Facing a Blank Canvas
From a conversation with Visual Arts Instructor Mark Mulherrin

The Difference Between Creativity and Imagination
When the Activities Program staff meets with patients (who are students when they work with us) shortly after being admitted, I hear similar sentences come up again and again: “I can’t draw.” “I’m not creative.” “I have no imagination.” Though any of the disciplines can elicit these responses, it seems most intense around the visual arts, which is frustrating because I think it’s arising out of a misunderstanding about what visual art is and how it is made.

Many of the students I work with come to the visual arts with an expectation that they should be able to do this thing that they don’t know how to do, or they come to it with this huge fear of failing. When I press them and ask, “What do you mean when you say, ‘I’m not creative’?” it becomes clear that language and the definition of words are getting in the way. Imagination and creativity are sometimes confused; imagination is the very human process of visualizing non-existent things in your head and creativity is the magical, but down-to-earth, process of taking existing things and combining and recombining them in a new way right out in front of you.

It’s harder to say, “I have no desire.” than it is to say, “I have no imagination.”

A good example would be a child in a room with a box. The child starts playing with the box and it becomes a castle—that’s a perfect example of the combination of creativity and imagination, because the child is using the box to embody his or her imagination. It’s a shipping box, not meant to be a castle. So creativity is taking things outside of their purpose and putting them to other uses. Creativity happens out in front of you, so you have to have stuff in front of you to be creative. Imagination is ephemeral and an
Welcome to the Summer 2018 issue of the ARC News. In this issue, you’ll find two compelling stories. The first one features Visual Arts Instructor Mark Mulherrin speaking about the central role of creativity and exploration that takes place daily in our unique Activities Program, where patients are students working with professional artists. The other story, written by Dr. Claudia Gold, infant-parent mental health specialist and Riggs staff member, reflects on our work in human development and some of the local community partnerships that have flourished as a result.

I’d also like to draw your attention to a few upcoming Riggs events:

**July 21:** “Leadership and Institutional Integrity” is a one-day conference in memory of Riggs friend and former Dean of Westminster Abbey, Dr. A. Wesley Carr. To register visit: www.austenriggs.org/leadership.

**September 28-30:** “Duality’s End: Computational Psychiatry and the Cognitive Science of Representation” is the title for the 2018 Erikson Institute Fall Conference. See the enclosed postcard for details and register at: www.austenriggs.org/2018-fall-conference.

**2018-19 Friday Night Guest Lecture Series:** As you will see in the enclosed brochure, we have a full slate of prominent clinicians and scholars who will be visiting and presenting.

Please consider joining us for some (or all) of these events and thank you for your ongoing support of our work.

Best,

Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD

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**Making Room for Uncertainty**

By Claudia Gold, MD, Infant-Parent Mental Health Specialist

WHEN WORLD-RENOWNED CHILD DEVELOPMENT RESEARCHER

Dr. Ed Tronick spoke in April 2018 for a mixed audience of Austen Riggs staff and community members who work with children and families, he began with a quote from Stephen Hawking, “One of the basic rules of the universe is that nothing is perfect... Without imperfection, neither you nor I would exist.”

Perhaps best known for developing the Still Face Paradigm, an experimental manipulation designed to demonstrate the young infant’s tremendous capacity for connection and communication, Dr. Tronick shared his decades of research, revealing not only the inevitability, but also the necessity of imperfection in human interaction.

In contrast to the expectation of a kind of mythical idealized attunement, he found, through detailed microanalysis of interactions in our primary love relationship, that healthy, typical parent-infant interactions are in fact mismatched 70% of the time. Through the repair of these moment-to-moment mismatches, we develop a sense of agency and hope, a sense that “I can act on my world to make it better.”

Psychologist Dr. Jayne Singer continued the afternoon presentation for the community, sharing the Touchpoints model, developed by Dr. Tronick together with pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, who passed away in March at the age of 99. Touchpoints offers a way to apply the core concept of mismatch and repair beyond infancy in a range of clinical settings.

Pediatricians, early intervention specialists, educators, child protection workers, home visitors, literacy advocates from Berkshire United Way, and others from across Berkshire County engaged in lively discussion. Bringing home the importance of investing in early relationships, Dr. Singer showed a picture of a newborn infant, saying, “This is early literacy.” She encouraged audience members to suspend the certainty inherent in being the “expert” and to instead create a space for listening with curiosity.

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The Difference Between Skill and Talent

Two other words that students often get confused are “skill” and “talent.” A student may say, “I have no talent; can I just leave?” What they mean is “I have no skill.” Now, they might have talent, but they don’t know it, because they haven’t tried to see if it’s there.

When people look at a piece of art and remark, “They have so much talent,” or “They’re so talented,” to me, that is a meaningless statement. Yes, you can be talented (born with this lucky card and have some ingrained, genetic aptitude for some “this” or “that”—running fast, throwing a ball, being good at chess), but what people are really remarking upon is the skill. I think that talent is there or not there, but art is an exercise of skill and understanding of material and putting it together in some way that elicits a response.

When people ask me if a student I am working with is talented, I think, “That’s the wrong question.” The right question is: “Does your student work hard?” or “Does your student sit down and do the work?” At that point, talent is less relevant. For any artist or for any worthwhile endeavor, it always comes down to the time we put into doing something we see as meaningful. That is not to say that talent doesn’t matter—it does make it easier, but it doesn’t trump having no talent, working hard, and putting in honest time.

I feel that people are more creative than they believe they are and they’re more talented than they might know they are. They don’t always understand that if you don’t sit and do it, you won’t develop a confident command of what’s in front of you through familiarity. It’s not really a reflection of quality, but it’s the confidence of familiarity.

Overcoming Barriers

For me, addressing barriers that students bring to creating art can be like unraveling a clot of fishing line at times. How I deal with it is to be encouraging and to try to make them feel comfortable. But it is less important how I deal with it, it’s how they deal with it. The difficulty is that students often bring some fixed preconception of the product to the process. If a student attempts a painting and the result is her saying, “I hate it.” I’m thinking, “It’s just a painting—you made this little baby and you hate it? What is that about?” If it doesn’t match up to their preconceived result, it’s hard to change that; it’s hard to make them see the honest effort they put into it.

Another roadblock is the idea of representation. If a student draws an apple, they may look at it and think (or say), “That doesn’t look like an apple.” No matter how poetic or beautiful their attempt is of rendering the idea of an actual apple—let’s say it’s all anxious and sketchy lines and it’s not quite right in some way they imagine (even though there’s beauty in that)—what they want is a slick rendering of an apple. There is this false idea that the best drawing in the world looks like a photograph. Anybody can learn how to do that; it just takes time and it takes practice. It’s a series of steps and techniques and understanding of how things work on a page and how the pencils work and you can teach all that.

But to have academic rendering be your paradigm is inherently frustrating because it’s not easily accessible. What’s accessible is accepting where you’re at, not, “I can’t do that thing.” Well, why could you? I can’t do quantum mechanics; there’s a lot of things I can’t do.

I actually did take a look at a range of different ways people paint apples—a three-year-old, a student, Cezanne, Picasso, and a bunch of others. The interesting thing is, when you see them all at once, you realize wow, no single one of them is more valid than the other. There might be highs and lows within each one, but it’s not like one is less valid—they’re all different, but recognizable as apples. Each one is an example of an individual experience. How can they grapple and devour and then spit this thing out onto a canvas or a piece of paper?

The Blank Canvas

How do you deal with the blank canvas? Any artist has this problem, any painter has this problem; they face thousands and thousands of blank canvases and have a lot of the same feelings and same doubts: “I have no talent.” “I don’t know how to do this.” “I don’t even know what I’m doing.” “Why bother?” But if we’re stubborn, we don’t allow that to stop the creative process. So, what do you do with a blank canvas? Well, you do something to it. It doesn’t matter what, anything, then you deal with that. It’s the second step that’s the most important, not the first one. That’s where you start to be creative because you have a thing and you have a parameter. This kind
of improvisation in painting is, in a way, the hardest way to paint. Abstract expressionists were painting, I think, the hard way. They make it look easy, but it is very hard; what they’re doing is blind responses to previous actions and then trying to make it coherent in some way or complete when there are no parameters for what is complete.

The blank canvas can also become a place where you bring an obsession and the obsession overrides any absence of confidence. And that’s a sweet place to be as an artist—you have an obsession, some passionate need to see something, and that’s always a good place to start—what are you obsessed with, what do you need to see, not so much what is it supposed to look like, but what do you need to make so that you can see it in front of you.

The obsession can take away that problem of “oh the canvas is blank and I’m blank and we’re both just sitting here and we have nothing to say to each other.” Another solution is to take the canvases off the easel and put it on the floor and walk around and get the floor dirt all over it and then put it back—then it’s not blank anymore, it’s dirty and not precious.

Thinking about other approaches to a blank canvas, I recall reading about a show by Robert Rauschenberg in the 1960s and he exhibited a room of blank canvases, which sounds like a neat trick, but there was something behind that which I thought was quite beautiful: he wanted people to notice that though the canvases were blank, depending on the quality of light in the room, they always changed color, there were shadows cast, they were always changing. They were never blank. And, in a way, there’s no such thing as blank, and I think that he was trying to make this point—that within that emptiness there’s all kinds of things going on, you just have to look, you have to be sensitive to what’s happening there. I don’t know if that relates to how you make a mark on a blank canvas, but I think it does expose a bit of the fallacy of blankness—the material is never blank, there’s always something there.

The Austen Riggs Human Development Strategic Initiative, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Association of Infant Mental Health, of which Dr. Singer and I are board members, sponsored the afternoon.

On the Saturday and Sunday that followed this event, another group gathered for the second annual Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) training. While the medical model of care often puts the professional in the role of expert, this intervention seeks to shift that mindset, mobilizing parents’ unique capacity to tune into and respond to their newborn. The 18 neurobehavioral observations of the NBO are not an assessment or evaluation. Rather, they offer a frame in which to support parents’ earliest efforts to get to know their baby.

Pediatricians, maternity nurses, infant daycare providers, and home visitors from different organizations, including Berkshire Nursing Families, Parents as Teachers, and the Pediatric Development Center, learned from Dr. Kevin Nugent, who developed the NBO, about listening to a baby’s earliest communications. On the second day the group devoted time to thinking together about how to collaborate to provide a holding environment for vulnerable families such as those struggling with opiate addiction. We acknowledged the need to support all families, recognizing the “normative crisis” of the transition to parenthood and the need to destigmatize asking for help.

In addition to training community practitioners in the NBO, Riggs is collaborating with the Family Birth Center at Fairview Hospital, supporting the efforts of the maternity nurses, who have all been trained, to incorporate the tool into routine care. As Doreen Hutchinson, RN, vice president of operations and patient care, wisely observed, “We want parents to go home with their baby feeling confident that they know their baby best.”

Many parents today are burdened by an expectation of perfection. When we can protect time to listen to parent and baby together, we convey the idea that, in contrast to a “right” way, they will figure things out together. Growth happens through the inevitable mistakes we make along the way.

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