts easily link the past with the present to create a sense of place and meaning in history, and they play a crucial role in creating a well rounded, inclusive, more universal human being.

When I was a young musician, I felt that if I had the ability, the best thing I could do in life was become a full-time professional jazz musician. In contrast to my traditional school training, I found that the best way to learn was from the emotional involvement with other professional musicians. One night I was in a small neighborhood jazz club listening to a nationally known group. They had hired a local

drummer, a man who was well known as an excellent player but who had chosen not to exclusively make his living playing music. This was intriguing to me and quite puzzling at the time.

During the intermission, I noticed that he was sitting at a side table by himself while all of the other musicians were at the bar. I was surprised by how contented he looked. I was bursting with curiosity, so I went over to him and said: *You are such a good player with so much ability. I'm really wondering why you choose to stay around here and why you don't make your living playing music.*

His face lit up with a big smile, as if he knew exactly where I (in my youth) was coming from, and said: *Well, I go to my job for the telephone company every day. I'm able to come home at night to my wife and kids, and I can choose to play only the music I want to play and with the people that I want to play with. This makes me very happy.*

I was glad to have an answer, but although it satisfied part of my curiosity it was years before I really appreciated what this man was saying. As I matured, I began to understand how a high degree of creativity is a vital part to all areas of life. It was only after I had experienced playing professionally and had settled into teaching, however, that I started to color in the picture. Many of my students at that time were professional people, and week after week they exhibited the importance of music in their lives.

For some of them music was so important that it was what made them able to function well and maintain their demanding jobs. One of them was a department manager for Microsoft. She told me that playing the piano was a major factor in being able to see and understand people from different perspectives, which was a very important condition for her job. She said that when she went to work after playing and being involved with music, she would be much more sensitive to her staff. She would actually see and hear people differently, and because of this was able to understand, relate to, and guide them more effectively.

Because the creative arts are both emotionally and intellectually engaging and can result in a positive expressive release, they not only make us more sensitive to others, but they also lead us into ourselves.

Self-reflection is a very important developmental element that helps a person derive and process meaning from experience as well as to form an introspective orientation for further growth.

One facet of this approach is to facilitate people's understanding of how things are interrelated. They learn that growth is a process in which one thing builds on another and is then assimilated and used. New perspectives and opportunities open up as we intake responses from the world which we again assimilate and use. On we go, so that learning really does become a lifelong experience.

The following is an example of just one process that occurs when one consistently works in an in-depth, progressive manner with the arts. The arts can:

- bring about personal focus, which can
- bring about self-order and self-organization, which can
- help bring about order to our outside world, which can
- produce a sense of security, which can
- greatly allow patience to develop, which can
- open doors that facilitate hearing, seeing, processing and being more receptive to our environment, which can
- form the basis of realization, a very active state of being that allows one to develop awareness, compassion, generosity, sensitivity, responsibility, and honesty—qualities which, by their very nature bring life into the individual, which can
- regenerate and vitalize people throughout their growth and lead to a more peaceful existence.

By the understanding that becomes available through experience of these processes people can become aware of the interrelatedness of life, leading them to a greater connection and integration with

life. The world becomes a bigger place for them and they are able to further develop the capacity to foster and follow the understandings into new areas within and outside themselves.

*I've always had problems with thinking I'm not good enough, but playing in the ensemble has boosted my self esteem. EMTAH not only helped me in my musicianship, but also helped in shaping me to who I am today. I have learned everything from leadership to friendship, from rhythm to melodies. I thank you so much.*

—P, age 18

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# Conclusion

As a stand-alone, the creative arts have great intrinsic value in developing high aesthetics and ideals. They draw out and cultivate natural creative areas that are present in all of us and catalyze cultural opportunities for diverse populations. They are a gateway for reaching people for whom there is no other way, and for creating a much richer, deeper, and more meaningful learning experience for us all.

The arts touch many aspects of life and are closely akin to everyday living: the rhythms of life, our social interactions, our need for and appreciation of beauty, our need for entertainment, the ways we mitigate our suffering and inspire ourselves in our work. We listen to or participate in the arts in many ways: we dance, we draw, we attend concerts, the theater, museums, and movies. Creating a consistent interrelatedness for students, a continuum, is critical for their educational development and well-being. In fact, it is critical for the well-being of us all. The creative arts can contribute here. I hope this book broadens your understanding in ways that will allow for new opportunities of engagement and enjoyment in your life.



BOOK TWO

Enlivening the Creative Spirit:  
A Strengths-based Educational and Mentoring  
Approach Using the Creative Arts

Venturing  
Together

Empowering Students to Succeed

WILLIAM ROSSI



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# Introduction

This book offers specific instructional approaches, orientations, and tools that can be used in various settings by teachers, parents, social workers—anyone, in fact, who works with others to help better their lives. It also provides an effective response to the challenging educational, at-risk, and mental health conditions so prevalent today, as described in Book One, *Fanning an Inner Flame*.

Educational reform has been the hue and cry of some of our country's best minds and most caring citizens for a very long time. It has received vast sums of money and produced many experiments and methods, but relatively little progress has been made. As we detail in *Fanning an Inner Flame*, we contend that current initiatives such as accountability and higher educational/testing standards are having limited success because they inadequately address the whole person and often neglect components that are crucial to providing effective education such as considerations of natural ways of learning and alternative learning styles, ensuring a relevant emotional experience, and inculcating humanistic values.

As our culture is increasingly driven by materialism and we as a society grow ever more discontent, our youth are becoming further at risk and in danger of becoming at-risk adults. The present social milieu of our schools isn't the cause of this but simply a symptom, and won't be mitigated until the underlying condition is better understood and addressed. We can begin to alter it, however, by recognizing that this societal orientation is adversely affecting many, and we could address it through the educational system by introducing an inclusive, more natural strengths-based culture that will not only

benefit those within the educational and human services systems but also extend into the community as well.

To find a balance, we can begin to shift from the current focus on individual gain towards one of individual realization that will lead to inclusiveness through understanding and appreciating others. An educational process can provide a way to growth and happiness by creating a culture where students develop the ability to be who they are and to empathize with others. A strengths-based culture that gives students the confidence to seek and have fulfilling experiences based on inquiry, authentic thinking/being, generosity, and non-self centeredness can be an effective approach here.

In recent years, some schools and teachers across the country have begun to actively work towards this goal. By initiating approaches that promote healthy character development and humanization, these teachers and school administrators are contributing to reform. We hope that our work will support and augment their work, inform others, and contribute to influencing the greater educational and social service systems. We need many more teachers and administrators if we are to form the critical mass necessary to provide examples that communicate to others, both within and without the educational community.

Learning should be fun, for the most part, and will be if it's allowed to be natural. When students enjoy learning and are allowed more autonomy, they become more stimulated and successful. Success can be powerful. It has the capacity to liberate, and enables students to understand the responsibilities and principles of learning, to understand the ways and means that got them there. Learning in this way they form good habits, and self-direction comes about quite naturally. Students become independent thinkers and learners who are able to pursue on their own what is important for them.

My approach combines strengths-based education and mentoring. This involves a process of:

- identifying and assessing students' inherent strengths and talents, all natural tendencies that already exist within them

- drawing out, developing, and applying these strengths through a personally relevant learning process to achieve creative thinking, success, and self-reliance
- developing a positive relationship that evolves so the teacher becomes the student's mentor, the student assumes an important role of teaching the mentor, and there is a joint responsibility for growth.

Teaching through mentoring is an educational partnership, a two-way street where the mentor teacher<sup>1</sup> (MT) offers guidance through modeling and leadership rather than staying in the traditional role of the teacher who primarily instructs, tells, and explains. When the MT strives to understand and support his students, continually assessing his relationship to them along with their growth tendencies, he gives them security in their learning. You can achieve real, significant success when you work in this way because it is grounded in some of the basic, fundamental truths of life such as the fact that all people have an innate need to learn who they are and express (give and share) their spirit, which when fulfilled can lead to deep, meaningful relationships with others.

Teaching and learning should engage and stimulate both the students' and teachers' creative spirit, because it's that spirit that invigorates the learning process and inspires us all to take positive risks, go beyond ourselves, and try new ideas. The relationship that develops from this contains basic and subtle truths that give us the opportunity to continually relearn and understand life more deeply. These truths can lead to a peacefulness for which we all search.

By awakening students' natural learning qualities and stimulating their capacity for human values, we give our students the best chance to soar as they go into life. We are really forming a basis from which the creative spirit can continue to develop towards a more humane and spiritual orientation. We can think of this awakening as freeing a process that is already inside them, a process of becoming.

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1 The term mentor teacher (MT) is used interchangeably with teacher throughout this book.

By recognizing their spirit and allowing it to unfold, we will be doing our job as educators in the best sense.

*Knowledge is to understand, to understand who you are.*

*If you know not who you are, what's the use of learning?*

—Yunus Emre, Turkish Poet

You will find that the more you sincerely pursue this orientation the more it will require from you. It calls for ongoing personal growth, with acceptance of that process and the resulting change. Those who attempt to overlay this approach as a one-size-fits-all method will find that it remains abstract, but those who take this orientation to their work and diligently attempt to apply it will find that it becomes a concrete tool on which they can count; it will give a healthy kind of confidence in working with all kinds of students, and both the MT and student will often have success.

Simply the fact that we are involved in this growth process communicates loud and clear to our students and others around us. This is of value in and of itself. Although it can be uncomfortable at times, personal change is pretty much the only way to have real reform. As the adage goes, we can't change anything without first changing ourselves.

As a teacher you face many challenges as well as high rewards in helping people explore and develop who they are. Every student has a unique history, family situation, and method of learning and communicating, so we often have to modify or even discard standard teaching methods and expectations to really reach each individual. This approach may guide you to new ways of thinking and working and will hopefully contribute to opening areas that will deepen the richness of your teaching experience. I hope that as you consider these perspectives you'll be stimulated to work with them and make them uniquely yours. Teaching should challenge our own creative powers as deeply as it does our students'.

Hopefully you will share your own creative experiences with your peers—[www.merge-education.com](http://www.merge-education.com) is available for this if you'd like to join us in conversation. Creativity has a wonderful capacity to bring people together. Working in this way you will feel more

confident about developing new approaches and relationships with students, and you will best stimulate creativity in the students by being creatively involved yourself.

Along with providing an overview of some of the fundamental principles of my approach to teaching, this book can serve as a reference manual with practical examples relevant to your every day work with students. While my discipline is the arts and I typically give artistic examples, the underlying precepts of these principles can serve all disciplines. If the arts are not involved in the way you work with students, I hope that as you read you will consider the extent to which they could serve as a catalyst for any discipline in terms of enhancing the creative process. Einstein's use of music to heighten his creativity to achieve his scientific realizations is just one excellent example of the tremendous value of the arts.

Many of the points and approaches covered in this book are further addressed in the other components of the *Merge System for Creative Education*:

- the manual *Risks Worth Taking: Tools for Creating a Strengths-Based Arts Mentoring Program*
- our curriculum units *Draw on Experience* (Art Mentoring) and *Play by Heart* (Music Mentoring)
- our evaluation software, *SETS: Student Evaluation & Tracking System*.

This approach has evolved and been effectively used over decades of teaching, program design, and implementation, and there are references throughout these writings to my years as a private instructor and as Executive Director of both YATMA (Youth Advancement through Music & Art) and EMTAH (Educational Mentoring through the Arts & Humanities). We are available through [www.merge-education.com](http://www.merge-education.com) for consultation and trainings if you would like to delve more deeply.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Teaching Through Mentoring

Teaching through mentoring is the active creation of a shared and sustained-growth relationship that is:

- an enduring and progressive involvement between persons
- based on modeling by an experienced and caring individual in a guided endeavor
- experientially authentic, focused on nurturing and developing the creative instincts that are natural in the student being mentored.

## Qualities of a Good Mentor

The effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on certain personal qualities of mentors. It is important that we:

- be accomplished and skilled in our art or discipline, and understand the way we learned our skill. The creative process needs to be alive and active within us, and we must be constantly willing to share that with our students. This is important because like anything else, we must have experienced the process we want to teach.

- be good educators and role models with the skill to effectively communicate our knowledge in a well-ordered, experiential process. We must be good listeners and be sensitive to what the students need. We should be able to work with a diverse group, treating all equally. As good educators we promote individual student thinking, and we bring out and help cultivate each student's inherent capacities.
- have a high degree of empathy and an orientation towards social service and human relations so we can deal with people from different levels of society who have varying and, at times, demanding and challenging needs. This will allow us to remain flexible with our students and to be patient with their learning styles and abilities. Many challenged students have significant strengths and talents that lie beneath their troubled exteriors; this orientation will enable us to be like miners digging for ore.

These qualities can and should be continually improved upon, a growth process for mentors that will happen most naturally as they sincerely try to develop and apply this methodology.

Developing as a mentor teacher (MT) is an ongoing process that requires us to actively work on many levels when teaching. The more we understand what is going on with ourselves, the more we will understand our students and the more effectively we will be able to implement these practices to facilitate our students' personal realization.

We should be strong enough within ourselves and secure enough in our abilities to allow nature to take its course. If we're doing our job right and the student is meant to learn from us, she<sup>1</sup> will—insofar as she is able. It's possible that even though we do our job right, the student is not meant (or is perhaps unable) to develop the kind of learning relationship we want—or even the kind of relationship we know is needed for optimum learning. We should forget any preconceived

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1 For consistency's sake, the female pronoun is used for the student and the male for the teacher.

notions and accept the capacities that the student has so we can find the potentials that do exist in her and focus on them. MTs make solidarity with students and are effective helpers.

## Principles Needed to Ignite and Sustain the Relationship

- **Integrity.** Honesty, genuineness, and sincerity communicate loud and clear and are hallmarks of integrity. Acting with integrity is most important in modeling behavior or skill. Integrity produces clarity of being, completeness, moral soundness, and direct expression. It makes for unity within a person which allows for greater unity in a relationship. Integrity is essential for the cultivation of good character and is a cornerstone in the foundation of all the principles involved in mentoring/teaching.
- **Consistency.** Being a person to be counted on, to “be there” regularly, and to supply long-term support are characteristics of consistency. These characteristics are vital in providing the center of stability in the student’s life that is so necessary to build and cultivate the MT/student relationship.

Just as a magnifying glass must be held steadily in front of the sun in order to ignite something, we must give students the sustained intensity of a progressive relationship so they can open up, grow, and develop in significant ways. As MTs we also need this kind of relationship to experientially share our knowledge. A reasonable amount of consistent involvement is necessary for all growth; relationships are no exception. While there might be efficiencies that can move things along, more often than not students require sustained periods of interaction, steady teacher modeling, and the in-depth relationship or partnership that occurs

as a result of a shared creative platform, similar to the experience of an apprentice within a guild.

This long-term orientation empowers self-direction through the formation of healthy habits, enabling students to internalize over time the personal structure which is important to self-organization. We sometimes need a great deal of patience before these relationships even begin, and we will need to accept rejection in a positive way, sometimes for months, before the trust starts to form. But once it does, it will pave the way for a meaningful relationship that will empower students to take the necessary risks to go beyond their perceived individual limitations, and the healthy student-teacher relationship that develops will transfer far more than the specific subject studied.

- **Trust.** Trust is the confidence and faith a person places in another and is at the heart of any good relationship. Trust creates the ground for the bonding necessary for any real progress to occur. The student must have confidence in and be able to rely on us. This creates a feeling of safety that opens the way for student motivation leading to positive risk taking, inquiry, the love of discovery, and freedom to choose. For some students, this experience also creates the vital feeling of hope.

We must be able to understand and accept our students for who they are in order to gain their trust. Trust can exist on several different levels, depending on the MT's character and competence, but without it we cannot really reach our students. In time, students will have to become committed and place themselves in our care, which may make them feel particularly vulnerable. The bond will be made solid when they believe we have their best interests in mind and entrust us with their well-being.

- **Respect.** The esteem one has for one's self as well as someone else opens the two-way street for the MT/

student relationship to flourish. This mutual regard (respect) results in supporting instead of interfering with one another. It is an acceptance and appreciation of the differences as well as the similarities of others. Respect is deferential to a person's privacy, maintaining appropriate boundaries while communicating receptiveness to the other person's confidence. Respect also leads to a willingness for people to extend themselves to one another in ways that create new areas in which relationships can broaden and deepen. It works in combination with the previous three principles to form a joint responsibility for growth and a gateway for empathy, compassion, and good kinship.

These qualities and principles will be further exemplified as this approach is discussed in the following pages.

## Essentials that Promote Growth, Facilitate Change, and Create Conditions that Heal

Good MTs focus on learning situations that:

- Expose – Put the student in position to experience
- Engage – Attract the student and encourage her to get involved and participate
- Empower – Make possible by facilitating power, capacity, and ability within the student
- Enrich – Improve, increase, and expand the above
- Endow – Reinforce fertile conditions through which the student can internalize and sustain her newly acquired abilities.

## Modeling to Teach by Example

Students always learn best by example (as we all do), and through our actions we almost always provide various kinds of lessons to others. For the MT, this modeling is a fundamental of teaching that starts with showing the above principles in action. Showing respect by being courteous under difficult circumstances, admitting to not knowing or to making mistakes, showing deference and appreciation, and acting in non-defensive ways are just a few examples of good modeling. Studies have shown a great need among challenged children and youth for positive role models, not to mention an increasing need to fill the void of the single parent.

Another of our main functions as MTs is to enable students to understand what they know and have learned, and then to recognize their next steps. One of the best ways we can show a next step is through doing it, and when we model in this way we create an environment of inclusion for the student and lead her into a full experience.

It's common knowledge that when the teacher is teaching what resonates with him and is fully engaged, the student tends to learn. We need to participate with the student, modeling the activity we are demonstrating and actually participating in a learning process that is based on our knowledge of and relationship to the subject. We must remain connected to the student and the student's relationship to the subject.

Mentor teachers:

- Promote acceptance with enthusiastic receptiveness to the student
- Provide a concrete example for the student
- Become the catalyst by exemplifying risk taking
- Make uncommon ground common by sharing a creative platform
- Exemplify new strategies to approach a challenge.

Our active participation leads to inclusion, reciprocity, and mutual respect, forming the basis of a team (community building). Students learn to honor life within themselves and then in others.

It is crucial that as teachers we are continually in some form of creative state so we are capable of transferring this process to our students. As students learn in this way with us their attention is on the creative process, not behavior. We also learn a great deal from them—the benefits are great for us both.

Modeling is a major part of this approach and will be further exemplified in the following sections.



## CHAPTER 2

# Strengths-based Teaching: Creating a Culture for Thriving

Looking towards and nurturing positive natural instincts and creative impulses in the student should be the first steps for a good educator. The more we nurture creativity and encourage it to grow, the more behavior will be positively affected by this natural process. We will also have given our students the best basis for learning.

## Basic Elements of Strengths-based and Standards-based Education

In Book One, *Fanning an Inner Flame* we make a case for strengths-based education as an alternative to traditional standards-based education. The following table illustrates the differences between the two and why strengths-based education works as effectively as it does.

This book, *Enlivening the Creative Spirit*, provides the *how* of strengths-based education—a methodology that has been developed, tested, and refined in a variety of situations and organizations over the past few decades. This methodology is intended to guide teachers, social service workers, therapists, families, and administrators in-

terested in assisting students in unlocking abilities they already have so they can realize their full potential.

We are not suggesting that standards-based education does not have effective elements. Rather, we are advocating for a paradigm shift in which the primary focus is on the student's strengths, inclinations, and learning styles, with the teacher utilizing standards-based elements appropriate to that orientation.

## A Comparison of Strengths-based and Standards-based Education

STRENGTHS-BASED EDUCATION TYPICALLY	STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION TYPICALLY
Encourages uniqueness	Encourages conformity
Identifies the dominant tendencies and patterns of what the student does best	Measures global attitudes through testing all students the same way
Looks at students as individuals within a group	Looks at students as participating one way within the group
Evaluates progress by "portfolio methods," i.e., collections of produced work	Evaluates progress by scoring amount and quality of memorized information
Focuses on developing innate abilities and talents	Focuses on developing an adherence to predetermined ways of learning
Recognizes, celebrates, and caters to many different learning styles	Recognizes, rewards, and caters to one dominant learning style
Focuses attention on inner impulses	Focuses attention on outer benchmarks
Values personal fulfillment	Values satisfying a bureaucracy
Integrates multi dimensions of a person that include emotion and perception	Isolates and addresses a singular intellectual, academic dimension

STRENGTHS-BASED EDUCATION TYPICALLY	STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION TYPICALLY
Promotes different ways of thinking and how to think	Promotes singular ways of thinking and what to think
Attempts to develop strength areas as leverage in overcoming areas of struggle	Attempts to fix the person by detailing and tutoring areas of struggle
Integrates combinations of abilities and talents to achieve effective results	Fragments abilities and talents to produce one size fits all education
Promotes experiential learning	Promotes theoretical learning
Allows for more independent goal setting, personal success, and autonomy	Determines success based on meeting same goals for everyone, goals based on dictated pathways
Strives for self-motivation through facilitating awareness of ability	Requires functioning on preset levels and predetermined values
Measures success through creativity and individual growth	Measures success through technicality and competitiveness
Promotes self-realization—“being who you are”	Promotes copying others—“being like someone else”
Teaching has a peer level orientation and guidance quality through modeling	Teaching has a more dominant authority orientation and mechanical quality
Personally driven	Institutionally driven
Emphasizes social sensitivity and includes ethical development	Creates distrust due to fragmentation and unrealistic expectation
Recreates new opportunities for success	Risks demoralization and failure
Values diversity and encourages acceptance	Vulnerable to stereotyping and prejudices

## First, Do No Harm

The Hippocratic Oath begins with “First, Do No Harm.” It seems rather obvious that a physician wouldn’t want to use an intervention that would have a negative effect on a patient, but what does this mean in terms of education or teaching? While there are many subtleties to this primary principle, not depressing the students’ spirit is a main one, as this subverts their chances of success. Such subversion includes dominating them in any way that could create fear. In other words, we need to be very sensitive and respectful of the students’ emotional states so whatever we are offering them gives them the best chance of stimulation, success, and freedom within themselves. We must always be cognizant of any action that might hinder their self-expression, dampen their feelings of self-worth, or otherwise subvert their ability to gain ownership of their learning process or their ability to reach out and try new things.

In the case of students with mental health challenges, it’s important to treat each of them as a whole person and not focus on their “disease” or pathology. While we need to support their challenges and limitations, we should acknowledge in ourselves that we may not have the capacity—we should never try to intervene in something we don’t have the capacity to solve. If we can’t support or contribute to challenges then we should simply ignore them or refer the student. Their strengths will, in many cases, take care of these things. Just go back to focusing on their strengths and have faith they will take care of things. This will help you keep from getting caught in their pathology, which is often a temptation for the teacher. All students have a vital force contained deep within their bodies that is naturally predisposed to move outward towards recovery, healing, and growth. By focusing on and developing their strengths, we open the way for this force to develop.

The students must in turn learn “Do No Harm” principles through us, so they can learn to realize these principles with other people. It’s very important to facilitate this kind of dynamic and learning climate as fundamental in working with our students. Again, accepting students for who they are, finding their natural capacities,

and encouraging them to foster self-acceptance will go a long way in determining how they interact to others.

- **MTO (Mentor Teacher Observation):** *D is afraid to use a journal or write on her unit because she is afraid other people will look at it or she will get into trouble. D does not open up much to her therapist or any childcare staff. She stated that she used to write a lot prior to her placement but that her journals were taken from her and she wasn't allowed to write thereafter. D is hoping to use these [writing] lessons to express a voice hidden down deep in herself.*

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## CHAPTER 3

# Approaches to Teaching

### Putting the Student First

Key Points:

- Student acceptance
- Teacher sensitivity

In order to implement this teaching approach at any level, we must always put the student first. Practically speaking, this means we must neither emotionally need the student's acceptance nor be deterred by initial rejection. Acceptance must be earned through trust based on sincerity and integrity: this will lead to mutual dialogue and direction. We should also remember, however, that kids need *our* acceptance in order to open up to be able to learn, and that they are very good at reading our visual cues. It is imperative that we genuinely exude that we want to be there physically and emotionally—*all there*.

While we need to become friends with our students, we should remember that as teachers we must never be egocentrically in need of anything from the student in order to create a relationship. Such need would be detrimental to the student's progress and ultimately

undermine her trust. There are times when it's important for us to show ourselves, to expose more personal aspects of ourselves to facilitate the learning process, but we must always make sure this is in the interest of the student.

When we are teaching a student a new song, for example, there will be times when we're immersed in playing the music together. This can be exhilarating for the student, but must be handled carefully. The moment when we should pull back from playing will depend upon a number of factors. Could the student handle the increased intensity and stimulation of continuing to play? Would we go beyond the student's ability, thus calling attention to our prowess and away from the student's involvement? Are we at a natural stopping place at which we could give information about the theory involved? In other words, would continuing to play be beneficial to the student or not? By staying in touch with the student's ability to receive information, not only will we not get caught up with our own performance, we also won't get sidetracked by a preconceived idea so we begin to simply layer information on.

Making such a determination requires a high degree of sensitivity. As a teacher you know that when you are fully involved with your discipline you often attain a state of heightened awareness and understanding. What's true is that the more you jump in and participate with your student, the more you will attain this "state" when teaching.

As you work with this approach and your sensitivity increases under these circumstances, you will also increase your ability to be in tune with your inner responses (to intuition), which will enable you to choose the appropriate next step for creating the proper balance. This expression may, particularly when working with a new student, feel like stepping over an empty elevator shaft. But heightened senses come with the territory of the creative process and they can bring a sense of belonging. So by stepping out like this—no matter how vulnerable we feel—we create a more supportive climate for the student which in turn gives the student confidence with handling their own vulnerabilities.

- **MTO:** *J is easily confused, often immobilized by verbal explanations and theory descriptions. He hears the music well as we are playing it, though, and can respond well that way. J is patient, does repetitions without being frustrated, and can focus on trouble spots. He does tend to get impatient with himself, but with encouragement will relax and refocus. J really needs encouragement, reassurance, and praise. He is his own “worst critic,” and I find myself relating to this trait in him. I need to be very careful about when and how far to push him without discouraging or hurting him. I sense that music and our relationship are very important to his self-esteem.*

## Listening

### Key Points:

- Nonverbal sensitivity
- Internal listening
- Self-evaluation

Although the requirements of listening well are somewhat hard to define, listening is an essential and specific skill that needs to be well established and highly exercised in a creative mentoring and educational relationship. It's been said that only about 35 percent of communication is through the spoken word and that the rest is through body language and subtle feelings beyond the words, such as intention and sincerity, which are communicated through tone of voice, inflection, gestures, attitude, and demeanor. For our purposes here it is important to broaden our understanding of listening to include sensitivity and awareness that “hears” these nonverbal messages. Listening in this broad sense allows the MT to learn about the student and accept the student at a level that is real for the student, as

well as to come to know the student's strengths and to understand her needs. Sensitivity could be defined here as allowing ourselves to be open to, receptive to, and considerate of the student's various behaviors in a way that creates a comprehensive awareness of the student.

One of the most important abilities in understanding someone and creating relationship is the ability to listen objectively and non-judgmentally, to take the person seriously without trying to diminish, fix, alter or avoid reality. This is especially true for understanding students who have psychological and emotional challenges. It is essential that we allow our students to express themselves in their own way and in their own time, with our acceptance. When they experience this interaction, they will feel validated and develop a sense of self worth.

One needs to listen and hear well to play good music, converse with others, or learn much of anything. One needs to be able to "hear" (be aware of) one's internal impulses as well as information from others in a way that is not distorted by subjective perspectives. So when we speak of this skill, we are combining internal and external listening. In the context of a music lesson, a student needs to achieve a sensitive state so she can hear her musical impulses and rhythms and allow them to come up in her and out through her instrument. She then needs to listen to the sound she makes and, just as a person should do when speaking, assess what she is hearing. Simply by listening this way, the student learns to critique herself. This self-evaluation is an important component of this approach.

- Does she need to play louder or softer?
- Is that the note she meant to play?
- Does she need to make adjustments in her fingering?
- Is that combination of notes pleasant?
- Does that rhythm swing in the way she really feels?
- In other words, did she play what she meant?
- If not, then why? What's the challenge?

Where does what she plays lead her? If she's listening carefully and correctly, the next steps will open up for her. If she likes what she plays and it's just what she meant to do, great, then on to the next thing. But if she doesn't or it's not what she is being taught in terms of the artistic tradition or technique, then we can guide her to rise to the challenge and solve it.

In this way she will gain the confidence to be spontaneous. It is important that we provide the student the time and space to grasp an understanding on her own. We should also provide her with many opportunities to put her new understanding and learning into action.

For the student, listening externally means being able to effectively hear what the teacher is saying or to understand what the teacher is showing. As in learning a language, many things are learned at first by imitation and repetition, and the student needs to be able to listen well to the teacher's advice and to what the teacher is playing in order to copy it effectively. As she grows in her abilities she will begin to explore on her own and respond to the teacher from what she's learned in her exploration. This will result in a statement that comes from herself.

The student who experiences listening in this way, learned through the MT's modeling, will develop a skill that will serve her well in any learning situation. She will also have a vital component of good communication as a way to interact effectively with the world.

- **MTO:** *I show him something only once and see if he can play it right away. If he can't, then I show him only the little part that he can't play, not repeating it all, so he can piece it together. He knows he's doing that, and then when he almost has it together I let him know if he's right or wrong. I don't do anything unless he asks me—if he can't get it he'll ask specifically where he's going wrong and then I show him and back off and allow him to practice it. I give him the room to sit and repeat it and practice it and then reinforce his acknowledgment that he can do it.*

## Understanding the Individual

### Key Points:

- Acknowledging prior knowledge
- Individually tailoring teaching styles
- Creating mutual learning agendas

Students need an *ongoing* sense that their feelings are taken seriously so they can begin to see that we, their MTs, do feel they are important individuals and that they do, indeed, have great potential. This requires that we continually:

- Work to understand their process of engaging with us
- Find areas that are stimulating for them
- Enable them to show what they know
- Encourage new ideas and new ways of thinking
- Create mutual learning agendas.

Paying attention to their inner impulses and inclinations as well as coming to understand their nuances is vital to our understanding in a meaningful way what our students are experiencing and digesting. This kind of awareness enables us to understand what is relevant to them, moment by moment, so that we can allow and encourage them to act on abilities they already possess. These could include:

- writing
- organizing
- expressing a perspective
- developing a mechanical concept
- designing the environment

- creating programming
- helping to teach.

These abilities need to be exposed, complimented, and given an opportunity to develop so that children can learn to organize themselves in the world and act responsibly from within rather than in a manner that is imposed from the outside.

- **MTO:** *Yet another surprise came as I was teaching the class how to do a drum roll. Most students could barely understand the stick control/hand concept as this was their first exposure to it. When R's turn came she started off slowly, letting the sticks loosely bounce on the drum head. This continued for a little while and then, all of a sudden, she started accelerating her hands and applying more hand muscles to the sticks. She then progressed into a full orchestral roll that would set some of my more experienced students to shame.*

*For a moment, I was so taken aback that I actually thought she had been playing drums for quite some time and was only pretending to be a beginner! As she progressed and started to surpass her classmates, it became apparent she was a perfect candidate for private instruction.*

*In the time I've spent with R, I've noticed she's very attentive and respectful towards me and will often tell a rowdy classmate to keep quiet and pay attention . . . During her last lesson her mother came, near the end, to pick her up. R told her to sit down and listen to her play. I had R count off the tune we've been working on and away she went with me for accompaniment on bass. It was very pleasing for her to see her mom's reaction. Her mom was completely surprised and looked very proud of her. At this time R said "see, I told you I could play drums". Her mom said "yeah, I know you said that but I didn't know you could play them this well." It's moments like that which make teaching very rewarding for me.*

It is also important that we offer our students various perspectives and choices, and then guide them in an appropriate direction that most resonates with them. This will help them derive personal, practical meaning from the world and they will be able to develop ways to know who they are. To do this, we will need to create a progressive plan based on their inclinations, motivations, and understandings. As always, our modeling, guidance, and experience will be key components in this.

Presenting material in a lesson can often be a trial and error situation, so we need to develop the skill of offering material from different perspectives and adjusting what we are giving depending on how the student responds to it. This process is like a dance. If a student is learning a new song, for example, we can emphasize rhythm if we feel that might be the best way for her to learn it, but if that's not working we need to be willing to try something else. Perhaps providing a more melodic orientation will work this time, or we may need to use verbal prompting. If we find that the verbal is too abstract, however, we can try repetition or a visual aid.

Likewise, if we find that the student is not able to ingest as much information as we are giving her, we need to be able to slow down and play the melodic content or rhythm more slowly. We need to be able to mix and match any of these approaches to best tailor our teaching to the way the student is taking it in. The more we understand what we're teaching, and the more we strive to be aware of and understand how the student is learning, the better we will be able to flexibly adjust our teaching to her needs.

- **MTO:** *She's a cautious learner, moving warily and slowly at first. When she's thoroughly engaged, she forgets about herself and she's asking questions, participating with zeal. I think what works best for her is a very gentle approach. Some kids like to be pushed; some kids (girls or boys) dive head in from the get go. I use lots of repetition, i.e. playing the same phrase a few times in different octaves, playing the rhythm of a phrase on the drum, etc. When she gets bored, grumpy, or discouraged, I quickly move on to a game or another instrument.*

- **MTO:** *Another approach that has worked well with him is when I'm beginning to show him something and he's trying to pull the focus elsewhere, I allow him to create a distraction for a moment, and actually go with that distraction. Then I bring him back and give him another piece of what he's learning. Then I go with his distraction, and then bring him back again. In doing this and being consistent enough with it he feels he's been indulged and becomes comfortable enough to allow himself to get into the music. He responds to that consistency, that back and forth play, very strongly. It seems to relax him. If he's relaxed enough, which is not very often, the sound itself will start to absorb him. Those are his best moments—when that relaxation takes place and he becomes absorbed in the sound, he makes his most progress.*

We also need to encourage questioning, because this helps students build a process of inquiry within themselves that leads towards discovery of both self and the world. It is also another effective means for us to begin to discern how students learn and what they should be learning, which may well differ from our agenda. We can then understand how to present material to them so they will relate to it in the best possible way.

By encouraging questions we become more knowledgeable and accepting of how each student learns, and we encourage them to accept the ways others learn. We also offer them the freedom to choose. Just as people have varying dietary preferences and requirements, people have different learning styles. A good MT will know this as a road to creating the important mutual agenda as well as the highly desirable opportunity for the student to actively participate in creating her goals and objectives, a part of the process in discovering who she is. More on this is presented in chapter 4, *Venturing Together: Steps on the Road to Success*.

The intended result of tailoring our teaching style to the student's learning style is to give her:

- the sense that many things are possible for her

- faith in herself
- courage to trust her instincts
- a feeling of individual value.

## Types of Learners

### Key Points:

- Different ways of learning
- Individual personalities

To use a strengths-based approach effectively, it's important to understand students in terms of their individual personalities and the combinations of learning styles. The highly regarded psychiatrist Carl Jung developed a theory of psychological orientations to explain the different ways people have of interacting with themselves and the world. These include:

- Extraversion: experiencing the external world of people and things
- Introversion: experiencing the processes and reflections of the inner world
- Perceiving: taking in information through sensing or intuition
- Judging: organizing information to form a conclusion or making a decision through thinking or feeling.

There are many variations and preferences within these four orientations. Following is a sampling of some of these as elaborated from Jung's work by Isabel Briggs Myers.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Isabel Briggs Myers, *Introduction to Type* (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1993).

- Step by step processing of information
- Random processing of information
- Focusing on immediate information and its practical application
- Focusing on how information is related to the bigger picture
- Remembering sequentially
- Relating more to the external environment
- Relating more to the internal world
- Preferring to communicate by talking
- Preferring to communicate by writing
- Learning best by doing or discussing
- Learning best by reflection
- Tending to speak first and reflect later
- Tending to reflect before speaking or acting
- Preferring the factual and concrete
- Preferring the abstract and theoretical
- Being imaginative and inspirational
- Being analytical
- Solving problems through logic
- Reasoning by cause and effect
- Preferring to be organized
- Preferring to be spontaneous
- Being flexible
- Liking to have things decided

- Preferring to avoid the stress of deadlines
- Becoming energized by pressing situations.

Within these orientations are classifications of tendencies and predispositions for the different ways people learn. Generally speaking there are two broad, widely accepted categories: analytical and global. A person who tends to be an analytical learner will most often process information in a fact-by-fact or more linear fashion, which is also referred to as a left brain orientation. A person who learns in a more global fashion will usually process information in a *seemingly* less organized way, which is referred to as a right brain orientation.

Howard Gardner's book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*<sup>2</sup> deals specifically with how people learn. Gardner has identified seven distinct intelligences, listed here with elaboration.

- Linguistic: tends towards writing, storytelling, reading, and word puzzles. Effectively communicates and remembers information through language.
- Logical / Mathematical: tends towards patterns, categories, relationships, math problems, strategy games, and experiments. Analyzes problems through logic and investigates scientifically.
- Bodily / Kinesthetic: tends to process through bodily sensations, is athletic and inclined towards dance and craft. Has a strong ability to mentally coordinate bodily movements.
- Spatial: thinks in terms of images, is interested in mazes and puzzles. Recognizes patterns. May tend towards daydreaming.
- Musical: has skill in performance and composition, the ability to recognize musical pitches, patterns, and

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2 M. K. Smith, Howard Gardner and *Multiple Intelligences, The Encyclopedia of Informal Education* (2002).

rhythms. Is very aware of sounds. Similarities to linguistic intelligence.

- **Interpersonal:** has the capacity to understand and be empathetic to the intentions, feelings and desires of others. Effectively works with other people. Good communicators.
- **Intrapersonal:** has the capacity to understand oneself and is aware of personal feelings and motivations. Is able to self-regulate and self-motivate.

Paying attention to these orientations and their combinations greatly enhances our effectiveness and provides a framework for understanding a child's learning style. Our lack of understanding, deference to, or validation of a student's way of learning can have serious consequences including diminishing self-esteem. We can too quickly put the student at risk while possibly escalating negative behaviors.

The above definitions are listed to provide an orientation for the reader. We must also be careful, however, not to stereotype students in one category or another. We are all made up of combinations of characteristics, with various ones predominating in different circumstances. So it's best not to *categorize* but to *recognize*, so we can be attuned to tendencies and spontaneously address any given situation. It's also important to remember that no one tendency is better than any other so we can appreciate the differences.

- **MTO:** *The first few weeks we got together she seemed rather cold and she didn't have much concentration. I felt as though I was an authority figure rather than teacher or mentor. Another aspect of the lessons which struck me was her incredibly short attention span, at least to what I was teaching! She would pick up a concept and hold it for approximately 10 seconds and then she went off on another tangent. This could be some what frustrating so I would give her short bursts of information hoping some of it would be retained.*

*After 2 months we started to work exclusively on songwriting and singing. This not only increased her enjoyment but also helped our relationship. She began to open up and express herself, making the lessons much more lively and fun. During this time I discovered her attention span would stay focused if we played through entire songs rather than focusing on exercises or fragments. I've noticed that she had a great ear and could pick out melodies and chords quite accurately. This however, was sometimes a distraction for her. Often she would hear part of another song's melody within the song she was playing and she'd go chasing the new song until it generated another melody, and so on.*

- **MTO:** *D demonstrated a strong need for control and order and she used this activity to do so. She sorted many beads by color in separate cups to prepare to string them for her necklace. The process of separating, sorting, and containing seemed to have a high level of importance. The completion of the projects was of minor importance for D.*
- **MTO:** *R showed herself to be a very bright, observant, rather analytical student. She asked many questions regarding both theory and technique. She often asked me to demonstrate techniques, voicings, patterns, etc., on the piano, while she observed from a standing position. In this sense, she was a very visual learner. She would also engage me in conversation by asking me to elaborate on points and by asking good theoretical and analytical questions.*
- **MTO:** *J seems to learn piano best by using his ear. The method that seems to work best with him is to play a song for him and then show him the individual phrases. With repetition he is able to pick things up. He seems to depend a lot on the order of something and if he is confused he usually starts from the beginning to find where he went wrong.*

## Emphasizing Success

### Key Points:

- Building success upon success
- Fear of failure
- Spontaneity
- Structure

There is nothing more stimulating to learning than the feeling of success. A sense of success makes people feel self-reliant, a liberating feeling, and when sustained it enables them to understand the responsibilities and guidelines of learning. With this understanding they become enabled, and self-direction comes about quite naturally. We should do everything possible to make sure students experience success as a regular occurrence, actively pointing out each accomplishment and the sum of accomplishments.

The future lies in the present. By building success upon success students internalize the experience which will lead naturally to developing commitment and perseverance. As teachers, we should be able to spontaneously and effectively use a curriculum that contains a sequence of progressive steps specifically designed to lead to success. Examples of this can be found in our curricula series *Partners in Art*.

Allowing the student to perform or create with the teacher will also lead to student success. A shared moment of creative experience produces a feeling of equality, and gives the student a real boost of self-esteem. These opportunities should be regular occurrences within the relationship.

We will need to make some students familiar with the good feeling of success in order for them to reap the benefits. Some, particularly those who have been unsuccessful in their lives, will be unfamiliar with the feeling, and the fear it brings might evoke a fight-or-flight response, a response common even to many otherwise well-adjusted

adults when they find themselves on the brink of success. When this response occurs, we must recognize what's happening. To minimize student stress, we will have to decide:

- How much to give
- How long to stay in a certain area
- When to digest and repeat the experience
- At what pace to proceed.

There is a great deal of subtlety in this moment, which can be a turning point in the process. When you successfully guide the student through this point, however, her personal value can increase.

A story about one of our students is a case in point. T first arrived at the studio in a survival mode, very intelligent and talented but burdened and dominated by the experiences of homelessness, broken family, school failure, and substance abuse. He was well acquainted with failure in his life—it was familiar to the point that it was like a habit. After several successful months of mentoring, his intelligence and talent began to gain the upper hand and he started to gain an acquaintance with success. He also began to experience consistent progress and found himself in a good ensemble.

During one rehearsal, his MT suggested that he take a solo in one of the songs. Although a bit reluctant he stepped into the opportunity and flew. Much to his amazement and to the obvious enjoyment of the others involved, he performed his solo very well. As soon as the song was finished T announced *that's enough of that* and quickly left the room. Sensing what happened his MT went to find him.

T was upset and visibly shaken, not wanting to continue playing that way. It was a completely new experience for him, leaving him vulnerable and unable to process the feelings. It was critical that the MT handle this competently, with good insight and the ability to communicate well so he could help T deal with this experience. This new success was a powerful, overwhelming experience for T like “stepping over an empty elevator shaft” and flying—it was scary.

He needed, and got from the MT, great assurance that this, however odd seeming, is a natural and positive experience that can occur when a person gets on new ground, especially when he expresses sincerely and deeply from within himself. He heard and understood that what he was feeling was growth, and that no matter how strange it felt at that moment it could become consistent and familiar.

So there are a couple of things to consider at moments like these. First of all, success is new and feels good in a different way, but can and will become familiar if one continues. Secondly, while stepping beyond your self produces feelings of vulnerability at times, this is not a negative thing—it will lead to growth, strength, and trust. This is a doorway leading to change, and those feelings that are so powerful can be powerful agents of change if understood properly.

It is also critical that the MT be very supportive here, creating situations with the right amount of experience based on the student's abilities—challenging enough but not beyond the capacity of the student to achieve. Consistently being there, guiding students through situations and helping them understand their experiences with insight, is very effective in turning fear—due to failure or success—into joy, a confident new friend.

Speaking of confidence, we had another ensemble made up of students like those described above, with very little positive experience in their life. Again, after consistent involvement in our program they became quite good as a group and were receiving a lot of good attention and support from other people associated with the program. They were invited to play at local venue—a public, concert setting—their first.

In developing the ensemble, a lot of attention was paid, as usual, to really listening and attuning to the other ensemble members. This is an orientation that needs to become natural, one that involves concentration and the ability to overcome distractions. Musicians need to maintain this state, whether consciously or subconsciously, for the music to happen. It's quite an art in itself and while people need to work pretty hard at it at first, no matter how natural this state becomes it always needs to be respected, cared for and never taken for granted—it's a relationship. This, like a lot of other situations, is easier to maintain in the rehearsal studio than out in public.

This event was a joyous occasion for all involved with a lot of excitement in it. Adding to the excitement was the adulation these students received when we arrived at the venue to be taken out to dinner, and this continued as they set up to play. There was a lot of high energy among the ensemble students and, understandably, their attention was all over the place along with their over-exuberance. It was very satisfying to see this group of youth with their troubled background experiencing happiness and confidence.

Showtime! They were introduced, took their places on the stage, and got comfortable with their instruments. They made sure they were in tune, they looked good—all was going very smoothly. The venue had a great atmosphere, with some striking artwork on the walls and the locals filling the house. It should be mentioned here that adding to all this energy was an underlying though not so obvious nervousness, shared by both the members of the ensemble and the MTs who accompanied them.

As expected, some of the effects of the distractions and nervousness showed themselves in the music right off, and we hoped the group would settle down after they got into the music and acclimated to the situation. Instead, the group assumed a demeanor of overconfidence and started showing off some of their newly developed skills. The way this happened distracted from the performance significantly and the music suffered as they became less focused as a group and more focused on how they were coming across individually. They stopped carefully listening to each other, lost their sense of swing, and even lost their place at times in the songs they were playing.

This didn't get any better as the set went on, and as a result they even lost many of their audience. We recognized that the combination of overconfidence, nervousness, unfamiliar territory, and distraction caused the members to become more self-centered. Underlying this self-concern was a very understandable sense of wanting acceptance which led to showing off individual abilities and a sense of survival in the situation where feelings became too vulnerable.

If the orientation is right, meaning a creative orientation, a person will feel a natural positive sense of vulnerability that will result in a freshness for all involved. This of course requires a trust which needs to be learned. There is also the important lesson of an exces-

sive pride and concern that is not good for either the group or the individual. Nothing like a real life situation for learning!

The next two rehearsal sessions focused heavily on processing this experience. There was much to learn from it, and with the guidance and care of the MTs there was much to take into future experiences, even making future experiences possible. The outcome was extremely positive and beneficial. The group grew and went on to play in professionally paid situations around town and to record. They learned a well-balanced sense of confidence based on success and an eagerness to engage with life.

Spontaneity is another important component in being successful. To be creative, the student will need to be able to respond to situations in a free, uninhibited way. Webster's describes spontaneity as:

*. . . one's free will, proceeding from natural feeling or native tendency controlled and directed internally; movement characteristic of living things, growing without being planted, indigenous.*

If allowing for spontaneity is allowing for natural growth, then we could define a spontaneous environment as one in which the child is "allowed to grow," surely best for education.

The educational environment that promotes success also includes opportunities for the student to develop the confidence to express her ideas and feelings rather than respond (or not respond) in defensive ways. This contains an element of risk, so the MT needs to provide experiences that will create a sense of security. This will result in the student feeling the necessary confidence to achieve on her own.

- **MTO:** *L needs much encouraging, prompting, and ample time when on unfamiliar ground. She demonstrates strong abilities to use art as an internal self-organizing activity. L showed strong abilities to express and develop, with a self-motivation to explore creative ideas and make cognitive logical deductions through art activities.*
- **MTO:** *C is doing really doing well and is a very talented young man. He seems to be searching creatively to embody*

*his self identity though his drawing. He has been able to verbally express his thoughts and feelings about himself, his family, and his art in a less forceful manner, which may indicate that he is becoming less defensive and more secure in his self identity. Using artistic expression may be a vehicle for C's natural growth and development.*

There are many ways to encourage spontaneity. One is to offer varied perspectives on a lesson theme. How many approaches are there to designing a building or laying out a painting? Where are the various starting points, the different ways of looking at something? We can stimulate creativity by showing choices and different ways of doing or thinking about something by asking such questions as:

- What are your impressions or reaction about this subject?
- Have you ever heard, seen, experienced something similar?
- How does it make you feel?
- How did you arrive at that?
- Did you consider something like this?
- What are you trying to achieve?

There are so many benefits to be gained when our students feel successful. A teenage drummer expressed the changes she'd made as a result of her successful experiences with our approach: *It doesn't scare me as much anymore to meet new people, so I make the effort to meet them. I've learned how to be tolerant and say what I mean, especially when I write.* This girl had always been an excellent student, but had never felt personally successful. As a part of an ensemble, she began to feel good enough to participate with others, and went on to become an articulate, forthcoming young woman. Cultivating the feeling of success in our students also makes us more successful in our jobs, because it reduces their resistance and encourages them to hear us.

Another way to promote success is to develop a clearly defined structure early with students. This structure should be based on their abilities, so they quickly have a foundation for achievement. The structure should include realistic goals to help them begin to distinguish between what they want and what they can actually achieve, thereby minimizing feelings of failure. (Please see *SETS*, Merge's evaluation software, for guidelines on setting realistic goals). The structure should grow as students do, enabling them to go from one lesson unit to another in a connected way, with an order that allows them to continually use recently acquired knowledge. This will give them a sense of accomplishment. Knowing when to challenge the students with new material or let them run with things already learned is also paramount to building a feeling of success.

- **MTO:** *B is presenting as a child with some disorganization in his thinking. He seems to have difficulty separating fantasy from reality; he has strong ability in using art as a way of communicating internal thoughts to the world. We need to consistently help ground him when his fluid thinking merges what is real and what is imagination. He needs this art activity to be well structured. He needs to practice the structure around this activity, having a clear beginning, middle, and end. He needs to be prompted to do age-appropriate tasks as he tends to take a passive, dependent role within this group.*
- **MTO:** *We know that music is a discipline that contains a certain structure that is critical for its existence. One of the things that communicated to the music student, in my opinion, is the sense of things fitting in their proper place within a structure. R has a form of dyslexia so this inherent element of structure necessary to music makes music a great vehicle of expression for him.*
- **MTO:** *A has demonstrated complete safety in all her weekly lessons. She has been able to interact in a positive manner with her instructor. She has been able to plan out a*

*project and work systematically to complete this project. She has experienced the natural consequences of rushing through the work at hand and continues to learn the importance of good structure to achieve a stronger end product.*

## Creativity

### Key Points:

- How, not what, to think
- Assimilation
- Personal connections
- Evoking new meanings
- Physical environment

When activated within the context of creativity, the thinking process and realization of ideas have the potential to reach beyond the individual to a universal truth. The creative process invigorates the learning process and inspires people to take positive risks, go beyond themselves, and try new ideas. It brings alive their capacity to express themselves and to put their learning into action. Our orientation is to guide the creative impulse and provide the necessary trust for taking steps towards this goal, steps that often feel particularly risky in today's environment where there's little to verify that it's okay to trust.

The creative process is one of *how* to think, not *what* to think. It's a process whereby a person considers a number of possibilities that often seem disparate and random (be they materials, skills, and/or approaches) and then assimilates and uses those she has chosen to produce a product or idea that uniquely expresses her feeling or vision. A person who problem solves and makes meaningful connections within the subject will feel a sense of inventiveness: those who observe or hear the result will experience it as well.

Students are designed to learn—our job is to provide them with our experience, examples, opportunities, skills and materials, and to expose them to excellence. In other words, children are naturally hungry and we need to feed them healthy food that is combined and prepared in such a way that they will be able to digest it. Their minds and bodies will take over from there.

When we as MTs ignite the creative process within our students we unlock a sense of freedom in them and catalyze natural processes, setting in motion a critical building process that:

- Helps students help themselves
- Allows natural curiosity—the desire to know
- Encourages inquiry
- Develops the ability to dream and imagine
- Promotes a desire to seek truth
- Illuminates the inner workings of students so they can see and understand themselves, which will
- Enable them to understand other people and develop empathy, which will
- Enable them to understand their relationships to other people and develop communication with them to
- Provide a socially interactive context.

Education should be a journey of investigation, a search for meaning, and an adventure towards accomplishment. For creative learners there is no end to the experience—it's an ever unfolding process of continuing from one end product to the next. A process-driven environment will help students discover and unify their nature rather than repress and fragment it.

This kind of environment gives them the opportunity to develop an inner strength so they can trust their uniqueness, discover their positive connection to others, and have confidence in their expression

as people. If allowed to grow in such a full-spirited way, they will also become capable of enhancing these ways of being in others instead of diminishing or even crushing them. When students' strengths are exposed, complimented, and given opportunity to develop, they can learn to act responsibly from within rather than in a manner that is imposed from the outside.

Following are some qualities to observe and support in students, qualities that can indicate that the creative process is active. This list could serve as a creative inventory as you work with your students.

- Inventiveness—bringing a number of ideas to a good or problematic experience
- Originality—generating new ideas or unique ways of approaching an experience
- Imagination—combining elements in an unusual or elaborative way
- Openness—refraining from a closure that would inhibit new possibilities
- Determination—applying perseverance towards realizing a vision
- Contemplation—using an internal process to find tangible solutions
- Experimentation—finding external processes to put solutions in a workable form
- Searching—desiring to find relevant meaning
- Need, the mother of invention—using some or all of the above to bring an inner reality together with an outer reality
- Acceptance—tolerating frustration and embracing success within the disparity between what one wants to do and what one actually achieves.

An orientation towards enlivening the creative process contributes to an experiential environment that students find emotionally relevant. It is exciting and stimulating, giving them a sense of knowing that goes beyond words, one that is more flexible and accessible than intellectual learning alone. In it, students can be taught about intuition and encouraged to value and follow their imaginative impulses. Quite wonderful accomplishments are often created spontaneously, and this happens far more frequently given the proper environment.

Due to the way this environment promotes reliance on the imagination, we can take advantage of opportunities for improvisation that will result in satisfying solutions to challenges and evoke new meanings. This can be useful for dealing with many of life's unforeseen events in a confident way.

Another challenge that can be met through creativity is satisfying the innate need we have to understand ourselves, understand why we're here, and the conditions of our life; in other words, our need to search for meaning—a constructive way of being in life in which we feel fulfilled. The acknowledgement of this driving force within us should be a focus of creative education. We should also acknowledge that it's important for people to come to those conclusions within themselves and we need to allow students to search and ask internal questions as well as explore and experiment in order to know who they are. We can't dictate these things; we can only create safety, offer experience and guide them in positive directions. Through the actions of the MT who wants to be there, a supportive emotional, psychological environment is established for the students' search.

The physical environment should be carefully considered. It should be aesthetically pleasing and well ordered. It should not feel restrictive but should provide a sense of freedom of movement so students feel comfortable and free in it. It should have the best equipment possible, with the sense that it's well taken care of and that this is expected. There should be as many diverse reference and resource materials as possible. It should have an expanded aesthetic that might include music playing and art and poetry on the walls which is refreshed often. In addition, students should feel a sense of belonging and of ownership of the space.

## The Process of Learning

### Key Points:

- Confidence with challenge
- Trial and error
- Cognition

We humans have an innate capacity for asking a question in sincerity and finding a direction to take towards the answer. This direction might not be a simple or well-traveled path; instead, it might take the form of a challenge to explore in order to find ways to proceed. This kind of challenge is a good thing and with sincere effort a direction will be found—not only to the question at hand, but to an understanding that this problem-solving process will happen again and again. With this understanding, students start to experience an unfolding of life before them and to develop a confidence that a creative process may lead to unexpected answers and self-knowledge which in turn will produce another challenge—a cycle that will repeat throughout life.

In speaking of a student's confidence in the learning process, I include the need to have confidence during the process of exploration which occurs before the solution is found. Having confidence in this experience allows us to remain flexible and fluid in our thinking and comfortable as we go through it—comfortable in not always having the answer right away or even in the near future. This is a natural process; we simply need to take in the experience and then allow the time and space necessary to organize and digest it and then produce a result. This is the place from which many insights come. Creativity is often simply the ability to be resourceful in how we put these insights into action and bring them to fruition.

Vital to learning *how*, not *what*, to think is developing the ability and flexibility to allow for many perspectives and pathways to solutions to the same goal. We need to teach students that trial and error is a desirable way to learn so they become accepting of their

mistakes while remaining confident that they will find solutions, correct what they are doing, and move forward. This will counteract some students' proclivity to be their own worst critic so they take a more constructive view of criticism whether from themselves or outside themselves. When they learn that mistakes are a natural and positive part of learning, they replace a fear of failure with confidence.

We need to encourage and support students in the learning process that involves trial and error, permitting them to freely make mistakes or errors in our shadow or on their own in order to learn. It doesn't matter how much intellectual knowledge any of us has, if we are to learn something well we eventually have to learn it by doing—by making mistakes and correcting them—not just memorizing and manipulating information.

Learning by doing is the only way to come to understand something completely enough to be able to make full practical use of it. When we learn through active experience, applying what we learn along the way, we gain direct knowledge that will lead to more accurate results and an authentic confidence. This kind of cognition involves:

1. initial perception of a particular subject
2. coming to know, developing an awareness of that subject
3. forming an opinion about the subject
4. making a decision on an action in regards to the subject
5. practically implementing the action
6. processing and integrating the experience that resulted from her action.

This is a process we all go through when we approach learning something new, as long as we have developed the ability to do so and are given the opportunity. Let's consider, for example, what the process might be when a student sees Adinkra Symbols for the first time.

**1. Initial perception of a particular subject**

What would she conceptualize when she first looked at the symbols? She might think in terms of independent images composed of unique combinations of lines with a geometric and symmetric quality and/or use flowing curves.

**2. Coming to know, developing an awareness of that subject**

She could learn that the images are symbols from Africa that convey various ethical, moral, humanistic and spiritual meanings and that they were originally used to create motifs and patterns on cloth by stamping with dye.

**3. Forming an opinion about the subject**

She might feel that the images were attractive, and when she learned they so clearly communicate something so specific and significant she might find them even more attractive and interesting. She might think that this was a very effective use of visual art, and that it was valuable they could be displayed in so many different ways in everyday life.

**4. Making a decision on an action in regards to the subject**

She might think it would be fun to try to draw some of the symbols, and might want to begin with the simple ones that use the straight lines like the diamonds, and also the circles. She would decide on

the instrument to use, perhaps thinking pen and ink would be a good choice.

### **5. Practically implementing the action**

She might try to copy them by looking at the original, then doing multiples before going on to the new shape. She might experiment making different sizes, then draw them from memory.

### **6. Processing and integrating the experience that resulted from her action**

She might think that the lines were fuzzy on the paper she had used, and that a less porous kind of paper was needed. Perhaps some parts of the image would seem to be out of proportion, so she could decide which parts and choose the type of line shape that made up the part. She could practice those lines individually multiple times, then draw the complete image again and compare it with previous attempts, continuing until feeling some satisfaction from progress. She might continue to experiment, possibly getting guidance from references, or another person.

If students haven't developed (or been allowed to develop) a process-driven experience of learning similar to the one above that includes being comfortable with not having an answer right away, they can become anxious and will lack the patience or introspection necessary to find the answer that's best suited for them at that time. Their personal investigation can lead to an answer that provides personal satisfaction and lays a foundation for illuminating next steps towards quality future progress, but if they are unable to be comfortable in that way they may choose a course based on momentary gratification. They will likely end up nervous and without a satisfactory solution, perhaps with a solution that was only the momentary alleviation of nervousness and not the most beneficial one, or it might even be a counterproductive solution that will have negative

consequences. These consequences could result in a loss of stimulation for future learning, feelings of depression, failure, and anger.

- **MTO:** *P continued to wrap plastic gauze around the geometric shapes of the torso, head, and legs. He struggled with balancing the cat, applied the plaster, and was able to problem solve through teacher prompting with questions such as “let’s observe which part of this cat is heaviest, is it heaviest because of its size or the amount of plaster? Is the plaster heaviest when it is wet or dry?” P continues to develop an understanding of materials and the ability to analyze shape, form, weight, and measurement. He is beginning to explain and connect information to his own experience as he describes past projects at home and at school. P continues to demonstrate a strong leaning towards instruction. He is consistently motivated by his own ideas and can easily describe the project he wants to make.*

One has to have enough faith in imagination and the development of vision to wait for the answer, even though it may not be immediate and may take time in coming. If our students are able to wait, they will not only experience something that is highly satisfactory—including a feeling of personal ownership—they will understand that they have the capacity to reach for greater heights. In fact, they will eventually realize that they have the ability to keep reaching and unfolding their potential.

This is not to negate the fact that in a heightened, spontaneous moment solutions will often come right away and all the pieces will just fall into place with little addition or revision needed, and when this happens we could never have done any better with additional time or efforts. The recognition of these various kinds of learning experiences and processes is really what brings one to maturity. We can come to terms with the fact that there are certain controls we have over our lives, and others we just don’t, nor are we meant to. If we can be comfortable with not being too controlling and depend instead on some of our intuitions, we will allow life to unfold and allow ourselves to continually grow no matter what age we happen to be.

There are things we are meant to learn well that will become fundamentals in our life, giving us structure and a basis of security, and there are processes that are more abstract and intuitive which we also need to accept as positive and learn to embrace. In terms of growth, these are the two wings of a bird that work together—there is an interaction between structure and process. We can't always legislate a rational, logical method; we have to be open to the unexpected and willing to explore it—even learn to promote it in order to be led to discovery and innovation.

Learning this way also provides the means to work out cognitive dissonances, the contradictions or conflicts in beliefs that may have been formed earlier during less experiential, integrated learning. This is critical if we are to find our way to an enriched place in the world. Additionally, because achieving this depth of understanding develops our ability to simultaneously utilize various levels of our person, we pave the way for a greater integration and completeness within ourselves. Without a potent creative process in place, we educators run the risk of dehumanizing our students.

## Motivation

### Key Points:

- Resistance and motivation
- New strategies

There are many children who turn away from or actually turn against education because they're not engaged, stimulated, and motivated. Highly motivated students learn, so we need to look for motivation in our students. Finding what motivates students and being able to address this creates real leverage for the teacher. Of course, students don't always show they are motivated so this sometimes takes persistence, patience, and new strategies on our part.

One of our students who presented with Oppositional Defiant Disorder is an example of the value of motivation. This youth had resistance to taking direction and, although we always made certain he had the capacity to do what we offered him, he often decided that he just didn't feel like it. In addition, his low self-esteem and fear of failure contributed to his resistance by making him afraid that his efforts wouldn't be good enough. In order to motivate him, we asked if he would like to record what he was playing so he could hear himself. He became very cooperative and enthusiastic simply because it was a novel approach.

When we replayed his music on the tape recorder he was surprised that he was able to do it that well and, being a competitive sort, felt that he could do better. So that's what he did, lesson after lesson. Each week he improved, and after each lesson he left quite stimulated. We had an effective tool that we used consistently, one that was thoroughly beneficial to this youth's motivation.

- **MTO:** *After several very chaotic lessons, B's mother and I developed three intervention strategies. First, with her support, I told B that repeated refusals to return to piano playing, to get himself under control or refrain from striking me would result in termination of that day's lesson. Secondly, each lesson was to begin with piano playing. Drums and other non-electronic instruments could be played, as a reward, upon successful completion of a period of time at the piano. Furthermore, the focus was to be on making music together. This meant no use of microphones, electronic pedals, etc. It also meant working cooperatively and creatively with me, the teacher, to create music together. Finally, we shifted our lessons to the smaller of the two music studios to reduce the amount and variety of stimuli and distractions. While not always successful, these interventions helped reduce the level of chaos, gave me a sense of at least some control in the lesson, and gave B some structure to count on.*

- **MTO:** *When our lessons began I soon found out that R's energy could be both a positive and a negative force. For the first two to three months it took a great deal of effort to keep him focused on music. There were a number of times that I did not succeed.*

*I tried to contain and channel R's energy in several different ways. One method I tried to use with him was to focus for five to ten minutes, then let him follow one of his energetic tangents for a minute or so, and then bring him back into the lesson. This often worked. Another method I would use was to let R switch back and forth between the drums and the piano. R has played the drums in school for a while now and this provided a very useful and musical outlet for a good deal of his energy. Frequently, I would play a song, a blues for instance, and let R keep steady time on the drums. I would also have him play rhythms from songs we were learning on the drums as a way of reinforcing the rhythms of a particular song. Also, I would often reward him by allowing him to play drums on any song he wanted to at the end of the lesson. Using these different methods together worked fairly well.*

*There were still lessons where R was very hyper and required a lot of attention and discipline, but over the last year we have made what I consider to be excellent progress. His attention span has gone from somewhere in the five minute range to up around twenty. Early on, I would try to have several ideas for diversions planned out for R before his lesson. Now, this is no longer necessary. There is usually one, perhaps two times in his lesson when I need to let him go a little bit. Now, he focuses almost as well as my average student, which I think is quite good considering his ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder).*

- **MTO:** *Attention span is something that I am trying to work on with J. Although he is improving he will now work very hard and diligently for five to ten minutes,*

*putting together perhaps sixty to seventy percent of the work, and then suddenly he will say he cannot do it and he doesn't want to play this song anymore. It is at these points in the lesson when I have to re-channel his energy by changing the subject and introducing something new for him to work on. Usually, this works, although sometimes I have to talk more with him or let him go for a few minutes before he can refocus on something else.*

## Awareness in Learning

### Key Points:

- Connecting skills
- Self reflection

As illustrated in Book One, *Fanning an Inner Flame*, when we learn to do any one thing we also develop many skills and strengths that can greatly enhance our overall ability to learn, skills and strengths that few people would choose to develop for their own sake. When a student works on a drawing, for example, and continues to practice and learn new skills until she's satisfied, she can learn that she's capable of perseverance and patience and that these strengths lead to success. If we specifically make her aware of the connection between her perseverance and her success she will be more likely to apply herself again when she wants to be successful. We might, for example, retrace her steps with her after project completion to discuss what she was feeling along the way and review her actions to help her understand her process.

Concentration is another skill that can be developed for one activity and used for many. When a student's passion is piano and she focuses in and concentrates on learning to play, she's developing the ability to concentrate, she's building that muscle. Her intention is not to "learn to concentrate"—how interesting is that? Her intention is to learn to do something she wants to do, yet the skills she's

developing will be useful in many other things, particularly if we make her aware of this connection.

Showing our students the connections between what they are doing in our classes and in other activities also applies to more finite skills, such as how to break an overwhelmingly big task into something manageable. If a music student encounters a difficult passage, for example, we might show her how to tackle it by breaking it into smaller pieces—each hand individually, each measure slowly, etc. Rather than just saying, *Try this with just the left hand*, we can say, *When you have trouble with something, think of how you can break the task into smaller, easier pieces, or . . . play them at a slower tempo, or . . . try singing the right hand part while you play the left hand part, or . . . put the pulse or beat on one note in one hand while you play only the rhythm on one note in the other hand.*

The way we phrase things can help students make the connection between what they're doing and other tasks or activities so they can apply the same concepts to new tasks. This is especially beneficial in helping students feel that these new-found abilities are relevant and useful.

It's also important that we make them aware of the process going on within them while it's actually happening. What feelings are being produced or what thought process is evolving? This is far more effective than explaining a process they haven't experienced, which is to some extent like describing a statue they've never seen or a tune they've never heard. If we show them the connection as they are experiencing the process, they'll be able to understand it better.

Moments after they've worked hard to concentrate, for example, we can call their attention to that and ask how it felt. We might say, *You were really concentrating hard. How were you doing that? How did that feel?*" We can then let them know that they can use the same process when they're trying to learn any other skill that might be difficult for them.

One of our first students is a great example of a student who learned self-discipline and focus through increased self awareness. When he began lessons at age 15, he suffered from Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (ADHD) and was so unfocused he was literally

unable to tap his foot four times in a row. Now a graduate of a leading university and a fine musician, he attributes his success to his involvement with the program:

*This was definitely the first thing in my life I was consistent about—my practice and coming to lessons. I learned to get in touch with my internal rhythm so I could focus on what I wanted to learn . . . it became a rhythm in my life that I could organize everything else around.*

It's important to remember that his teacher called his attention to how he was developing these skills, each step of the way, so he could begin to understand and recognize these processes as they occurred. Creating awareness should be a main function of the teacher.

## A Total Experience

Key Points:

- Relevant experience
- Gestalt
- Depressing creativity

Relevancy in learning means that at any time the student's experience needs to contain meaning for her. The student needs to be met where she is, and met with something she cares about, something that's exciting to her. For it to contain meaning it has to touch or move her in some emotional way so she can be stimulated by the experience and motivated to further explore it. As this process begins to develop in her she will, in her exploration, be stimulated to communicate her needs for clarification, a perspective, or other input from the teacher. If encouraged and assisted she will gain the confidence to initiate her own thinking and formulate some of her own ideas, which should be a major goal of education. As her guides we need to help her see

how this subject that she's beginning to ingest and digest affects not only her but her community or group.

Relevant learning also needs to have a real existential basis or practicality to it: the student has to have a place to put it in her life, by which I mean she has to be able to use it based on what she is feeling, not as some theoretical, intellectual point. As the teacher we then play a critical part in making concrete connections between what is being taught and its history or tradition. If the student is allowed this experience she will naturally begin to form her thoughts in a way that her intelligence will develop, and she will be able to form and ask theoretical questions in order to solve them. But if we present the theoretical and intellectual information without providing a meaningful experience for her learning, we will have put the cart before the horse: we won't have given her enough of an emotional, practical, experiential base to make the correct sense of the information.

Providing this experience helps to create a gestalt, which is defined as *a physical, biological, psychological, or symbolic configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts.*<sup>3</sup> The following story illustrates a gestalt, a highly desirable integrated way of learning, and also demonstrates a traditional reaction to this kind of environment. Many years ago we had a small percussion workshop for young children led by a percussionist from Ghana. During the first session the children formed a semi-circle of kids around him, and each had a drum.

The teacher played the rhythm and the children either tried to copy what he was playing or simply listened and then tried to get it on their own. It wasn't important that they copy exactly what he was doing at first; they were free to feel the rhythm in a personal way such as dancing or playing a part of the beat while moving their bodies. The teacher frequently repeated the rhythm, watching each student and then giving individual help as he intuited the way

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3 <http://dictionary.reference.com>.

in which they were starting to put the rhythm together. Through repetition the kids were learning the beats specifically, but the process was one of call and response—and fun.

Somewhat into the session a new child was brought into the class by his mother. The other children kept working with the rhythm as the teacher showed the new child the beat the other kids were learning, playing the rhythm so that he could begin to participate. The new child was so stimulated and happy to be there that he spontaneously began to dance around the drum.

His mother became alarmed and expressed her dismay that her child was not sitting in his seat trying to play exactly the way the teacher had shown. We told her that the first stage of her child's learning was to ingest and feel the rhythm, and that it was much more important that he first do this in an enjoyable way rather than sit in a chair and mimic the hand movements. We let her know that when he was ready to put the rhythm into his own hands, it would be quite natural for him to sit down and play and he would then be much more accepting of the technical aspects. We added that this was a valuable process in which he was engaged, one that would provide a deeper, more meaningful learning experience.

Unfortunately, she didn't accept this explanation and couldn't tolerate this style of learning and teaching. Even though she saw that the other students were indeed learning in this way, she pulled her child from the class. We felt this to be unfortunate for the child, but it does show a certain thinking that is prevalent in traditional ways of teaching, a thinking that is not only counterproductive in children's learning but can ultimately depress a student's creativity.

*It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.*

—Duke Ellington lyrics

## Focusing on the Internal

### Key Points:

- Personal language
- Intention of expression

We are usually taught to focus on the external ramifications of what we're learning: to acquire facts, figures, and techniques in order to gain the approval of others. While this is satisfying to some, there are many for whom it is not. Among these are students in whom the creative process is very alive: these students often become upset and angry when they feel that the most valuable part of them is being smothered.

All skills, techniques, and forms have come into being to serve something greater, and while these devices and forms are very valuable, they are not the essence. Form or technique alone never creates something that's alive. Likewise, teaching our students as if they were silos of information results in an education that is devoid of meaning and denies them the experiences they need to thrive.

Making technique or information primary puts our emphasis outside ourselves, and leads to concern about the reactions of other people. If our focus is external when playing music, for example, our music becomes stiff and tense and lacks melodic content. We play the "cool licks" we copied from someone else (often out of context), or play too many notes thinking we need to get them all in to sound good. The face is no longer wearing the makeup, it's the other way around.

When we focus on expressing ourselves sincerely from within, however, we can participate in the world in a way that builds self-esteem and is immensely satisfying. It's also far more pleasing to others, because when we create from this deeply emotional place, our expression becomes purer and simpler. When playing music with this orientation, for example, we won't feel the need to play a lot of notes just to play them or to display our skill. To play music that is satisfying we will try to play in a way that's melodic, has rhythmic consistency, and interesting shapes to the lines. When we stay in touch with these feelings our creations have continuity and make sense.

- **MTO:** *P is a perfect example of an artist that lets the work live on its own. By this I mean that if P is given a starting point and the support and freedom to move forward he will consistently let his creativity lead the way to success.*

A look at how and why form and techniques evolve helps to understand this. An excellent example is the birth of the Blues and Jazz. As described in *Fanning an Inner Flame*, the roots of these forms lie in Black slave music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The pure emotional expression and communication that came from the singer's soul could not be accurately written in our diatonic language because the combination of the slaves' ancestral African music and the European music to which they were exposed resulted in unique rhythmic patterns and melodic notes that defied written description. Musicians studying the music could only do their best to imitate on paper what their ears heard, and today's Blues scales and other devices emerged as an approximation of the music.

## Response to the Call: Technique Serves Expression

Key Points:

- Non-intellectual experience
- Meaningful expression
- Technique
- Integrating the whole person

Within the context of a dynamic learning experience of almost any subject, students will experience many different feelings, and will often want to communicate them. In other words, they will be stimulated to express ideas based on what they are feeling in order to try to send a particular message. Often times, they may desire freedom

from the present feeling or relief from an unpleasant condition. They may want to express a need for social justice, let out a cry of the pain of existence, a sense of happiness, yearning for something new, or simply express an idea they have.

They will attempt to make a response to these “calls” in a non-intellectual way, one that contains a certain emotional content and message, and for this they will need materials, skills, and abilities. In a visual arts context, for example, there will be ways of creating line, color, shapes, compositions, or combinations of these, that will express or meaningfully represent these feelings. Their feelings and reactions will conjoin with the material and techniques to give a symbolic representation of their moment. Again, this is a non-intellectual experience.

Once we recognize the particular need, we can give students the tools or techniques by our example and then teach these techniques to them so they can make a more personal response. In this process, the intellect is at the service of the *whole* experience as are the body and heart—skill and emotion are tightly attached. There are times, for instance, when we need to focus in on technique to isolate any difficulties and work them out. There are also times when the student needs a thorough intellectual understanding of a theory or technique. But we must always bring the focus back to the larger context of creating something that is meaningful to us.

This concept can be fairly abstract because what we’re talking about is a feeling, an emotion, a human condition, so I will offer another way of considering this. Forms of art can make you happy or sad, they can acknowledge pain or joy, they can make you dance or cry—they can summon the human palette of emotions. Some art forms are more urgent than others, some are designed to rattle your cage, some to bring you peace, and they’re all valid. They’re all a way of sharing our condition. There is a certain energy that goes into expressing these feelings and that energy should determine the skills, techniques, and resulting forms. The material being taught should somehow significantly resonate with the student. Offering the student varied examples of what artists of that particular style or tradition have done before will be very useful here.

In this skill-oriented culture I feel I should reiterate that skills are by no means unimportant. Of course, the best artists are highly skilled. The question is one of how you approach learning those skills. Good art contains an energy about it that makes it alive—it communicates life. That which produces art, the expression, needs to stay foremost, and the skills and techniques should be developed in service to it. The end product will contain this energy if the priority of the human condition remains the priority. Without the soul of the artist, the technique will be admired only as a mechanical execution. It won't communicate much beyond that.

When great technique is in service of purposeful creative expression, the artist achieves a fineness and subtlety that could never be achieved by focus on technique alone. Students who are allowed to feel deeply about their music will articulate it from a rich place in themselves and get far more sound out of their instruments than someone who is focused only on technique. The teacher won't even need to speak about many dynamics and articulations because these are so natural: if the student is playing the music from a soulful place, these dynamics will come out quite easily, right where they belong.

## Creating the Balance

### Key Points:

- Entrainment
- Pacing
- Hearing

Truly good education has a sense of vitality and balance—a tension, a sense of forward movement, and a rhythm in which we interact with our student. This sense of motion is an important piece of communication; and much like riding a bicycle the MT needs to know how to keep the lesson balanced and moving at the student's tempo. This sometimes feels like we're on a tightrope, and we need to know

how to do whatever is necessary to stay upright. When we do, the moment stays dynamic and has a sense of vitality. We can create this balance by determining what's appropriate at each moment.

The following example is given to communicate how to achieve this flow or progression, how to create a particular sort of rhythm that is important in the transferring of information. Although this example is musical in nature, the process I describe can be used when teaching other subjects as well.<sup>4</sup>

When beginning to work on a new song, for example, one of the first things we music teachers can do is play the part that we are going to teach the student at a tempo that we think is best suited for her. Then, to engage her to start this process, we set a tempo and get into a rhythm with her so we're both feeling the beat, and then starting to feel it in a similar way.

This can be done by first clapping, counting, or singing a rhythm of the musical idea we're about to present. It could also be done by playing one note in time and having that serve as marking time and rhythm. This sets up something that's often referred to as *entrainment*, where the sense of time or rhythm forms the basis from which we operate—the basis in which we hear and feel, the first steps in establishing a common ground of feeling from which to step off into the music. So in this example the first thing is to share pulse, because when playing music we must always take care to keep the pulse going and to make sure we experience music as music, as alive.

Now that the time has been established, both teacher and student may be beating a foot. The time is being felt in both of our bodies and there's a unifying feeling about this. We may then offer a small motif, a fragment of a melody or musical idea, a series of notes, and lay this into the time, the feeling, always keeping the time going. We then ask the student to repeat the phrase, so we have a kind of mirroring, or follow the leader, with the student essentially trying to copy what we are playing.

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4 In visual art, for example, when beginning a new drawing, you might give your student a series of basic shapes that will form the foundation for the drawing she is working towards, and create a series of strokes that make up these shapes for her to practice and develop with you. Doing this will create a sense of flow that can then be built upon to create the drawing.

Of course, she may or may not be able to play it in the right time or with the right fingering. It will be our job to figure out what the challenge is and offer a solution (unless she is able to figure that out herself, which is preferable). We may need to break the phrase down into smaller segments or, in the case of fingering, we may have to stop the time momentarily to show a technical aspect of correct fingering so the student can execute the phrase. As soon as the student catches on to the fingering, the time should be started again with feeling brought back in and played. This is what we mean when we say that the technique is gained within the context of a feeling and the movement of the music. We may then use various dynamics such as back and forth or call and response, because it will take more than correct fingering for her to play with any depth of feeling.

As the student starts to absorb the rhythm and the feeling by repetition and to attach it to the movement of her hands, she will bring the technique in sync with the rest of her senses. This will ensure that everything she learns to play is integrated. We may then ask her to take her hands off the keyboard and sing it, and then play it while she sings it. We then could take our hand off the keyboard while still fully being there with her, clapping our hands or beating our foot or singing with her as she articulates it herself.

In much the way that you show the technique of fingering in context so it comes out of the overall feeling and the musical idea being expressed, you can do the same with theory when you are showing an improvisational idea. Introduce only the theory the student needs in order to manipulate and be creative within a variation and then, when the playing comes to a concluding point, use that opportunity to further elaborate on the theory.

At this point she may spontaneously come up with an idea of her own, another way of phrasing or hearing it, a way of altering it. This is desirable as long as she has the fundamental idea we're showing her in place. Then again, she may not come up with a variation until she has more experience with what is being shown and the subsequent steps. If we're showing her the next step, then it's a building block process in which we'll show the next phrase in much the same way and then, when she has a sense of accomplishment, we'll add the two phrases together.

We must always remember that repetition is desirable, encouraging the student to repeat it as much as possible so she deepens her experience with it and can start to hear what she's playing. We should encourage her to listen very carefully to how she's playing it, for if she's sensitive enough, her ears are going to tell her how to get more out of it, how to make the instrument sound richer. The repetition also allows her body to absorb it in a way that brings the phrase alive. And she'll start to swing. Creative expression should always be a fully-sensed experience.

If we're showing the student an improvisational idea, we could take the motif or musical idea and show her a variation of it to start to develop a sense of musical possibilities. We might show her two or three variations while we're playing them and show her the scale, tonality, or rhythm that we're focusing on to create these variations. It's a good idea to keep these fairly limited at first so she isn't overwhelmed by too wide a range of possibilities. After having her repeat these variations with us as before, we then encourage her to make some variations on her own. Again, the context should be in the time and we should be all there, fully attuned to our inner responses, moving with her and the music.

We might then do a call and the student, in the sense of time, might do a different response because she can now play a different idea. If she is capable and it seems as if she's becoming empowered here and willing to try new things with our encouragement, she may start to make the initial statement. We can then respond to her. And so it goes, on to more sophisticated levels with variations of all the musical principles such as rhythm, melody, harmony, counterpoint, etc., taking it on to an increasingly sophisticated expression.

Again, this must evolve out of an artistic experience that emphasizes feeling, listening and hearing, seeing, and responding. I make a distinction between listening and hearing because people may listen, but they don't necessarily hear. The subtlety here is that one has to listen carefully and deeply enough to really hear. As teachers, we have to allow enough space and pacing in a lesson so that hearing can really take place.

The following communicates the feeling that this way of teaching can create.

*Imagine a student and teacher together at a piano. The teacher focuses on the music but is sensitive to the student and able to hear the music as the student does. Student and teacher listen and tap the rhythm together. Sometimes they play together as the teacher expresses a musical phrase to create a point of stimulation. These shared experiences help students by raising their awareness and by allowing vital learning to occur. It is at these moments that students not only grasp the skill of playing, but also can learn the theory behind the music because it relates directly to their personal experience.*

*These moments also affect the teacher. He re-experiences the music which enables him to teach with a freshness that excites and motivates students. The teacher's honesty, openness, and vulnerability contribute to the trust and belonging that are so helpful to students.*

## Social Learning: Individuals within the Group

Key Points:

- Self esteem
- Inclusion
- Respect
- Awareness

*Who creates a melody like this?*

*Draws a tree like this?*

*Writes a poem like this?*

*Expresses an experience like this?*

Seeing each classroom as the group of individuals it is and finding how to best work with those individuals as we recognize the culture that is evolving from the group is a focus necessary to providing the important element of social learning in education. There are ways of participating in a group that are clearly more productive than others and optimum group dynamics occur when people bring the best of themselves to a situation in a non-defensive, confident way. When they build the competencies of good learning (as a result of good teaching), students develop self-esteem.

Developing good self-esteem in our students is one of our highest callings. By good self-esteem we mean that students have a confident, not overconfident, feeling about who they are—that they are comfortable with themselves and don't in any way feel the need to find someone less in order to make themselves feel better. A student with good self-esteem is satisfied in her development and doesn't need undue ego reinforcement. She can express herself to the benefit of the group. Through having learned how to listen and how to respond, she can do these simultaneously in a group situation, ascertaining when to be in a supporting or leadership role.

- **MTO:** *Student has a tendency to display some jesting aggressiveness towards his peers and seems to derive some satisfaction from their struggles to cooperate. We are putting the student in a dyad situation in order to work more closely in filling a need that will not show itself in negative attention within a larger group.*

Developing self-respect and self-confidence that is not earned at the expense of others and learning how to respect other cultures and be inclusive are all capacities quite natural to humans but, and this is becoming apparent in today's world, this won't occur in a vacuum. As teachers we need to provide the guidance, the environment, and the sustained relationship to catalyze these qualities in our students so they can realize these traits and feel confident in their ability to grow.

These qualities are therapeutic in and of themselves because when a person sincerely tries to live a life based in inclusion and other higher principles, it's as if she has attached herself to the coattails of life. She becomes more fully alive. These are the elements of love, the highest thing to strive for, and being on that track will produce the most dynamic growth in human beings. These higher principles are fundamental to life, and should be at the core of education.

*Education . . . must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits. It must be controlled at every point by reference to these same considerations. These powers, interests, and habits must be continually interpreted—we must know what they mean. They must be translated into terms of their social equivalents – into terms of what they are capable of in the way of social service.—John Dewey<sup>5</sup>*

We can very specifically address students' ethical development and character, going beyond a simple list of do's and don'ts. Character should first and foremost be modeled by the teacher who wants to be there and should also be open for student discussion both individually and within the group. These discussions can stem from

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5 John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed*, [www.infed.org](http://www.infed.org).

the perspective of building good relationships. The creative arts are a great tool here because they provide opportunities or gateways to many different types of people and cultures and can give a concrete feeling of interconnectedness.

Understanding other cultures is a main ingredient in the type of education we're advocating because the best way to accept others is to understand them. Contact with diverse groups in the community is an essential experience for students in order to gain this understanding. Subjects to be studied and discussed could be determined by the demographics of the community and the classroom. These might include:

- How Native Americans view nature
- How African Americans arrived here and what their cultural influence has been
- The meanings of various celebrations
- The meanings of current music trends and fashion.

We might also facilitate student presentations of their:

- Family histories and origins
- Cultural values and how they practice them
- Meaningful experiences
- Personal interests and talents.

By celebrating individual students we showcase their individuality, foster their self-esteem (which in turn will help them accept others) and enlighten other students. This also provides an opportunity for us to work to develop some of the skills of interaction such as:

- Non-judgmental listening
- Asking questions in a non-threatening way.

As we work in these ways, we create an environment for learning, one that says to all: *Who are you? We want to know you. We value many different ideas and backgrounds. Everyone has talents. Please express*

*yourself*. This truly creates inclusion. We need to be like architects or orchestrators, balancing and blending personalities, encouraging and moderating. MTs should present themselves as enthusiastic, growing individuals in pursuit of more understanding of human dynamics.

Respect is a principle at work here that's worth revisiting. Respect is a capacity to be developed and practiced with others. To be able to respect somebody even though you have a difference of opinion, for example, is fundamental to healthy growth and maturity. People need to feel that it's okay to be different or have a different slant on things. There is much value in the admonition to treat others as you would like them to treat you.

We can help students learn to appreciate and understand differences by exposing what's already in them and what they may be experiencing. This will depend upon our awareness, and can be achieved by:

- Showing them their need and desire to be accepted by other people by exposing a particular strength in them they would like to have well-received by others
- Acknowledging the desire to share it
- Creating a situation in which they are supported in expressing that strength to their peers
- Sharing their resultant good feeling.

We also create an environment of inclusion when we take care to correct students in non-threatening ways. How we perceive their actions is important here. When a student is acting out we can interpret this as an indication that she is losing her way or that she needs more direction. One way to facilitate that moment in a way that enables her is to offer set guidelines that she clearly understands. Take, for example, a moment in which she is hurting another student. We might remind her that this is not allowed, but our admonishment should be set in the orientation of understanding how the hurt is happening and in the context of respect, with a clear understanding of what respect is.

We can use this situation to teach the need to be aware of others so we don't hurt them. We can reinforce our guidelines with a concrete, experiential explanation and allow the student to explore this. This exploration might include considering questions such as:

- What is respect in the first place?
- What does respect mean for you?
- For me?
- Are there degrees to this?
- What are actions that can hurt others?
- How can I be more understanding and aware?
- How can I better express or communicate something?
- How can I listen better?
- How do we get from here to there?

Such exploration always presents an opportunity for us to revisit these questions in ourselves and see how much we, as teachers, are respecting the student.

If behavior is disruptive, we need to recognize the cause of the discomfort in order to engage the disrupting student and offer her a more positive way of expressing herself. Perhaps she needs to express something she feels is being neglected or something she doesn't like about the situation. Perhaps she simply needs to be prompted to bring out a part of herself that needs to be recognized. What are her ideas? How should they be used in the situation? Help her accept and respect herself. Respect will build trust and make the situation more secure.

If we perceive a prejudice or an aggression, for example, we can teach that this orientation produces a negative feeling and will lead to actions that are detrimental to both the individual and others. We can teach about defensiveness, aggression, and isolation and show students that their acting out of these feelings will bring the same back to them.

Success in group communications gives students confidence in assuming responsibility for their actions, and when they're given opportunities to understand their actions, they can learn that their actions can bring negative as well as positive responses. These are avenues of learning in which student and MT can explore many choices before a real problem develops. When we help students understand this, we provide a pathway that leads them to become less prejudiced, and to the realization that we all have very similar feelings and that everyone wants their feelings respected, not hurt.

Viewing divisive attitudes and behaviors as misunderstandings provides us with a positive way to address them. Misunderstandings and mistakes are part of the process of growing and learning. When we understand prejudice or aggression as a mistake stemming from ignorance, we can emphasize the ability to change. Students will learn through new perspectives and better choices. Having this kind of freedom draws people out and allows them to discover their own abilities, their own power. The key to so much of this growth is that the students experience it within a well-guided group and obtain a deep understanding so these things become *willingly* internalized.

Another area worth careful consideration is the misperceiving or misinterpreting of others' words and actions. Students can be shown, for example, how we can often take others' anxieties personally where that might not be appropriate.

- People often feel anger for one person but take it out on another
- A person who is experiencing loss often becomes upset with other people
- People blame other people for their own insecurity.

Additional awareness and skills that can be taught and gained in a group include:

- Listening without interrupting
- Not putting oneself above another person

- Acting with fairness and empathy instead of dominating or imposing ourselves.

The workings of healthy group dynamics become clear when viewed through the lens of playing music in an ensemble. In order to make good music in a group you have to have confidence in your abilities and listen to what's going on around you so your response will be one of give and take. When you are able to most freely express yourself *and* listen to and appreciate the others in the ensemble, you can respond to them appropriately, as in a good conversation. This interaction of give and take, of hearing and responding, will produce a third dynamic which in its best sense produces the music. This dynamic of solidarity or harmony is a universal feeling which results in communal expression.

The ability to make connections, a capacity that is learned through making sense of and broadening an experience, is another ability that we can facilitate within the group. This is one of the most important skills a person can learn. A 16-year old guitarist in our program years ago eloquently summarized the personal benefits this can bring:

*Being in a group of people [in this case an ensemble class] has shown me that lots of people have different ideas and that my idea isn't always the best and isn't always right. When a group plays together, you have to work with each other to make it happen. It helps me understand how to listen to people, even outside of the program in the other parts of my life.*

Where this student had previously been quick to shut out others by simply not listening, he had learned how to listen because he *had* to in order to do something he badly wanted to do—play music. He somewhat jokingly told us later that this could present some problems—he actually wasn't able to shut people out anymore. It's important to note that his teacher had frequently made him aware that he was developing this skill and had done so at times when he was actively learning it.

His example demonstrates how the workings of an evolving group can be so valuable and readily understood in relation to many other areas of one's life. It's important to note that this youth was originally not very skilled in either communication or music, but because the music was so important to him and he wanted to make the group sound good, he was willing to take the necessary steps and put in the required effort to learn acceptance and communication skills. There were many "trials and tribulations" in the process, so he also learned that by sticking with something to achieve goals you develop the lifelong skill of perseverance.

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## CHAPTER 4

# Venturing Together: Steps on the Road to Success

The following key approaches and steps will help guide you as you embark on the rewarding joint venture of a Mentor Teacher. These are steps you can take with your students that will facilitate their progress as they come to understand new meanings through seeing, hearing, feeling, and learning, and they are intended as a true joint venture. You can do them in this or any order that's appropriate for the student.

- Acknowledge students' prior experience and knowledge
- Bring things to the learning situation that are or were your own strong, personal influences in a particular subject such as artwork, a piece of music, or literature
- Choose one of these based on students' interest
- Demonstrate techniques used
- Create an oral, written, visual, musical, symbolic, and/or physical vocabulary
- Share by describing what emotions evolved, thoughts, elements that were seen and heard

- Initiate a dialogue on the meaning and purpose of the subject, what is being conveyed, what effect it has, or what kind of contribution it makes to society
- Discuss and process responses, questions raised, how to look for answers, comparisons of similar works
- Create presentations of other offerings including personal work
- Discuss art as communication coming from personal experiences
- Discuss under what conditions work was created, why created, happenings in society at the time, other works produced during that period
- Provide examples of research for students to further explore on their own
- Give students the feeling of having a plan
- Discuss the development of a personal plan for and with students
- Create a specific track with goals and design activities to further explore ideas
- Choose stimulating elements to create study activities to begin student development
- Practice parts of the project with the students, breaking down steps to smallest parts and then enlarging them with variations, perspectives, and relationships
- Have students follow practice techniques to complete parts
- Design exercises spontaneously in the lesson based on how the students are working and what they need to develop

- Create a clear step-by-step lesson practice plan
- Work with the students to develop a direction for their lessons, following their lead as much as possible. If they become unclear or don't know, take the lead and offer options from which they can choose
- Show students how to create and organize a portfolio
- Develop and keep continuity based on the previous learning, continue to show relationships
- Revisit overall subject for new responses and observations from activities
- Connect to broader contexts with connections to other subjects
- Arrange field trips to introduce students to the array and use of community resources related to the field of study
- Create as intensive a situation as possible for each student.

**Note:** for further examples, see the curricula in our *Partners in Art* series.

## Creating a Personal Study Plan

A personal study plan will aid the MT with organization and continuity and offers a guide for student practice. The plan should be created with *specific* goals to be achieved in a specific time period, accompanied by activities to achieve the goals.

Creating a progressive plan that includes a written weekly study routine is a specific way of ensuring student success through structure. We can begin this by offering the student various perspectives and choices, and then guiding her in the positive direction that most resonates with her. This direction will be based on her inclinations

and motivation and an understanding of how the steps of the plan are related to the achievement of her goal.

After a mutual goal is established, we must determine a series of activities or objectives for each week in order for the student to achieve the goal. We should then help her develop a consistent, personal way of working by giving very specific steps at each lesson. These should be designed in such a way that she will be able to understand them well before she leaves and then successfully implement them on a regular basis throughout the week. The plan should include:

- Curriculum used
- Skill building techniques
- Procedures to follow
- Information to retain
- Steps to achieve
- Knowledge to acquire
- Reinforcement of success
- Challenges
- Problems to be solved
- Handouts
- Project materials
- Project Tools
- Resources
- References

**Note:** for additional examples see our manual, *Risks Worth Taking* and the *Partners in Art* curricula series.

## Notating the Practice Routine

Notating the lesson plan and writing down the assignments serves three very important functions. First, it helps the student remember all she needs to practice in a detailed structure that sets clearly defined expectations and goals. It also helps her establish good habits that can lead to her taking responsibility for her learning. The assignments should be numbered or bulleted in the suggested order of practice. Each item should be stated clearly and simply with notes on technique and helpful reminders.

Writing down the assignments is also an aid to you, the MT, in that it reminds you *exactly* what the student is supposed to have accomplished each week and will help greatly in your preparations for the new lesson. Keep an exact copy for yourself. (I've always favored carbon paper—still available in most drugstores).

Most students really appreciate knowing that the teacher is so finely tuned to their instruction. Your preparation will also communicate this so you should copy lesson materials (written pieces of music, exercises, etc. for music lessons) beforehand so the student won't have to wait for you to search for the material. Of course, on occasion you will have new ideas about material during the lesson and searching and/or photocopying, within a reasonable amount of time, will be just the thing to do. The point is that we should be as well-prepared as possible for our time with our students.

## Journaling: Creating a History of Positive Expression

A journal (or art portfolio) is an example of an activity or project that can create a chronological continuity for students. A journal provides a means of looking at the self through personally created visual images and/or writings, a process through which a student learns to read herself, a process of self-insight and self-discovery.

When shared with a teacher, the journal becomes a dialogue of “what you see, what I see” (or hear or think or feel) and develops into

a back and forth interpretation of what it evokes, how the subject is experienced, and what is communicated. The teacher remains neutral, a non-judgmental observer, taking in the student experience of evolving perception and image, all the while encouraging the positive efforts and personal results of the student.

The journal is a history that can provide invaluable insights into a student's learning process and development and serves to stimulate new questions, new perspectives, and future direction. This can be very grounding and reassuring, supporting the student's identity and sense of self as she ventures into new territories of life.

Finally, a journal can be a revealing tool for self-reflection. A student working through a difficult new process or stage in learning can gain encouragement and insight from her own experience by re-reading what she wrote during a previous challenge and remembering how she handled that challenge.

## Designing an Activity with the Student – Possible Orientations

- Imagine the idea
- Picture in your mind what it could look like
- Design out the idea
- Explore all the possible ways of making it
- Decide on a plan, with specific steps to take
- Figure out in what order to carry out the steps of the plan
- Be able to change the plan based on its outcomes
- Have the patience to work on a project over several weeks' time.

## Examples of Student Approaches and Interventions

The following are additional ways of promoting student success as well as methods of intervening when the student has lost her way.

- Provide consistent structure
- Offer options so the student is able to choose
- Give praise whenever appropriate
- Provide sufficient challenge
- Analyze tasks before instruction begins so you can break each task down into clear, simplified steps with a progressive sequence
- Begin new projects with easily recalled steps
- Encourage student's self-exploration
- Prompt student to express herself
- Make the lessons fun, with a warm feeling of caring
- Provide clarity of direction and consequence
- Set clear limits and expectations
- Provide a high level of predictability in each lesson
- Provide smooth transitions, always aware that transitions can be very challenging for some students
- Ensure that all involvement with peers is non-competitive
- Work on more than one project at a time to help offset frustration
- When a student appears to be stuck, move to another media with which she has less experience: she may become more open and creative

- Take a break when tensions begin to run high
- When an individual is subverting the success of the group, provide that student with individual attention.

## Key Relationships and Evaluation

The following areas can be helpful for thinking of the student's growth and progress in behaviorally observable terms. This objective teaching and evaluative orientation will help you find ways to stimulate, cultivate, and strengthen the student's learning process. An observational framework could use such definers as never, cannot, resists, infrequently, rarely, occasionally, sometimes, usually, often, frequently, repeatedly, constantly, or always.<sup>1</sup>

- Student's Relationship to Self
- Student's Relationship to the Mentor Teacher
- Student's Relationship to Personal Development.

### Student's Relationship to Self

- Ability to concentrate—time student is able to focus and stay on task
- Level of motivation—self-preparation of lesson and initiative taken with teacher
- Self confidence to succeed—a positive sense of self that takes on challenges
- Frustration tolerance—acceptance of difficult process and the ability to refocus after mistakes
- Consistent effort—steady rate of energetic attempts at achieving results.

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1 \* These observable behaviors can be scaled and evaluated. Please refer to our *SETS* evaluation software.

## Student's Relationship to the Mentor Teacher

- Listens to the MT—attention expended in trying to understand the teacher
- Follows directions—responsive to and cooperative with the teacher's instructions
- Communicates needs—asks for help, clarifications, or new approaches
- Communicates ideas—proposes or initiates new perspectives and areas of learning.

## Student's Relationship to Personal Development

- Shows ability to build on previous learning—independently transfers skill to other areas
- Is able to incorporate various elements—combines multi-understandings in a coherent way
- Recognizes patterns—identifies similar elements in varying contexts and relationships
- Displays freedom in expressing herself—exhibits spontaneity and imagination
- Shows willingness to try new steps—readily engages in unfamiliar areas
- Shows respect for the studio/classroom and equipment—is careful with materials and environment.

There are two additional assessments we use periodically as aids to determine student progress and challenges, to further fine-tune our development process to build on strengths. For the first one noted below, we ask the students to conduct a self-assessment, which represents a continuum of attitudes the student has towards herself.

## Student Self-assessment

Characteristics to consider can include:

- Satisfaction with self
- Has good qualities
- Thinks self is no good
- Can do as well as others
- Not very proud
- Feels useless
- Feels like a worthy person
- Would like more self-respect
- Feels like a failure
- Feels good about self.

The second, an assessment by a significant other, is completed by the parent/guardian, teachers, counselors, as well as the MT and anyone else who is close to the student, to delineate a continuum of characteristics each sees in the student.

## Significant Other Assessment of Student

Characteristics to consider can include:

- Becomes easily alarmed and anxious
- Needs a lot of support
- Becomes withdrawn or sullen when criticized
- Brags or boasts about exploits
- Seeks attention by being loud or noisy
- Uses drugs or alcohol

- Acts impulsively
- Adapts easily to new situations or activities
- Popular with others
- Shows a sense of self-esteem and self-worth
- Shows confidence and self-assurance in actions
- Generally achieves artistic and psychological goals
- Feels all mixed up
- Has a low self opinion of self
- Gets upset at school
- Has good friends
- Feels positive about the future
- Easy to like
- Tries best at school.

At Merge we have developed a comprehensive evaluation software that, in part, focuses on the foregoing areas in order to carefully monitor student progress and overall success of a program, initiative, or organization. With this system, teachers and staff can easily keep detailed records and provide reports on each student including their progress and any special needs. *SETS: Student Evaluation & Tracking System*, is available through Merge at [www.merge-education.com](http://www.merge-education.com).

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## Conclusion

Our job is to free up the learning process, to open the dams and blockages as we liberate the natural resources in our students. If we are really teaching in an in-depth way, a common ground will be created between our students and us, a shared experience of the human condition.

All of us have innate abilities to creatively learn on our own. This teaching approach provides a means for our students to become their own best teachers. Ultimately we all teach ourselves: we must, in order to *be* who we really are. As MTs our perceptiveness and creativity are part of the foundation of success with these students. In the end, you may wonder who the beneficiary of this work really is—the student or the mentor-teacher.

*Most of the students that I had came from low to middle income families, and many were in a single parent home environment. What I have discovered being an instructor with this program is that for the time the student and I spend together I become the other part of a single-parent situation. That is, I feel that I successfully become the students' mentor, something I think that parents sometimes forget that they naturally are for their children.*

*I truly become someone that my students can confide in, someone who really listens to them and responds in a way that lets them know that yes, what they have to say is significant. This is significant not only when they "speak"*

*to me or anyone else through the piano, or drum kit, but also when they use the English language to communicate a thought.*

*When young people learn to communicate in more positive ways you begin to see them gain the self-confidence and self-esteem that was abandoned for one reason or another. So our students come to us for this opportunity, to get back that part of them that they remember making them feel good about being “just who they are.”*

*Teaching in this way has allowed me to share with these students what I’ve learned being a professional artist for more than 30 years. Feeling good about your profession is part of what makes one want to stay in his chosen field. I’ve chosen to continue to be a professional musician partly because it gives me a feeling of self-worth, and partly because I feel that I can, by having someone hopefully enjoy my music, in my own way serve my community.*

*I believe that one of the things that determines a community’s ability to serve its individuals effectively is how well each individual serves the community and, in a broader sense, our society. This program lets me be a part of my community, and show young people how they too can be involved in this process on a continual basis, and for me it’s always rejuvenating.*

—Former EMTAH teacher

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# Addendum

The following material, un-edited profiles written by teachers as a part of their evaluation of their students, is intended to offer orientations and ways of approaching different students. We would welcome hearing from you with your own observations, and hope to foster and facilitate an ongoing dialogue from which we can all learn from each other.

## Relevant Connections

S was brought to his lesson by a staff person. S has been diagnosed with Noonan's Syndrome [a genetic disorder that causes abnormal development of multiple parts of the body]. Noonan's Syndrome is not S's only challenge – he also struggles with anger management and appropriate behavior in social situations. On S's first day of class, the three of us sat down together for S's first art lesson. Ten or 15 minutes into the lesson S requested a private audience with the staff person who accompanied him. When they returned to the room I was asked if I felt comfortable conducting class with only S in the room; the staff person would be right outside the door. I agreed. This was the beginning of my relationship with S, and the first step of his journey as an artist.

Now, 9 months later, S has not only become an artist, he has turned 18 and taken many steps toward living more independently as a young adult. S's classes focus on the areas S is naturally in tune with—color, pattern, and design. S's strengths lie within his wonderful imagination and his ability to find relationships between images

that create lively, joyful compositions that people respond to. Drawing from life or using perspective, if dwelled upon as in traditional visual arts classes, would make S miserable and cause his self esteem to plummet. What makes sense to him are patterns—patterns on the color wheel, patterns of nature or the design created through experimenting with composition.

As S has navigated his way through growth, learning challenging material, changing homes, getting two jobs, grocery shopping and learning to balance a check book, there have been classes with outbursts, intimidation, confusion or anger. Just as important to S's artistic development has been his development as a student. He has learned the boundaries between the role of teacher and student, how to control his behavior so that he can get the most out of each class, and if he has had a tough day, how to discuss and control his negative feelings instead of letting them control him in class.

S is a perfect example of an artist that lets the work live on its own. By this I mean that if S is given a starting point and the support and freedom to move forward he will consistently let his creativity lead the way to success. S comes to class now ready to work. If he is in a horrible mood he does not let it interfere and sometimes surprises me at the end of class with the confession that he came in full of anger and feels better now. I would not have known.

S has hung his work in two of EMTAH's art shows, and sold work at both events. People who have never met S respond naturally to the charm and imagination in his work. S has learned how to discuss his artwork with his audience and takes pride in his strengths and unique understanding of his world. S's art defines his personality and gives him a context to be his best. S connects other parts of his life to his art—he sees relationships between art and cooking and loves to compare his two passions. S's class meets at the same time as the Jazz Ensemble, and S never fails to comment on the music, the performers, do a little dance, and employ the rhythm in his work.

## Learning Style

When he is able to sit and concentrate at the piano, P is a quick learner. He responds well to a combination of visual and aural

stimuli and repetition (showing him finger placement and demonstrating how a passage sounds). I introduced written music fairly early with him (about 3 months). This was partly at his mother's suggestion, to assist her in helping him during the week, but also because he responded well to musical material written on a page.

R, not surprisingly, is easily frustrated by a passage he cannot immediately master; this discomfort and frustration may help explain his tendency to move on to another stimuli that makes him feel better. He has the capacity, though, to return to the material at home during the week (with his mother's help) and to gain some mastery over it. However, he also tends to hard wire material as he believes it should be played, so correcting mistakes or misplayed passages with him is extremely difficult. R is very creative (see more below) and often writes variations on songs, as well as his own endings. He is quite exact about how these should be played. He has a very good ear and tends to respond to harmony and rhythmic ideas. Again, not surprisingly, he tends to play pieces too fast, with consequent errors and limited dynamics. He does play with great enthusiasm, passion and, usually, volume.

R has a very strong imagination and dramatic bent. He often wants to act out dramatic characters and have me join him. For example, he pretends that we are co-hosts of a radio show, performing and talking on the air. Or, he pretends to be a rock lead singer, dancing and posing while I play the drums. R gets so caught up in these mini-scenes that he forgets about making music or about making music with me. The visual "image" of his imaginary character or scenes is more important than the sound or the music.

R displays an idiosyncratic need to practice and play a song from the beginning, and always start from there. It is very difficult to get him to break this pattern. It is also very difficult to get R to play with me, in the sense of working together cooperatively to make music. Once, though, after hearing a well-known local Latin jazz band play at his school, R was able to join me in trying to recreate on the drums some of the rhythms he heard. Usually, though, there is a sense of "parallel play" which is usually exhibited by much younger children.

## Teacher Responses

Working with P has certainly been a challenge to my patience. He is professionally challenging on both social work and music education levels, and for the most part, I feel that I have maintained my composure and my sense of openness, empathy and respect for him. I have also enjoyed the puzzle of devising strategies and approaches to working with him. More difficult has been my problem convincing P to create music with me. The creative part of me responds to P's flair, but it has often been difficult for me to "join" him in his play; it seems like he is willing to entertain me as an audience, but not to play together with me. Because I am usually successful in this endeavor with other children, it feels like a failure on my part with P, and that is disappointing. I do hope that he returns to lessons and to the arena of engagement with me.

## Types of Learners

N showed herself to be a very bright, observant, rather analytical student. She asked many questions regarding both theory and technique. She often asked me to demonstrate techniques, voicings, patterns, etc., on the piano, while she observed from a standing position. In this sense, she was a very visual learner. She would also engage me in conversation by asking me to elaborate on points and by asking good theoretical and analytical questions. Once, in our third lesson, I stopped the discussion and asked her to play me something she was to work on from our last lesson. At that point, she expressed some anxiety about playing in front of others, including me, and "confessed" that *now you know my deep dark secret*. I attempted to normalize her feelings of anxiety and to assure her that she could proceed at any pace that felt comfortable to her. She felt that this anxiety had stopped her from previous attempts to progress in piano lessons. N had told me earlier that a previous teacher had "showed" her some songs and set arrangements, but had not explained much theory or harmony. She also asked me for printed material on scales, as she had never studied fingering. In her last lesson, she said she felt that she needed to work on scales before she could go any further. I agreed

that scales are important, but that there are other elements and areas that are important to work on at the same time. She concurred, although she remained adamant about studying scales.

If N returns to study, it will be interesting to hear her compositions and to work on improvisation. I suspect that she will have interesting harmonic ideas (without yet truly understanding why they work) and probably a very creative ear. She needs to work more on visceral, gut physical playing, and to free-up more rhythmically. She is a serious, mature, and focused individual. I anticipate that she could become a very good player in time.

## Strategies 1

I think we have gone from about five minutes for one subject to around ten minutes. The main problem in extending his attention span is that his energy will shift very quickly and unpredictably from working totally with me to completely against me. For example, we can be working on putting the coordination for both hands together in the context of a song, and J will go from one extreme to the other. He will work very hard and diligently for five to ten minutes, and put together perhaps sixty to seventy percent of the work. Then, suddenly, he will say that he cannot do it and he doesn't want to play this song anymore or ask how much time is left in the lesson. It is at these points in the lesson when I have to re-channel his energy by changing the subject and introducing something new for him to work on. Usually, this works although sometimes I have to talk more with him or let him go for a few minutes before he can refocus on something else.

J seems to learn best by playing the piano and using his ear. We tried reading a little bit when he was interested, but have not used it much lately. The teaching method that seems to work best with J is to play a song for him and then show him the individual phrases. With repetition he is able to pick things up. He seems to depend a lot on the order of something and if he is confused he usually starts from the beginning to find where he went wrong. Hand coordination is usually the greatest source of frustration for J. He does decently, he just seems to become easily frustrated with it because it is usually the final step between him and playing the song correctly.

## Strategies 2

When our lessons began I soon found out that K's energy could be both a positive and a negative force. For the first two to three months it took a great deal of effort to keep him focused on music. There were a number of times that I did not succeed.

I tried to contain and channel K's energy in several different ways. One method I tried to use with him was to focus for five to ten minutes and then let him follow one of his energetic tangents for a minute or so, and then bring him back into the lesson. This often worked. Another method I would use was to let K switch back and forth between the drums and the piano. K has played the drums in school for a while now and this provided a very useful and musical outlet for a good deal of his energy. Frequently, I would play a song, a blues for instance, and let K keep steady time on the drums. I would also have him play rhythms from songs we were learning on the drums as a way of reinforcing the rhythms of a particular song. Also, I would often reward him by allowing him to play drums on any song he wanted to at the end of the lesson. Using these different methods together worked fairly well.

There were still lessons where K was very hyper and required a lot of attention and discipline, but over the last year we have made what I consider to be excellent progress. His attention span has gone from somewhere in the five minute range up to around twenty. Early on, I would try to have several ideas for diversions planned out for K before his lesson. Now, this is no longer necessary. There usually one, perhaps two times in his lesson when I need to let him go a little bit. Now, he focuses almost as well as my average student, which I think is quite good considering his Attention Deficit Disorder.

Around March, K's lessons were moved from the music room (where the drums were) into the main housing unit. This meant that now we only had a keyboard to use during his lesson. K adapted to this much better than I thought he would. He also came up with the creative solution of using a smaller keyboard that he had gotten for Christmas. K would program rhythms into the small keyboard and then play along with them on the bigger one. He would also sometimes play the drum sounds on the smaller

keyboard while I played the larger keyboard. K can be very creative when he wants to be.

The main problem or limit to K's progress is his focus. Fortunately, we are making good, steady progress in this area. Aside from this, K is one of the most naturally talented students that I have seen. He has an incredible knack for transposition (moving a song from one starting note to another). Often, I will teach him a song and the next week he will be able to play it starting on three or four different notes (for most students, I would give one or two new notes for them to work on for the next weeks practice material). K also has a very good ear. He will pick up and figure things out by ear. K seems to be most comfortable learning this way. He appears to learn best sequentially with a good deal of repetition. Another thing that K will do with his ear is figure out the melodies to songs that we have never even worked on. Frequently, when I am writing down things for him to practice during the week, he will begin playing Yankee Doodle or something else that he has sounded out on his own. I think that his ear compliments his transposition ability. The final area that K is very talented in is his ability to pick up rhythm. I think some of this is due to the fact that he has played the drums for a few years in school, but he is able to play different rhythms with such ease that I am convinced a good part of this is natural talent. Often, K will learn a melody and as soon as he has learned it (sometimes before) he will begin to vary, play with or "drum" on the melody (This is usually something you teach students to do when they begin improvising). K is certainly a very gifted person.

K relates to music in a very physical way. This seems to be a natural, logical, and healthy outlet for his energy. He will get into a bodily kind of groove with the music. His head will often move, keeping time with his feet. K's whole body will often look relaxed when he is playing, but it seems also as if he is releasing pent-up anxiety and frustration. When he gets into and plays in this way, that is when he makes the most progress. In a year, we have come from K being a complete beginner to his being able to play beginning blues with both hands (three to four notes at a time). I believe we have made very good progress all things considered.

Coordination is usually the hardest part of playing something for K. When I first show him a piece of music he will almost always tell me that he will not be able to play it. I try to reassure him and then we start simply with each hand and eventually put them together. He has been able to play the song when we are finished every time. I think this is where music will be a great confidence builder for K.

Rhythm is the thing that K seems to respond to most strongly in the music that he plays. This would make sense with his background playing drums. It also is a very accessible outlet for his energy. K definitely learns best by ear at the keyboard. He likes to pick things out and seems to learn well by repeating phrases one at a time. Reading is more difficult for K and something we have tried only a few times. Reading is something that I would like to work on in the future as hopefully his attention span will continue to grow.

Discipline and focus are also things that I think I will continue to work on and try to emphasize to K. If K can continue to harness his energy and talent, I believe he will be able to do many things. Early on, I felt like K would test me a great deal. I think he was trying to find my limits and how much he could trust me. K does not do this much anymore and seems relaxed during his lessons now.

I know that music is a very important part of K's life. He has mentioned to me several times that he likes to play music with the other children at the Children's Home. He has told me that his group has performed for the other children at the home. K seems to be interested in and absorbed many different types of music. Recently, K has been placed in a foster home, and I found out how important his lessons are to him. Before he left the Children's Home, he told his counselor that he wanted very much to continue his piano lessons. Arrangements have been made for me to teach him in his new home. It was nice, as a teacher, to know for sure that lessons are important to K.

K has told me that he is very happy that he is going to a new home. His foster mother told me that he will be in the drum core at school over the summer, which will practice several hours a day during the week. Between piano and drums, I think K is getting a very well rounded musical education. Currently, we are trying to see if K's

attention span is now long enough that he can join one of our ensembles. His former counselor in the housing unit at the Children's Home told me that K has a hard time with team sports and thought that a group ensemble would be an excellent place for him to try to work out some of his difficulties. If all goes well, I think that it would be a good experience for him and a great use of his musical and percussive skills.

For more information about this methodology and the *Merge System for Creative Education* please visit us at [www.merge-education.com](http://www.merge-education.com).

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In *Venturing Together*, Bill Rossi makes a compelling case for his groundbreaking educational approach based in creative strengths-based mentoring. His argument—aimed at educators, human service providers, parents, and the general public alike—is that only a dynamic, positive, and personal approach can ignite students’ creative spirit, the force that drives learning and personal growth. Working from the bottom up, his approach focuses on the students, develops their strengths and talents, and guides them to follow their intrinsic motivation to find their way through life.

Although *Venturing Together* focuses on mentoring through the arts, the principles it expounds can be used in approaching many subjects, and can empower students to develop personal understanding and build good relationships that will ultimately lead to positive community involvement and productive communities.

Mr. Rossi is a 1971 graduate of Boston’s Berklee College of Music and lifelong jazz pianist and educator. He has demonstrated the effectiveness of his approach in programs in Seattle, WA and Albany, NY, and is currently building a center for mentoring through the arts in Chester County, PA.

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