

Blue flame: Rediscovering the transformative power of making art

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“The task of therapy is not to eliminate suffering but to give a voice to it, to find a form in which it can be expressed” (Levine, 1997, p.15).

Allow me to share my experience of ‘Trauma, therapy and the arts’. Stephen and Ellen Levine’s master-class brought me back to the transformative power of making art in a safe space and to the medicines inherent in the creative process itself. I was guided to face that which troubles me. My spontaneous art response allowed the birth of a fresh perspective.

The warm-up begins beforehand. Stephen invites us to bring print-media images of human suffering. I am a sensitive person. I usually avoid violent news photos, yet I would like to use art-making to change my relationship with viewing the world’s horrors. I bite the bullet (metaphor intended) and leaf through old issues of *National Geographic*.

I gather confronting images while barely viewing them. Amongst several photos, I chance upon a hand-drawn illustration of violence from another place and time. Should I clip it? Why not? It still counts, even if several steps removed from contemporary photographic documentation of harsh reality.

During the master-class, Ellen shows slides of her artwork. She works with haunting or distressing news images. Her art processes naturally lead her to creative gestures and responses that ‘hold and soften’.

This resonates with me. I ask: How might I bring myself to look the demon in the eye, to sit with pain and discomfort? How might I bear witness? How might I bear it at all, when the instinct is to bury my head in the sand?

Stephen invites us to select one image to work with. I spontaneously choose the illustration, donating my photographic clippings to the picture-pool in the room’s centre. I’ve accidentally (or perhaps unconsciously) discarded the explanatory caption.

I am finally obliged to actually see the image – no more dodging or sideways glancing. It appears to depict several men torturing and slaughtering women and children. It is unbearable.

We are invited to respond creatively to our images. I glue the illustration into my art journal

and immediately find myself washing translucent red and blue watercolour flames over, below and above the black and white picture. I paint blood, water, fire. I soothe myself with the flow of the brush. I consider the paradox that the blue centre is the hottest part of the flame. I think about alchemy, what little I know of it, where base metals are transformed into gold.

I instinctively add white to the woman and child. Am I whitewashing the trauma? Blotting it out? Or am I ‘holding and softening’? Am I helping myself to face suffering, in order to better serve my clients?

Atypically, I finish art-making early. I leave the room to stretch my legs. Noticing that this is out of character, I wonder, am I currently self-caring, am I further avoiding sitting with that picture or is the work simply complete?

Curious, I return and gaze at my work. I am astonished and deeply moved. What I see is that I’ve unconsciously transformed the image from brutality to compassion. I’ve trusted the momentum and wisdom of the painting process and it has shown me a fresh view. It looks now as if several attentive men rush to assist a woman in dire strife. Perhaps they are even supporting her to give birth. This is a total reversal of the original meaning; a complete metamorphosis. Is this art’s alchemy at work?

The combination of white paint and childbirth then spark the phrase ‘the milk of human kindness’. I can now bear to look. I momentarily hold the range and depth of human action and motivation in view.

In this moment, I rediscover the transformative power of making art. I have been gently guided to face a gruelling picture. In the held environment of the master-class, I’ve allowed the natural medicines of art-making to hold, soften and shift a horrific image into a scene of kindness.

I am grateful to Stephen and Ellen. Re-ignited by the blue flame of passion and possibility, I strengthen my resolve for applying art to difficulty.

Reference

Levine, S.K. (1997). *Poiesis: The language of psychology and the speech of the soul*. London, Bristol, Pennsylvania: Jessica Kingsley.



Figure 1: *Blue flame*, watercolour on found image, 420 x 150mm.

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