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PICASSO'S SEARCH FOR GUERNICA—TRUTH OR DARE?

A Jungian Meditation on the Unconscious Roots of Art Analysis

By

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*"The canvas at eleven feet tall and twenty-five and a half feet wide is dreadfully alive." ~Author*

Over his lifetime, Dr. C.G. Jung championed and drew inspiration from the Eastern philosophical approach to co-origination or creation expressed in the *Tibetan* *Book of the Dead*. Dr. Jung stated, "…The background of this unusual book is not the European 'either-or', but a magnificently affirmative 'birth-and'."

The event in the present moment that each of us feels gives birth with all events or no event, but never with only one event or the other event. My favorite line of inquiry often asked by the Eastern Zen approach to creation is, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The answer that recently came to me is, "The sound of ten-thousand soldiers marching in the pouring rain." Many Westerners feel that Zen is inscrutable, and likewise understanding a Picasso abstract or semi-abstract creation is a mystery beyond comprehension. I feel the answer to the question of one hand clapping is that a single hand never clapped; only all hands clap or do not clap, and this is not a negative, it is simply the way our universe functions. Our universe is empty of independent events or things while overflowing with dependence. When Picasso picked up his brush, the master artist's first stroke was not painted alone, but created from his universal perception.

Creation is a continuous process. Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, is here, yet simultaneously it is not. This because *Guernica* cannot exist in the moment without each one of us. We bring the subtext that imparts an infinite dynamic meaning from movement, soul, and life, to the complexity of angst, struggle, fear, and defiance we feel in Pablo Picasso's famous anti-war statement. The root birth in creative art is concurrently birth-and…

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If we are of a mind, Picasso shares with us a moment of realization and practice walking in two perceived worlds simultaneously because the finite world of the massive display, *Guernica*, and the infinite collective universe is whole. Art offers each of us a finite vessel through which to view our feelings. The essential source of our feelings is collectively mysterious and often referenced as unconscious, though simultaneously the source is alive, creative, and as a whole includes us, and may be considered the axiomatic point from which our sense of existence evolves. The painting is a phenomenal practice in that we may touch *Guernica*, see it, feel its dynamic energy in an emotional human state, and still the creative source is beyond finite phenomena—more than only neuro-chemistry.

In the Eastern philosophical sense, we live a transcendent life practicing an awareness of the all and everything and using this state to evolve an infinite realization that creation is incessantly more than, and a bit different from, the sum of all phenomenal parts.

We live with beauty and breathe despite war, and debating the truth of either is personal, passionate, and heated. What function does compassion play in truth if it plays any part at all? Journeying through life perceiving created events of compassion and truth, how do we validate our qualitative perceptions?   
 I will paraphrase a line—originally eight hours long and void of punctuation—from Gertrude Stein's *Lectures in America* where she suggested "The greatest paintings are those paintings that come from life and whose painting continues off the edges of the canvas."  
 Continuing off the edge of the canvas is critically important to interpreting art, because it intimates that art and what the viewer brings to the work of art in question affects the whole of creative existence.  
 Artistic process is not separate from life. Any artist will tell us that a painting is incomplete until it has a viewer to complete the process. The inspiration for art, the execution of art, the viewing and interpretation of art does not take place in a vacuum. Realized from a universal viewpoint, innovative interpretation is an integral dynamic of humankind's circle of life, and as many a thinker will take pains to say, living one's life is an art.  
 Aesthetic interpretation is hardwired into our human menu and as we create and judge creation we formulate powerful statements affecting the whole and so requiring a responsible understanding of truth; how truth uplifts or devastates, constructs or destroys.

Eastern philosophers are resolute sojourners after absolute truth in a cosmos that is infinite, unending, and inestimable. Fundamentally we can judge a case two ways and both may be the truth. Truths carry a responsibility for consequences ensued. It gets sticky—which truth do we choose? The effects of one's perceived truth—if it is told, and if so, how it is communicated— must arrive from a place of compassion, the game of truth or dare, bespeaking the wisdom and will to aid in the common good.  
 *Guernica*, painted by Pablo Picasso and exhibited at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, is black, blue, and white. The canvas looming at eleven feet tall and twenty-five and a half feet wide is dreadfully alive. It is created out of living experience, and we can't help feeling walloped though Picasso's masterpiece is an abstracted expression of his experience, and to keep Gertrude happy it runs off the edges without punctuation into that life it came from. But what is the truth? Which life experience did it come from and where does it run to when leaving the canvas?  
 Coming from a long line of artists, and having been a painter for many years, I could do a passable job of discussing color theory, composition, rhythm, and throw in a little Jungian symbolism. However, taking in the artistic process that is *Guernica*, the fact of its existence, its hanging in physical space seems to be anti-climactic. To interpret *Guernica* is knowing the truth of where it came from and where it is going; we already know it's arrived out of a collective mysterious creative unconscious, and it is here now.  
 *Guernica* grows from three truths. First, the popular commercial truth; *Guernica* brings the terrors of war toe to toe with the people. It is a blatantly manipulative piece backing one up against an emotional wall. It shoves a fist into your entrails shouting, "This is the face of man; unmitigated brutality!" Theoretically, it shows us the bombing of the Basque town, Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. *Guernica* has attained mythic proportions as anti-war art. Where does it go when it runs off the edges of the canvas? It inspires thousands upon thousands of people who have viewed it since 1937 to commit to a life of non-violence. *Guernica* has often served as the heartbeat for engaged grass-roots anti-war movements. *Guernica* goes to the heart and soul of everyone touched by war; in Jung's "birth-and" void, that means all of us.  
 However, truth becomes sticky stuff because Picasso, so far as anybody knows, was never in Guernica, did not see the bombing or the aftermath or know anybody from Guernica. Guernica was an atrocity, yet, for Picasso and his agent one could surmise it was, like many events of war, an event turned to profit.  
 The second truth, *Guernica* was the answer to a commission paid for by the Spanish Republican government. *Guernica* was bought and sold contributing its part to solidify Picasso's career during his lifetime. Profits of war are a rampant disease. *Guernica* does not stand alone in this arena. This is not to say that profit is a dirty word if it brings civilization into touch with elements and ideals of humankind's higher inspired compassionate nature. Personally, I am thankful that *Guernica* was commissioned.

What of the third truth? If Picasso was not at Guernica, what life experiences brought him the agony and fright to compose such a piece? According to Dr. Alice Miller in her book *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness*, *Guernica* is a snapshot saved in the child-mind of the grown Pablo Picasso, of a violent major earthquake destroying his village, its inhabitants, streets, its homes and structures and its animals. While running through the streets witnessing the destruction and trying frantically to locate a relative's house that might be untouched by the quake, little Pablo must have been horrified! When the family did locate the one room cottage, they set up temporary housekeeping and Pablo's pregnant mother gave birth to her baby in front of the child. Grown men have fainted witnessing the painful screams of childbirth. All of this occurred within a couple of days time and Picasso lived with it for the rest of his life. It is Dr. Miller's contention that these are the scenes, animals and people we see in *Guernica*—a painting born of the compulsion of a man-child to tell at last what he experienced years before and has lived with. Was the artist conscious during the painting process that these are the events which gave birth to *Guernica*? Pablo Picasso has died leaving this question, at best, as a meditation in progress.   
 What if I believe this is the third truth? I doubt Dr. Miller's theory would make front-page news. Would this truth, the *Guernica* of Picasso working out his private trauma, motivate generations to seek their higher innovative selves, practice compassion, and commit to a world of non-violence?  
 Imagine this truth obfuscating the more popular truth of the painting to be a powerful grass-roots anti-war statement through which people might exercise their passions and reflect their views on the horrors of war—a powerful rallying symbolic instrument to help people make their statement—to feel that they are not alone in their vision. Nevertheless, we know that *Guernica* is symbolic; it is objective as paint on a supporting panel and only takes on a subjective meaning born out of creative perception. Because perception can be influenced by interpretation, interpretation bears responsibility.  
 Picasso's personal truth behind the painting is dammed important, but only to him. He could be hard, gruff and controversial, yet he stood before his canvas a brilliant man who gave the painting to the world as a reaction to war, which fulfilled the contract of his commission and offered the world a tool to use against its shocking inhumanity. If we now pressed for Picasso's personal truth, would that be a truthful interpretation that would be more constructive or destructive? Picasso was a man with a lot of rough edges—not an easy human being to figure. Yet, he abhorred war and violence, and I feel he gave the painting as he intended to: twice—first to himself and for his personal growth searching for a way out of a long-held nightmare, and second to a world for its growth and searching for a way out of its long-held nightmare. The roots of creativity, as experienced in the human condition are simultaneously unconscious and conscious. The creative roots are dependent.  
 The interpretation of truth should be based on fundamentals of compassion and responsible consciousness of creatively sustaining the whole. The *Guernica* that is an homage to everyone on earth who has been touched by the face of war must be "the" truth enabling us to use this finite life to transcend this life and touch the mysterious and so-called unconscious roots of creativity. Dr. C.G. Jung's Eastern philosophical vision of a magnificently affirmative 'birth-and' must sustain.

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