

## CREATIVITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

**MICHAEL B. FRIEDMAN**

mf395@columbia.edu  
School of Social Work,  
Columbia University

**ABSTRACT.** In this paper, originally delivered as the keynote address at the annual meeting of the NYS Psychological Association, I take issue with the common view that madness or mental illnesses such as depression and bipolar disorder contribute to creativity and suggest that it is more interesting to explore the converse view that creativity contributes to mental health and psychological well-being. Drawing from art, literature, psychology, and my own experience as a mental health professional, a jazz pianist, and a photographer and digital image maker, I maintain that the creative process creates opportunities for intense activity and accomplishment, can open people to inner depths and to powerful connections with artistic colleagues and cultures, and can provide a sense of transcendent meaning. Creative efforts can contribute, not uniquely but importantly, to developing a sense of well-being for people who are fundamentally mentally healthy and for those who have mental disorders, including those with severe mental illness and those with dementia.

**Keywords:** creativity; well-being; mental health; recovery

Richard Juman, The President of the NYS Psychological Association in 2012, asked me to give this keynote address because I am a semi-professional jazz musician and photographer as well as a mental health professional. I immediately said, “Why would anyone want to come to hear me speak about art and psychology?” I’m not Miles Davis or Ansel Adams or any musician or photographer that anyone has ever heard of. Richard persisted, appealed to my abundant narcissism by saying that he wanted me to talk about my personal experience with music and photography and tempted me beyond my ability to resist with the opportunity to explore a new area of thought for me.

As I was doing some research about creativity for this speech, it dawned on me that it was almost all about creative geniuses, something that I very clearly am not. As I often say, for a social worker I am a hell of a jazz

piano player; as a jazz piano player I'm mediocre. Then it occurred to me that not being a creative genius might make my experience useful for understanding what engaging in creative activity can contribute to the mental health of us ordinary mortals. So today I am going to discuss the important, but not unique, contribution that art can make:

1. to psychological well-being, using the framework of positive psychology and
2. to having a decent quality of life if you have a serious, long-term mental illness or even dementia.

Note that I am not talking about the frequent claim that madness – i.e., mental illness – is the root of creativity. Instead, I am making a case for the idea that creativity is a major source of mental health.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

## 1. Art and Psychological Well-being

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM9L1qUCYLI>

This music played by the Gerry Mulligan Quartet in Paris in 1954 changed my life. I heard it first when I was 15. I had started playing jazz after my mother took me and a few friends to a Jazz at the Philharmonic concert two years earlier. I was transfixed, bought a book with the music of three boogie woogie stars, and taught myself to play boogie woogie. Something caught my eye about the cover of the album we are listening to, but \$3.99 was a lot of money in those days. Eventually I found a used copy I could afford; and from the sound of the first notes of these close harmonies defined without the help of a piano, I was captured. I remember the feeling more clearly than I remember the first time I had sex – which was, if you'll excuse the pun, an anti-climax, whereas this music has influenced every note I have played since I first heard it. I don't mean to suggest that music is more powerful than sex. There's nothing more powerful than sex. But even as an adolescent who thought about little else, I was captured by this music in a more profound way. It opened a part of myself that is usually buried and hidden and that I have returned to over and over again for the past 55 years. This music also shaped part – a very important part – of who I have been, who I am, and who I am becoming in old age. Without it, my life would have been, and now would be, poorer; some part of me would not exist; I would have been a different me – a lesser me, I think, though that sounds more judgmental than I mean.

Music can have great power in a person's life. So can the other arts. But I want to be careful not to suggest that this is a universal human necessity. Art can contribute to living as well as possible; but I don't believe that

doing or appreciating fine art is a necessary condition for living well. There are many routes to well-being – love and work, as Freud reputedly said<sup>13</sup> and also being a responsible family member, commitment to a community, exploration and adventure, spiritual experience, and many more.

But art is one very important route to living well.

As I have thought about my experience with jazz and photography, four critical dimensions of the artistic experience have emerged:

- (1) Cultivating skill
- (2) Emotion and identity
- (3) The experience of beauty, transcendence, and meaning, and
- (4) Connection with the other artists and the cultures we share and celebrate.

### *Cultivating Skill, Engagement, and Accomplishment*

Let me begin with the most prosaic dimension of doing art, using jazz as a prime example. It takes work to play well enough to reach into yourself when you play, to connect well enough with others to play **WITH** them, and to satisfy an audience. Malcolm Gladwell claims in *Outliers*, his a book on becoming really good at something, that it takes 10,000 hours to get past the period of bumbling practice to excellence.<sup>15</sup> That’s a lot of time. Recently I met a concert cellist who is well past his 10,000 hours, who told me that he still practices six hours a day. I also saw a video recently of Phil Woods, a great alto sax player, giving a master class, in which he said to the terrific young jazz musicians he was coaching that they had to practice 26 hours a day. No wonder I’m mediocre.

Practice often is laborious and far from fun – though on rare occasion it results in an exciting breakthrough. But there is something very satisfying about being immersed in an activity you care about. Especially when I was a teenager, jazz was like that for me. I spent hours at the piano repeating one boogie woogie baseline or another over and over again. I spent even more hours learning to decode “fake” sheets – pages that contain the melody written in musical notation and the names of the chords of the song in letters and other symbols. I spent still more hours trying to sound out songs I wanted to be able to play. Although I had less time for jazz when I chose a career that was not rooted in music, it remained a hobby and I still had to practice. Just to be good enough and not wonderful, I spend time playing and replaying songs I’ve played many times before as well as forcing my fingers through new songs and new arrangements – which I create as I practice. I rehearse for gigs. I also listen to jazz, and I think about it. It takes a lot of my time.

Lately, I spend even more time working on my photographs on the computer. Digital photography has opened great new opportunities for creativity for me because I can manipulate the picture the camera has recorded and

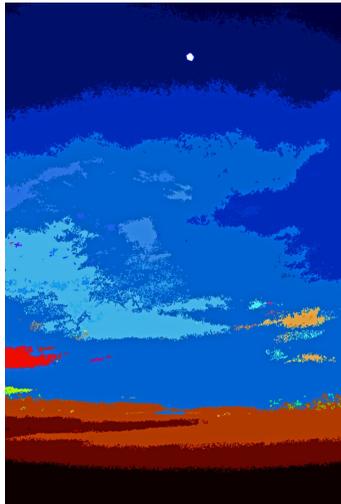
make it into an image that I like. This takes hours and hours of work, in which I become so deeply immersed that I lose all track of time. My wife often wakes in the middle of the night and tells me I need to get some sleep. I'm often stunned at the time.

I am reminded of Martin Seligman's most recent book, *Flourish*.<sup>25</sup> In it the so-called "father of positive psychology" switches from calling the goal of human life "happiness" to calling it "well-being" instead. He identifies five critical dimensions of well-being. One dimension he calls "engagement." By this he means that people find great satisfaction in activities in which they become so immersed that they forget time, i.e., activities at which they spend hours without realizing how much time has gone by.

Seligman also identifies "accomplishment" as a key element of well-being. By this he means working hard in order to achieve mastery and success. While it is certainly true that many people seek success in their field, I think that Seligman puts too much emphasis on "winning," on being among the best. Personal best, I think, is enough for most people. Still, Seligman is certainly right that working hard so as to become accomplished is a source of satisfaction and well-being.

Both jazz and photography provide me with the great satisfaction of accomplishment, even if it is not excellence, which may be a higher satisfaction. I'm sorry to say I have no way of knowing because I have never become that good. But even without excellence, even without anything approaching genius, there is great satisfaction in doing something well, in having developed a human skill. It still amazes and thrills me when I see what my fingers can do. I love to sit back and watch my hands. It seems impossible, but somehow it happens. And I get great pleasure from my new ability to change photographs into what I now call "digital images."

Here's a straight image that I like quite a bit and which took a good deal of time to create. Below it is a digital image that transforms the original almost totally. Very time-consuming to do, but great fun.



Jazz and photography – even without greatness, even without being among the recognized best – have given me the great satisfaction of both “engagement” and “accomplishment” – immersion in activity and a sense of improvement over time. As Seligman notes, these are two critical components of psychological well-being, and art – as Seligman mysteriously does not note – can make them possible.

### *Emotions, Self-Revelation, and Identity*

The second important dimension of my experience doing art is a complex mix of discovering and managing emotions, shaping an identity, and revealing myself both privately and in public.

Jazz enables me to experience and manage emotions that are often hidden and “undisciplined,” to use T.S. Eliot’s word.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes when I play, something emerges inside me that I don’t think I could experience in any other way. It is wordless, and buried because it is wordless. I feel it powerfully in my body when my playing is authentic and not just a repetition of riffs I have learned over the years.

As I thought about this experience, I was reminded of a paper that Freud wrote in 1915 called “The Unconscious.”<sup>14</sup> This was before he developed the structural theory of self – Id, Ego, and Superego – but well after he had reached the conclusion that much of our mental activity is unconscious. The purpose of this particular paper was to say that, not only is this mental activity happening outside of our awareness, but it is also fundamentally different from the mental activity that takes place in consciousness. It is, he says, much more like the mental activity we experience in our dreams. It is not bound by time and space, it is not limited to the possibilities of the real world, it contains wild imagery of all the senses, it is filled with repressed desires, and it is neither expressible in words nor – as later post-modernists would observe – constrained by the possibilities of language. I cannot remember whether it is in this essay or another that Freud describes the purpose of free association as using words unconstrained by linear thought as fish hooks dropped into the churning sea of the unconscious to try to catch some feeling or desire that is in itself beyond words. It is then pulled into consciousness and perhaps brought under control using words, even though they are never quite adequate to the true nature of unconscious experience.

Although I was in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for some years when I was a young man, music connects me more with these deep emotions than words do. Sometimes I feel something in the music I improvise that brings out powerful emotions in me and perhaps then evokes them in my listeners. For me these emotions are captured by the close harmonies I learned from Gerry Mulligan in the early and mid-1950s and the modal harmonies invented for jazz by Miles Davis and Bill Evans at the end of that decade. Something about these harmonies allows expression of the complex, dissonant, contradictory nature of my personal emotions. Listen, for example, to “Blue in Green” from the revolutionary album *Kind of Blue*.<sup>4</sup>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoPL7BEsSQU&feature=related>

Jazz also captures something raw and sensual for me. Probably it's the rhythms. The tempo of a slow blues, the magic of making music swing, an irresistible repetitive beat, the drive that makes me move as I play, sometimes invisibly in inner bodily sensations and sometimes visibly in the way I will sway or pound my feet. Listen, for example, to Herbie Hancock playing "Watermelon Man."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4ASTMFN-h4>

Music is far from the only way to capture hidden emotions. Other arts do the same thing. There's no doubt that photography can reveal unconscious emotions. I do not understand this, but when I am in a flat mood, I take flat pictures. When I feel connected to the life around me, my pictures are alive. How is it possible to get a camera, a machine that does not have dynamic variety like a musical instrument, to express feelings? I have no idea, but it does.

Thinking about emotions and art also brings to mind the description of writing poetry that T.S. Eliot gave in the *Four Quartets*.<sup>6</sup> Listen to him:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years

...

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, *a raid on the inarticulate*  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
*Undisciplined squads of emotion. ...*  
(Emphasis added)

He is certainly right that it is often a struggle to find words to give voice to "undisciplined squads of emotions," "a raid on the inarticulate," for sure.

For many years, I have believed that there is a lesson for psychotherapists in Eliot's description of his struggle to find words. It occurred to me first when I was in didactic group therapy and another student was struggling to find words to express something she was feeling but couldn't quite get hold of. Someone in the group said, "So you feel no one likes you." The woman was devastated, not by the insight, but by the failure of the person offering this simplistic interpretation to understand the individuality and subtlety of HER experience. It was a kind of human reductionism that struck me then and still strikes me now as emotional despotism. It is, I think, a major danger of the interpretive process in psychotherapy. The woman who was struggling to find words for her feelings needed poetry of some

sort, a form of non-linear expression that is understood immediately in its own terms and not interpreted into something easily expressed in clear prose.

Or perhaps music. In fact, after group sessions, another member of the group, who was a bass player, and I sometimes went to my apartment to play out, and work through, emotions that had been stirred up in the group.

The arts offer opportunities for expression of profound, primarily wordless, hidden, inarticulate emotions, but they provide more than that. In philosophical aesthetics there is a theory that art is “expression,” an idea similar to what I have been saying about revealing something generally inexpressible in ordinary words. Albert Hofstadter, a philosopher with whom I studied many years ago, took issue with this view in a book called *Truth and Art*,<sup>17</sup> in which he argued that successful art is not literally expression but is better understood as “articulation.”

What’s the difference? To him “expression” described a process in which the artistic product was formed mentally and made physically – like drawing from a mental image or saying a line of poetry out loud after rehearsing it mentally beforehand. For Hofstadter, however, the creation of art is more making something that has not existed before than it is an expression of something lurking behind the scenes. For him expressing yourself is one thing; articulating yourself is another. In the end, he believed, true art is a process of simultaneously creating and expressing an authentic self.

What strikes me as important about this is, first, that art is largely done outside of consciousness and, second, that it is not just the expression of a formed self or even the realization of a potential self but the creation of a self. In doing art you form yourself or at least some significant part of yourself.

I have no doubt that I shaped part of my identity through immersing myself in jazz, although I am unable to articulate exactly how.

By the way, I am finding that retirement poses some of the same challenges of developing an identity that adolescence did. Once again, I have to figure out what I want to be when I grow up – or, more precisely, who I will be for the time I have left between now and death or dementia.<sup>12</sup> Playing jazz and doing photography are increasingly part of the somewhat new identity I am developing as I age. Let me emphasize “am developing”. I am still in the process of development; my epitaph is not ready to be carved in stone.

I am not alone in this regard. Artistic activity has much to offer older people, even those with dementia. If this interests you, read some of Gene Cohen’s work about the importance of creative activity for older people.<sup>2</sup>

Back to the issue at hand – is art articulation and self-creation rather than expression and self-realization? As with most things human, logic’s

law of excluded middle has application only in the abstract. In concrete, lived, artistic experience, art is not either expression or articulation. It is both. Art is both a source of self-creation and an opportunity to elicit deep-rooted emotions that often are never otherwise expressed. Art gives form and voice to these emotions, *and* it is a process of self-discovery and self-revelation that adds to one's conscious, formed self and one's place in society.

There is an alternative – perhaps contradictory, perhaps complementary – view about art and the emotions in the unconscious, namely that art suppresses them or perhaps sublimates them but in any event doesn't give true expression to them.

I think that the play *Equus* implicitly articulates this view.<sup>26</sup> In brief, *Equus* is about a boy who takes a girl to a stable to have sex. He is unable to have an erection and feels that the horses in the stable are watching him and taunting him in his moment of humiliation. He leaps up, grabs a tool, and blinds the horses. He is arrested, found to be insane, and sent to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. The psychiatrist sees that the boy is filled with wild, deeply personal emotions and fantasies and becomes tormented himself about whether he should cure the boy and rob him of these powerful, personal and private inner experiences by helping him to bury them, by getting his “ego,” one might say, to take control of his id, to get what should only be unconscious back where it belongs.

I have read several commentators on this play who seem to take the psychiatrist's dilemma seriously. I do not. In the first place, psychotherapists don't have that much power over their patients. It's just not the way psychotherapy works, when it works. In the second place, it strikes me that this is a play about playwriting. The author, I think, is expressing his dismay that he has to get control of *his* inner fantasies and feelings and give them a voice that even an audience as stupid as horses can understand, risking the humiliation of an unsuccessful performance every time he puts his work before the public.

On this view, art is not so much eliciting what is unconscious and giving it voice as it is containing the unconscious by subjugating it to words or other forms that can be understood not just by oneself but by others, indeed by a whole society of others. Individuality of expression – on this view – is sacrificed to society's limited capacity to understand.

It seems to me that both views of the relationship between art and emotion are true. For some of us, doing art pulls out feelings, desires, and fantasies that otherwise are hidden from us. For others the conscious mind more easily fills with stuff that is usually kept unconscious. For both of us, the presence of emotion is not the end of the artistic task. We still have to form these emotions into something – a composition, an improvisation, a

poem, a story, a play, a painting, or a photograph that speaks to us AND which also speaks to others.

### *Beauty and Transcendence*

But, I'm afraid, art is even more complicated than that. It is as I've said, about shaping emotion. But it is also about a quest for beauty. For example, for me the process of making a photographic image is not nearly as emotional as playing jazz. My photography is more about capturing an outer moment than an inner experience. It connects me with the world around me. It feels like chasing beauty rather than expressing emotion.

Some people who know me well enough to say so tell me that I use the camera to distance myself. I confess; when I go to weddings or similar events, I often prefer to take pictures than to talk with the people I've been seated with.

But I also work hard to get the feeling of the event. Part of that is creating images that are beautiful and capture a moment – the lifting of the veil, slipping rings on now married fingers, a tear of joy, the first official kiss – and to freeze such a moment in time.



Bride and Groom's First Dance

Stopping time is one conception of beauty. Listen to Keats's famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn:"<sup>20</sup>

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

Forever panting, and forever young:

...

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Famous lines, of course, and nonsense when you think about it. But the important thing is that for Keats art is about fixing a moment in time, an antidote to old age and mortality. No doubt this is one form of beauty.

I believe, however, that there can also be beauty in flux and movement, and I particularly enjoy photographing the dancing at celebrations. So much energy and joy. I go for the blur of it and not to freeze it in time.



Retirement Party



Wedding

I photograph jazz in the same way, to capture the rhythms and the movement of jazz as well as the immersion and intensity of the players.



Sheila Jordan

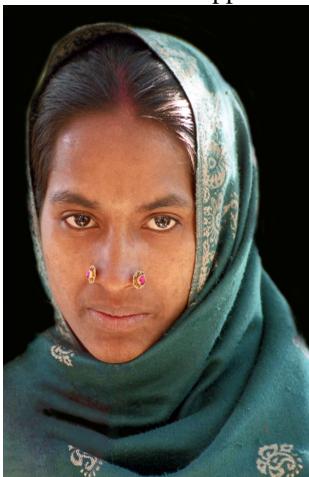


Anat Cohen

So, even though I do only *still* photography, for me photography can be either about fixing a moment in time or conveying a sense of the movement of time. Often I try to let the fleeting be fleeting. Maybe that is because old age and death don't trouble me in the way they trouble young people like Keats.

I also try to find beauty in ugly things. I was accused once of distorting India by making the people I photographed look happy. Actually, I don't think it was a distortion. Poor people are not always suffering. They experience happiness too. For example, here is a photograph of an Indian construction worker who did really hard work for long hours. But her young children

played nearby and, like mothers everywhere, she both corrected and caressed them. Her life was hard but not without happiness.



Indian Construction Worker

But there's no question that I do not use photography to reveal journalistic or political truth. I am searching instead for a kind of transcendence of the reality presented in the image. Some of the very best photography is, in Arthur Danto's terminology, a "transfiguration of the commonplace."<sup>3</sup> Somehow, and this is a mystery, an image of something as common as a table in a diner can become something more, as my friend Bernie Kessler has shown in a remarkable series of photographs called, "Silent Spaces."<sup>21</sup>



This experience of something transcendent is a very important dimension of art, and without doubt it contributes to having a richer life.

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*,<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Haidt, a positive psychologist who specializes in moral psychology, maintains that experiencing the “divinity” of human life contributes to human happiness. He insists that “divinity” is not bound to participation in a religion or even belief in God, but I think his choice of the word is misleading. I prefer the word “transcendent” even though that has unintended metaphysical overtones as well.

Haidt’s concept of divinity and my concept of the transcendent are not exactly identical. For him the challenge is to rise above our animality and innate selfishness through ennobling actions, especially altruistic actions. For me, transcendent experience is not so much a challenge as an opportunity to experience reality not in its brutishness but in its overtones of grandeur.

The point is this: for many people a sense of getting beyond the everyday world and connecting with a dimension of reality that is more profound, more meaningful, more illuminating, more – well choose your own word – this experience provides a sense of excitement, meaning, connection, and discovery that contributes mightily to human well-being. Art – when it involves a transfiguration of the commonplace – is a route, a very important route, to this experience of transcendence.

I hope my digressions have not been too distracting from the main point, which is that through expression and formation of emotions, through self-discovery and the shaping of identity and through emergence of a sense of the transcendent, artistic activity has much to contribute to psychological well-being.

### *Connection, Celebration, and Meaning*

So far I have talked about three of the four dimensions of the experience of doing art that I set out to discuss. To remind you, the first is cultivating skill, immersion in activity, and accomplishment. The second is emotion and forming identity. The third is the pursuit of beauty and with it a sense of something transcendent.

The fourth dimension I will refer to as “connection and celebration.” Here’s what I mean. When I play jazz with other people, it feels magical. I have played a song called “Bags’ Groove” with my friend Ken Barish – a trumpet player and a psychologist – several hundred times. One of us counts by snapping his fingers or moving in time or saying numbers and then we are locked in unison. I am thrilled every time it happens. How does that happen? How is it possible to feel this connection of time, of melody, of harmonic structure, and of musical style? Repetition, you say. Yes, that makes a difference. But jam sessions are one of the essential forms of jazz – a form in which people who have never played together before call a tune, count it off, and play together. Sometimes it’s a struggle until we hear each other and feel the roots we share. Sometimes it is instantly magical.

Either way, it is of the essence of jazz that there's a connection between the musicians. It is a conversation in which hopefully we hear each other clearly and feel each other. Sometimes we know what's coming next. It feels like reading minds. Ok, ok. There's a trick to it that has to do with all of us following the same harmonic structure; but there are infinite possible variations on this structure. How do we find each other among all the possibilities?

The mystery of the connection we experience is in some ways the mystery of all language. There is a language of jazz. Actually there are a number of dialects. I speak straight ahead modern jazz far better than I speak Dixieland or traditional jazz or bebop. But somehow I understand most of the dialects of jazz, even though I did not grow up in a home that included jazz in any dialect.

It's a mystery that, dare I say it, brings Jung to mind.<sup>18</sup> There seems to be a pool of musical knowledge, of forms, and of feelings that those of us who play jazz tap into when we are playing well. Is it a collective unconscious of some sort, containing archetypes related to universalities of human experience? I don't know. The metaphysics of it are purely speculative, but the connection is intimate and powerful for the time that it lasts. It certainly feels not of this world.

Sometimes the audience is part of this connection too. Moments of all being locked together in a collective excitement, a collective joy, a collective – well again choose your own word.

Perhaps this is the moment to mention Eric Kandel's intimidating new book, *The Age of Identity*.<sup>19</sup> He says that he will explain, or begin to explain, all this mystery neuro-biologically. I guess that's possible, though I will be disappointed if he pulls it off. I like the sense of mystery. Kandel says the sense of mystery will remain even once we know how the brain performs its tricks. Hmm, that would be really mysterious.

Whatever the neuro-biological base, part of what makes connections between musicians and between musicians and their audiences possible is our shared experience of a culture that we celebrate every time we play. Both in literally playing together and in shared love of the traditions of a musical culture, jazz musicians (and their audiences) find a deep connection.

There is I think, a similar shared celebration of a history and culture in doing photography and other visual arts. Certainly my work is inspired by the photography and painting that I have looked at and been moved by. Some would say that my work is imitative in that it doesn't break new creative ground. I guess. But there are also photographic icons that many of us draw from and repeat without being strictly imitative. That can be subject matter, composition, choice of color or black and white, and so forth. I feel part of a great artistic tradition when I create an image that moves me.

Seligman would probably say that I find “meaning” in jazz and photography. He believes that meaning is one of the 5 essential elements of well-being. He says, “The meaningful life consists in belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self.” He adds, “Humanity creates all the positive institutions to allow this: religion, political party, being green, the Boy Scouts, or the family.”<sup>25</sup> It seems strange to me that he does not include the arts because, as I’ve said, doing art connects you with a group of people practicing the art today and who practiced the art historically. Art is a social institution that adds profound meaning to the lives of those who do it and those who love it.

## **2. Art and Psychological Healing**

So far I have spoken only about art and psychological well-being without regard to mental disorders. In the short time I have left I want to turn my attention to another role that art can play in the achievement of psychological well-being – its healing function.<sup>9,10</sup>

I am quite certain from both personal and professional experience that the integration of art into the lives of people with mental disorders – including people with dementia – can help to improve their quality of life – not always and not everyone, but often enough and for enough people to make art an important adjunct or even an alternative to formal treatment.

There is some evidence for this, but the Cochrane Collaborative reports that there are not enough quantitative controlled studies of the impact of the arts on mental health to claim that there are practices that meet the formal standards to be “evidence-based.”<sup>22,23</sup> This may be a great niche for those of you looking for new research ventures.

In what follows I will talk first about what art can contribute to an improved quality of life for people with serious, long-term mental illnesses and then about what it can contribute to the lives of people with dementia.

To start, think about this. Recently I was telling David Ostwald, a great traditional jazz musician who plays at Birdland in NYC every Wednesday, about the major thesis of this lecture, namely that doing art is good for your mental health. He said, “Well then, why am I so crazy?” A good retort, it seemed to me, and it took me aback for a minute. But before I had a chance to respond, he said, “Of course, if I didn’t play jazz, I’d be a lot crazier and a lot less happy.”

“Recovery” from serious and persistent mental illness: A major goal for current efforts to “transform” the mental health system is to make it “recovery-oriented.”<sup>1</sup> In part, that means recognizing that some people with severe, long-term mental disorders do recover over time in the usual meaning of that term. The arguable estimate is that about 1/3 fully recover. Whatever

the right number, a great many people with serious and persistent mental illness do not recover in the usual sense. The word “recovery” as used in the context of psychiatric means having a life that the *individual with mental illness* finds satisfying and meaningful despite continuing to have a mental disorder.

Doing art can contribute to recovery in this sense. For example, these days a number of mental health organizations and consumer advocacy groups organize exhibits of visual art for people with serious mental illness. Both doing art and exhibiting it can make significant contributions to improved quality of life and personal well-being. They enjoy doing art, they become immersed in an activity they care about, they spend time with people with whom they have something in common other than being mentally ill, they get a sense of skill and achievement, and they connect with a human institution that is meaningful.<sup>10</sup> Thus, participating in art can facilitate achievement of Seligman’s five essential elements of well-being – positive emotions, engagement, connection, accomplishment, and meaning.

Dementia: The same is true, I believe, for many people with dementia. Here’s a strange thought. If the word “recovery” is used to mean having a satisfying and meaningful life despite the presence of a severe mental disorder, then people with dementia can experience recovery. Or if that idea is too alien, how about, people with dementia can experience a quality of life that is satisfying and meaningful *TO THEM*? Does that seem possible?

Most people believe that everyone with dementia *suffers* from it. We tend to say, in fact, that so-and-so “suffers” from dementia instead of he or she “has” dementia. We close off the possibility that a person with dementia can have a decent quality of life just in the language we use.

But is that right? Do all people with dementia suffer? Aren’t some happy and a lot somewhere between happiness and suffering? There’s a range of experience, no? Some are miserable, but many are not. Many are miserable some of the time but not all of the time, right?

Remember that the question here is about the *INNER* experience of the person with dementia, not our *OUTER* perception of them. How horrible to think that *your* ending will be to be lost without memory and the capacity for thought and meaningful conversation! But you don’t know what you will experience if you get there. Our outer perception of people with dementia does not necessarily coincide with *their* inner experience.

If I – and many others – are right that the life of a person with dementia can be better or worse, we really should be asking how we can make it better. Maybe someday drugs will be the answer, but we’re nowhere close to that. For now, the question is how to help people with dementia to enjoy the best possible quality of life without a magic bullet.

Art is part of the answer. There are many examples of people with dementia becoming involved with artistic activity. One is a chorus started by Mary Mittelman, one of the most important researchers about Alzheimer's. It is composed of people with dementia and their caregivers. I recently attended, and wrote about, one of their remarkable concerts, which began with a poem that included the lines, "When we hear music, ... memories fill our minds."<sup>9</sup>

A similar experience using the visual arts is documented in a lovely video that was shown on PBS called *I Remember Better When I Paint*.<sup>5</sup> It – like the concert – leaves no doubt but that art can improve the quality of life of people with Alzheimer's and other dementias. For more about the power of the visual arts to engage people with dementia take a look at John Zeisel's wonderful book *I'm Still Here*,<sup>28</sup> which lays out an alternative "philosophy" of care for people with dementia including use of the arts.

Dr. Zeisel has an interesting theory about why the arts can be so important to people with cognitive impairments. As memory and other cognitive strengths decline, he maintains, other capacities remain and come to the fore. Many people have used their strengths throughout their lives to repress and to fend off their creative interests and abilities. As their defenses break down, creativity is freed up, and an opportunity emerges to get satisfaction from creative activities. In addition, as memory diminishes, the present becomes more important. We generally see lack of memory is a weakness, and it is. But can't we also see it as an ability to be in the moment and as a strength? Much of the doing of art is about being in the moment, in its feeling, in its excitement, in its being the whole of time and space – for that moment. Artists – and lovers – value being in a moment when time is suspended and the entire universe seems to gather in the touch of another person's body, a meeting of minds, or the emergence of an artistic vision. Buddhists seek the suspension of time as the ultimate experience of human life. Perhaps this is a capacity more available to people with dementia.

If this possibility interests you, take a look at Lars Tornstam's very interesting developmental theory of "gero-transcendence,"<sup>27</sup> which Joan Ericson uses to give substance to her suggestion to add a ninth stage – very old age – to her husband, Erik's, eight stages of human development.<sup>7</sup> I am not sure that the theory of gero-transcendence ultimately makes sense, but it is a fascinating alternative to the usual view of dementia.

I want to be careful not to romanticize the inner experience of people with dementia. I am certainly not looking forward to a stage of life in which my memories, my ability to think clearly, my grasp of reality, and my ability to communicate clearly with people I enjoy are largely gone. But I do want to insist that it is important to recognize the facts that some, maybe many, people with dementia, get pleasure out of life and that engagement

in artistic activities can help them to achieve what *for them* is a satisfying inner experience. Art can help them.

### 3. Conclusion

It's time to come to an end now. I have tried in this lecture to elaborate on what I regard as fairly obvious – artistic activity is a route to human well-being both for people who do not have mental disorders and who want to get the most out of life and for people with minor and major mental disorders who can find both solace and a way to a satisfying and meaningful life through artistic activity. Maybe those who believe that there is a link between mental illness and creative genius are right – though I and others don't think so.<sup>24</sup> But it's for sure that creativity has much to contribute to mental health and human well-being.

#### NOTE

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