



From Blocks to Bridges

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Abstract: The intention of this article is to present a personal example of transformation over a period of time through the conscious processing of unconscious blockage; and to illustrate, through personal example as well, how one may concretize transformative experience into a practical form with which others can engage. The therapeutic workshop presented in the last section is intended neither as a clinical case study of group process through the use of art materials, nor as a verbatim documentation of the proceedings and participants described therein. All descriptive elements are solely based upon my own memory of events and upon the personal impact they have had on me, rather than upon documentation, and are therefore necessarily an approximation of actual details consigned to another time and place.

A ROAD IN THE FORK

I always face an inner sense of opposition, fear, and a preference for the illusion of stasis when I contemplate initiating something—this writing included. So I am thinking, why not begin this effort by acknowledging *the block*: that self-generated, self-molded, self-situated obstacle that sits in my way, fed by all the overt and covert disconfirming messages regarding endeavor and worthiness that I've soaked up like a sponge throughout my years in this body, this identity. The bearers of bad news have assumed the form of parents, teachers, peers, strangers, television programs, advertisements, institutional policies, social standards, religious mythologies, practices, and principles—the list continues. Countless influences have, over the years, morphed into inner voices that have served to

protect me, perhaps from failure and rash decisions, or from exposing who I truly am amidst a hostile world, while they have simultaneously coalesced into a pattern of prohibition from living a gifted life, based on talents, desires, and dreams.

At the time I began to take notes for this article, I had been contemplating writing it for two or three weeks, since my trip to Boston, and had been thinking more generally of writing on this theme for several months. On a bus bound for Ithaca, New York, as I sat next to a napping travel companion and wrote in my notebook, more out of a desire to keep myself occupied than anything else, it occurred to me that the confluence of two recent sources suggesting that I write this article was serving as a validation to punctuate the message for me.

The first suggestion had come from my therapist, in response to my description of

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a workshop that I had developed, entitled *From Blocks to Bridges*. As I shared my concepts and spoke of how I had come to implement the workshop, having faced several struggles along the way, my therapist suggested that I write an article. She felt that a presentation of this theme would merit publication. A couple of days later, I was offered the possibility of publishing this as yet unwritten article.

A friend I had known for thirty years had just welcomed his first child into this world and the *bris* was scheduled for Saturday that week. I had hoped to stay a night or two to get away from the hustle and bustle of New York City. Fortunately, despite the short notice, another set of friends, Anna and Behrooz, who also lived in Boston, warmly offered me a bed at their place. I had not seen them for several years. During one of our lengthy late night conversations, the topic of blocks emerged and I began to describe my workshop to them, how I had come to develop it, and the fact that I was considering writing an article about it. Behrooz had been publishing a sociological journal for several years centered on an area of study he defined as *the sociology of self-knowledge*. Although my field was not the same as his, Behrooz found interest in the self-exploratory nature of my process, which illustrated how I had come to investigate my own areas of stuckness while developing an experiential model in which others could safely face the sources of their learned limitations, and he invited me to write a piece for his journal. He could not have known how appreciative I would be of such a lovely gesture, particularly because I have never even attempted to publish a piece of writing, despite the fact that writing has been such a cherished part of my life for over twenty years, since I wrote my first poem at the age of fifteen. And so, I come full circle to the deep-seated block that informs this article: a fear of voicing my own voice, of being a fully expressed person in the world, of making contact with

other people who are just as deeply scarred, mystified, intrigued, bored, humbled, and ecstatic as I have been.

I began to consider working specifically with blocked energy during a frustrating time in my life when I was kicking around the idea of starting my own private practice as an art therapist. I had been working on a hospital nursing unit as a recreation therapist, having long been facing burnout, when I finally began to take seriously the notion that I was not going to remain a therapist if I continued to work in severely dysfunctional and dreary institutions. That site had been the seventh place I had seen in six years, including some volunteer work, a dropped internship, and two completed ones, and I knew it would be my last. For a few months before I left, I researched office spaces and put the word out that I was embarking upon a new endeavor, trusting that casting my intention out into the great cosmic oceans would be enough to evoke a positive outcome. During extended lunch breaks, I would hash out my objectives and speculate on possible specializations or specific indicators that would set me apart from the rest of the therapeutic community and potentially draw clients. Throughout my post-graduate career, I had mainly worked with elderly populations and I imagined that such a client base would be slim at best in a private practice setting. So, I turned to the things that I knew, thinking I would most effectively be able to work with such focal points as depression, relationship building, identity formation, boundary setting, career and interest development...oh, and blocks in creativity.

Soon, I was renting an office space on Sundays and Mondays, which I believed would serve me well, since I worked every second or third Saturday, getting Mondays off on those weeks. I also had amassed zero clients, a few inquiries here and there that materialized into nothing but heartache and disappointment, a huge box of business cards that did not quite come out as I

had imagined they would, a fluke three session trust with the one potential client that did turn out to be more than a phone call or an email, and an overall sense of what-the-hell-have-I-gotten-myself-into. I had been declaring my intentions of running a workshop for some time, having no idea what its focus might be, but somewhere along the way it occurred to me that working with creativity blocks was the most unique and interesting proposition on my menu, at least in my estimation, and that if I reduced the subject to blocks in a more general sense, I would have a form that applied to all the other things I had listed as potential focal points for my practice.

Despite the fact that I lacked a clue as to how I was realistically going to enroll six-to-eight clients for a workshop, although I had entertained many cockamamie ideas, I began to imagine how such an experiential inquiry might unfold. A notion of blocks, of obstacles, of stasis as a benevolent, albeit stubbornly painful, force began to take shape, based upon a deep personal conviction that everything we experience occurs as a call to know ourselves and the less in tune we are with who we are, the more severe our experience becomes.

Practically, I had derived this understanding from years upon years of suffering through a profound depression, having eventually discovered that the only way I could ever reconcile my persistent presence in its mold was by accepting, not just intellectually, but essentially and experientially, that I myself had generated the depressive form as my strongest and most durable coping mechanism for having to live in a world that had made little sense to me. In such a light, my depression, though often unbearable, had been a great ally, a trusty shield, and an expression of my own ingenuity.¹

As I thought about the blocks in my own life that had distanced me from the experience of living fully and of how they were playing out picture perfectly in my

timid approach to developing a practice, I knew that should I ever actually work with a group of people—not in an institution that filters every experience through the lens of illness and monotony, but on *my* terms and in *my* sphere—I would want to work with the insight of weakness as strength, fear as bravery and boldness. I plugged away, tweaking things here and there and when, during a conversation with a colleague and friend, I found in him a collaborator, I felt certain that together we would make this workshop happen and that it would be just the thing to jump-start my practice.

We shaped the workshop, discussing all the final details. We practiced leading different aspects of it with one another. We bought all the necessary materials. We even nearly scheduled a test-run of it with some close friends. Nevertheless, we somehow failed to manifest it, taking refuge in the lame defense that the winter holiday season was upon us and people were generally not going to be available for such extra-curricular activities as a workshop. At that point, as I came to realize that my partner had all along shared my apprehensiveness, I decided to give up my office space and I shelved the idea. I had just left my job on bitter terms and was soon barely getting by, but I had decided that, sink or swim, this period in my life would be *my* time; time to be me—screwed up and lost as I had felt, yet with a clear road ahead of me.

I had always known what I wanted to be: an artist (at first of comic books) since age 6, a poet since age 15, a storyteller and writer since age 17. When there had been little pressure to be anything at all but a

¹ The literature on depression is filled with examples that cast it as a spiritually redemptive force and as a sort of rite of passage that must be traversed, as opposed to the typical characterization of a mental illness requiring treatment, appropriated from the current medical model. See David H. Rosen's *Transforming Depression: Healing the Soul through Creativity* (1993) for a Jungian approach.

grandchild and son, a brother, a friend, and a student, doing what I loved had seemed nothing but an organic extension of me. But somewhere along the way this path had been corrupted, fizzling into a just barely achieved Bachelor's degree in studio art, some failed attempts at writing novels and screenplays, and eventually, not long after having finished college, eclipsed creativity.

I continued to keep notebooks filled with personal writings and sketches, but I no longer considered my efforts to be a creative endeavor. Once I had been faced with the notion of using my gifts, my treasured forms of expression for something as crass as making a living, I felt stained and utterly uninterested. I had made a meager attempt to publish something through an acquaintance who worked for an agent. I had shown a painting in a group exhibit at the university and had later been commissioned a couple of times by neighbors and family friends, but I had not craved recognition as do most writers and artists. I did not think it at the time, too fragile as I was, too egotistical to accept the naked truth, but I was afraid of myself and of who I could become. Living back home with my parents, working at my mother's small home-based export company, I was mortified to actually live as a human being in a human world I perceived to be grim and uninviting, and even if I had wanted to, I had not a clue as to how to do it. As if to compensate for my caged reality, I had traveled a bit, both during and after college, with some of the barmitzvah money that had been sitting untouched in a bank account for years, almost ready to believe that I had been motivated by a desire to see more of the world, but my excursions, I knew, had more accurately been motivated by desperation and escape.

It was not until several gloomy years had passed that I began to wake up from the nightmare of resignation, when a dear friend, Shoshana, had served as a mirror, looked directly into me, and challenged me to declare that I would be satisfied to live

my life in darkness and despair for the rest of its span. She had been the one person brave enough to face my depression and to speak directly with it, bypassing the typically automatic responses of either ignoring it or of feeling helpless to do something about it. I stepped outside of my comfort zone of misery, passivity, and discomfort and took some classes in random subjects that seemed interesting. I volunteered at a cancer treatment center full time. And then, I did something I had sworn during my gut-wrenching years at college that I would never do: I applied to some graduate schools. Three years later, I walked away utterly uncertain about my new career choice and newly branded as an art therapist. The structure and sense of completion had served me well, and perhaps most importantly, I had emerged willing to play out sequences of my life regardless of how positively or negatively I felt about them, but I had not yet been ready to heed the deeper call within.

Two jobs and three years later, nerves fried and with muscles in knots, I was determined to write some stories and make some art work if it spelled out my demise. Gone were the notions that I had to be anything in this world that I did not want to be. But I did have to *be*, and I had to be in this shared and social world, not in some monastic retreat of my own making. I wanted to continue my pursuit of a practice as a therapist and as a supervisor to other therapists, as I had begun to do, but that would not be the whole of my professional life and that would not be the sole enterprise of each lived day.

During the early summer months of 2005, I received an email from a stranger, named George Hunter, informing me that he was in the process of launching a school that would offer training in the arts and techniques of intuitive healing and that he intended to hire an art therapist to join his staff. Shoshana, who had become my fiancé and had been living with me for three years,

was in the process of applying to various Master's level and Ph.D. programs in spiritual-based and transpersonal psychology, all rooted in California, and it seemed fairly certain that she would be moving out by summer's end while I remained in New York City. I showed her the email, as if to confirm its authenticity—I have always nursed a healthy skepticism about contact with strangers, particularly when resulting from the random technological means of mail systems and telephone lists. Immediately, upon reading the man's name, clicking the link to his website, and seeing his picture pasted on it, she strongly felt that we would soon be working together and that he and I would find that we shared much in common. Her enthusiasm excited me, but I held on to that sense of caution that has ushered me through much of my life, serving as a source of self-protective stasis.

I had experienced a slim few forms of healing technique usually classified amidst such words as intuitive, energetic, and light, and I had recently befriended someone who practiced a particular form, but I had little sense of what a healer's training might entail. Nevertheless, I responded to the email and was soon invited to interview with the founder of the enigmatic Blue-Stone Institute. Alongside the usual interview process, George proposed that we conduct an "exchange," in which I would receive a healing session from him and he an art therapy session from me.

When I walked into his office space in Long Beach, having spent an hour traveling by train with a bag full of art materials, I felt instantly at ease with George. His voice over the phone had been slow and deliberate in a way that had reminded me of how my most recent therapist spoke, which nearly intimidated me, but for the genuine quality behind it. In person, he announced a laid back quality with his long hair in a pony-tail, baggy shorts, and a fairly loud printed button-down shirt. Although I had not worn anything even resembling a suit,

I felt overdressed, but I quickly overcame my self-conscious feelings. It did not take long before we shared a sense that we were cut of the same cloth: we were both highly sensitive and gentle men who had been badly bruised as children and who craved honest and emotional contact with people. Our exchange was such a deeply rewarding experience that I almost wished we would be able to enlist one another as clients, but at the end of the interview it seemed evident, at least to me, that we would be working together at his school; at bare minimum, we were going to present a workshop together.

Toward the end of our meeting, he had insisted upon a test-run venue in which to establish beyond doubt our seemingly apparent professional compatibility. In response, I had described my workshop to him and how it had come to pass that I was never able to implement it. *Let's do it*, he had said, catching me off guard, and as we discussed the details, I had matched his gung-ho (a great talent of mine), while inwardly I sank into a dread feeling that this was really going to happen, because I knew that George was someone who could make it happen. My fabulous workshop was going to be put to the test, forced off of a two-dimensional piece of paper, no longer a mere exercise of my intellect, and thrust into the world of human contact. No single cell in my body could reassure me that I was going to be able to go through with this. And so, I found myself uncomfortably near to an old, old demon, face to face with its vaporous breath in my eyes—my clear and personal reason for building bridges out of blocks.

WALKING WITH FEAR: THE ROAD AS A KNIFE

Perhaps it is common for someone in this particular society and age to feel a sense of surrealism when he stares into the

mirror for some time or listens intently to a recording of his voice, thinking, *Is this really what I look like? Is this really what I sound like? Is this really me?* And during those rare occasions when another person notices who you are on the inside, or reveals s/he has the capacity to perceive you in depth, we may feel shocked or naked, or we may refuse to acknowledge that that person really sees and understands us. Often, when we are faced with and take deep notice of our own reflection, it does not seem to match how we experience ourselves in the world. While such an awareness of misalignment can feel unsettling, it can also sound a call for personal responsibility and for change.

As a child, there was a time when the voice that emerged from me was my own and I expressed it freely. For many of the adults who knew me, this was a frustrating and provocative experience, as I might have been tagged willful, sensitive, oppositional, difficult, and, I suppose, overemotional (today, some form of medication would certainly have been recommended to keep me in balance). For many of the children that came to know me during my first years of grade school, I represented an easy target and an episode of comic relief. I was quickly dubbed the Incredible Hulk, after the comic book character, an identification with which I instantly felt comfortable, despite its embarrassing implications, and thus I became aware of my own voice as one that was wholly different from those of others. Much like the story of Adam eating forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, I began to develop a sense that the unfiltered expression of my voice was against the rules, that there was a good way of wielding it and there was a bad, monstrous way, and that, having tasted this fruit as an entity that stood apart from me, I felt ashamed of my own nakedness. My voice had come to represent two different versions of me that were almost completely different beings and, much like the comic book

character, I became a mild mannered, hidden monster, a good boy unless angered.²

I functioned for six years within this archetype, until an English teacher whom I liked very much took me aside one day, held up a mirror to me and said *I can see you in there*. The first adult to have ever acknowledged my behavior as a deep and valid personal expression, he looked me in the eye and showed me that although there was nothing wrong with being so sensitive, I was going to have to learn how to control my behavior, because it would not be tolerated when I entered junior high-school. Shaken to the core that someone would see me so clearly and speak to me so directly, I instantly took his words to heart. The only way I knew how to integrate them was by training myself first to censor the “inappropriate” voice—the monstrous, the angry, the hurt one; and later to slowly leak it out in more covert forms, as tempered rebelliousness and feigned lack of interest.

I had begun to adapt to the notion of a social world that would not accept me as I was, but the self-protective effort commanded a heavy toll. By ninth grade I had begun to develop a new split, which seemed to evoke a more complex depressive tendency: an inner world of dark thoughts, self-negation, and secret treasures, from which was spawned an awareness of myself as a creative being, sat behind a budding social “nice” or “good guy,” who was open, sincere, and easy to get to know. Although I continued to exist within the dear and close friendships I had begun in my first years of school, through which I had been known, accepted, and validated *as is*, I also crystallized another old feeling that nobody understood me or

² Regarding the question of patterned individual development, Harry Stack Sullivan (1953, repr. 1968) postulates the notion of a “self-system” that originates from “the irrational character of...society” and sequentially derives from more “rudimentary personifications of good-me and bad-me, and...not-me” (p.168).

loved me and that therefore, no matter what my circumstances were, no matter how many cared for and appreciated me, I was alone in the world.

During these years, when youth sets in and teens typically become painfully self-conscious, I poured into the mold as predictably as might have any other boy my age. I had long been teased, but now, despite a belief that my efforts embodied distinction from the general crowd, I sought acceptance and conformity more than ever. Newly groomed and possessing stronger social skills than I had ever imagined, the notion of being revealed as the “loser” that hounded my childhood seemed unacceptable on the surface and unbearable underground. In many ways, though I was generally a sincere young person, I was learning how to feel fake, how to hide, and when I first experienced an unmistakable betrayal of my own voice, while I had been called upon to read a homework assignment out loud in a Torah (Old Testament) studies classroom, I felt not only exposed as a fraud, but downright obliterated.

Anyone else in that classroom might hardly have given it a passing thought. At worst, if I could have peered into their minds, a classmate might have noted that a fellow student felt a little nervous and embarrassed—big deal. But I could not integrate the fact that my voice had refused to veil my fright and vulnerability in the classroom. In my experience, the scene had been a nightmare in which my teacher scathingly smiled at me as I suffered unforeseen torture and the minions of heads and eyes under her power that I no longer recognized were turned upon me like daggers frozen in flight on the verge of incision.

Like most, I had always feared presentations and being called upon to publicly perform, and I had also, God knows, felt deeply humiliated many times before this incident, but I had always been able to tolerate my fears and find my way through them, even if only because I sensed no other option. After

all, I had been through a bar-mitzvah, chanting verse for some gargantuan length of time. But this dreadful moment in the classroom had presented a new and wholly unwelcome insight: that my voice would not participate in the game of charades that I had been interested in pursuing and that I could not wield it as I pleased. For weeks, I did not trust my voice anywhere outside of my home, fearing how it might behave even during chummy hallway conversations with my closest friends at school. I avoided class presentations, eye contact with teachers, and reading out loud in any situation whatsoever, and when I could not remain invisible, I trudged my way through spotlight with a madly thumping heart. I skipped classes when I thought I might be called upon and pleaded with teachers for Fs on verbal assignments. I lived in utter terror of the next moment that I might be asked to speak, never once allowing myself to indulge that all too clear possibility that I could refuse, that I could say, *I don't want to and I won't*. Instead, I chose flight; I learned to dissociate, to be absent from spaces that my body inhabited, feeling like a fish out of water whenever some bit of attention reeled me back in.

The few teachers that heard my plea or took my abnormal level of anxiety to heart gently insisted that I go through my fear. Two that I can remember encouraged me, having called on me only to read short bits out loud in class and I sense them now as though they held me in warm embrace for those brief moments, even though ironically they happened to be two of the most feared teachers in the school. Another would not accept my insistence on an F and she withheld any grade whatsoever until I recited the designated Shakespearean sonnet with her as my sole audience—embarrassing, but bearable.

It was not until I had been assigned to present Rainer Maria Rilke's fourth Duino Elegy, during what must have been my junior or senior year, that I experienced a sweet element within my voice. The elegies had

each been distributed to pairs of students, which had given me some scrap of courage. My partner was a vaporous, sleepy-looking girl who dragged her words over mayonnaise when she spoke. She was not the least bit interested in delivering this presentation. Afraid that she might ditch me, I offered to plan the presentation and do most of the talking, so long as she got up in front of the class with me.

All the others that had presented prior to us had taken notes, read them aloud, and spent ten minutes getting it out of the way. We were the first pair scheduled for the second day of presentations. In preparation, I had taken comprehensive notes on the elegy, primed to make a dry, lifeless delivery as my plan B, but I had decided to first try a strategy: involving the rest of the classroom and deflecting the spotlight from me. I wrote some words on the blackboard so that eyes would not all be pointed towards me and I began to request reading voices and insights, and before I knew what I was doing, I had engaged the class in a thought-provoking discussion about Rilke's meaning and intent. My peers, presented with something completely unexpected, took the bait and played along, as did the teacher, who did not insist on keeping a fixed schedule, and my presentation morphed into a lesson that had lasted the length of the class. I felt vividly alive for a moment, benignly powerful, but shortly after relishing in my triumph, the old custom of shutting down returned to me and I thought: *this is the last time I will ever, ever have to do something like this again.* And it was...until, lifetimes later, I became an art therapist.

FINDING A PLACE TO STAY: THE ROAD IS A SPOON, THE WORLD IS MY OYSTER

As I write this, I am wondering: why am I traveling through memories, rewriting my history, generating a new mythology

through which to understand my "self;" my sense of a continuous and unified experience in this realm of human life—all within the context of presenting a concept that I have nurtured into the form of a workshop, which I have barely even begun to describe? My intent from the beginning has been to illustrate an example of transformative process from my own life, rather than to explain the dynamics of the workshop, but I had not imagined such a lengthy portrayal. The fact that I have hardly touched upon the direct subject matter in focus, coupled with my scarcity of academic reference thus far conjures a voice of dissent in me: *Is this a proper article? Am I being self-indulgent in a distracting manner? Will anyone care enough to read past the first page? Will anyone be touched by my effort? Will this actually merit publication?* The only thought that comforts me is that I am in the zone of not knowing, of not having answers, which indicates that I am not making a pre-packaged offering and that I am in that genuine place of playing something out regardless of outcome—which is really the core concept I am attempting to magnify here.

Throughout my years in high-school and those that followed, I always sensed that my deepest fears and most sharply experienced weaknesses were the keys to discovering my greatest hidden strengths, but I abstained with untiring perseverance from putting such a notion to the test. I was content to know this merely intellectually, as some sort of misty spiritual dictum. Somehow, I suppose like most people, I had learned to detest going through the feared experience with a fierceness that eclipsed the ecstatic reward of conscious expansion through survival of it; and when, in college, the reality had sunk into my bones of having the choice not to do anything I didn't want to do, I made this discovery a cherished daily practice. In this way, I began to learn how to exercise the depressive tendency that I had already integrated as an aspect of my identity. In short time, the

most dramatic expression of this sequence would be: not only did I not *have* to do anything, but I did not *want* to do anything—a banner so nearly total, that at points it encompassed negating such basics as going to classes, getting out of bed, allowing for sensations of hunger and sexual arousal, and practicing the great pleasures of art-making and writing. Feeling—that aspect of personhood that had been my most deeply expressed truth since the discovery of self-awareness—had been cast as such an enemy in its utter incongruity with how I believed I had to exist in the world, that I could not tolerate it and I used up much of my energy designing ways in which to escape from it. Of course, simultaneously, I craved and indulged feelings, acting them out dramatically in areas of relationship that seemed acceptable and turning up their volume when no one else was around.

In the course of my studies, I have often come across a general notion (explored in a variety of far more complex and nuanced ways than offered here), that various mental “disorders” and “dysfunctional” forms of behavior or psychological “condition” are at heart reflections of communicated systems of being; that they are, through repetition of sequences, unconsciously taught and learned existential schema consisting of closed sets of inescapable opposing, disconfirming, and irreconcilable experiences of reality, or “no win/no exit” templates; and that they are inevitably developed (as, in many cases, no other possibilities are even within the realm of development), as the sole available strategies for intra-psychic and inter-personal integration.³

In my case, the wordless mantra I had been repeating daily could have been expressed as, *Do not feel nothing, or you will be nothing*: feeling and numbing had each become a threat to my existence and it was impossible not to experience either, or to question the premise of the paradoxical contradiction that had become my uni-

verse. My voice had always been the vehicle for expression of my feelings and by my mid-twenties its passage had become so constricted that I had even ceased to acknowledge the once acceptable alternatives to actual embodiment and vocalization of feelings. I suppose when we lose our own voices, or at any rate, when the rooms which hold them become ferociously dim, we wilt into hopeless creatures resigned to whatever little cage life will deliver us into. For some time, that seemed to be my fate.

Not until I was able to reach out and fully embrace my dear friend, Shoshana, with whom I had long ago lost touch, during perhaps the lowest time in her own life and in her greatest hour of need, did the doorknob to a simple and basic sense of possibility even appear in my field of sight; and by the time she had challenged me to take responsibility for my own life, I had witnessed enough of her bottomless anguish and had shared a sufficient amount of my own, in a space of complete acceptance, to have opened my heart to life.

³This is an extremely reductive conglomeration of concepts that have generally, to my knowledge, been applied within specific contexts of psychological, anthropological, and sociological inquiry. Although I have not, as far as I can recall, come across this type of paradigm with regard to studies of depression, I nevertheless find it apt and useful, based upon my own experience. For a varied and loosely related set of early examples in literature that examines this, see Gregory Bateson (1972), who challenges a strictly physiological understanding of what causes schizophrenia by correlating its development with the persistent communication of an inherently self-defeating situational reality he describes as a “double bind,” in which one is, so to speak, damned if you do, damned if you don’t, damned if you try not to do or don’t, and damned if you think you can find a way out of such a conundrum; Karen Horney (1945), who understands neuroses to be generated by the unconscious presence of irresolvable inner conflicts; and Harry Stack Sullivan (1962, repr. 1974), who views the onset of schizophrenic psychoses to be largely “conservative” in character, in the sense that it is an active attempt at preserving bits from a personality threatened with extinction in order to maintain the possibility of achieving social integration.

The jagged and slim path toward taking the helm was (and continues to be) a lengthy one, but eventually, through my school's insistence on transparency and on demonstration of experience in the field, and during the course of my internships with psychiatric and elderly populations, I came full circle to confronting the initiation of my own voice. With a level of consistency that had long been overdue, I gave presentations of my work with clients, I led all sorts of groups for facilities, including a book club, consisting mostly of women elders, in which I read stories out loud and initiated lively discussions, and I provided some direction for many who only saw dim alleyways ahead of them, if they sensed any horizon at all.

During this time, I happily discovered that my voice was a strong, compassionate, and welcoming force that was capable of forging connections between hearts with great ease and comfort. I also found that it was a lucid communicator capable of giving full audience to my interest in a subject or situation. Nevertheless, old habits, as they say, die hard, and I continued to dissociate with unquenchable thirst for haze and daze when caught inside spaces that felt hot and dangerous to me, particularly in the presence of one highly provocative professor whose method was, in a nutshell, the confrontation and testing of student boundaries and the public exploration of personal vulnerability. Still fearing visibility and struggling with issues of control and mastery, I was not yet ready to risk exposure of the sensitivity within that had been invalidated and vilified throughout my years. Furthermore, I tended to hear the whisper of a critic in my ear, minimizing the enormity of the hurdles I had jumped and the value of my efforts, insisting, for example, that I was only capable of authentically aligning with my voice publicly in small classrooms and in front of socially outcast groups of people, who were openly appreciative and eager for my company,

only because they were starved for contact. Nonetheless, through my cynicism, I felt a real sense of gratitude to those who had become the witnesses of my blossoming voice, as their acceptance and admiration was at least as much as I had been able to offer, and often far more.

Throughout my navigation of graduate studies, I faced my depression head on, with consistent therapy and with medication, which felt a shocking admission of my desperation; as though I would try anything, including the great American pill-fix I had always found abhorrent. Who can tell what it was that most effectively induced my emergence from the pit, but I know it was fueled by a radical sense of self-trust, expressed in the forms of initiative and perseverance, regardless of ability, readiness, direction, or outcome—something of which my therapist had reminded me on many occasions when he addressed my frequent urge to drop out of the graduate program. His insistence on the importance of seeing an effort to its conclusion, even if it meant arriving at my destination with intent that was contrary to my initial impetus, spoke deeply to me. I did not have to embark upon a profession when I graduated, he would often repeat, but I would have a choice that otherwise would never have entered my field of vision.

Months after the grueling and immeasurably rewarding experience of writing a thesis, I did make that choice, against all the persistent voices within that tugged at me to remain their purgatorial company (particularly those that dangled the carrot of finally writing that book or starting to make some art again). I felt just as unsteady walking the tightrope of a new profession as I had stumbling through graduate school, but I knew that at that moment in my life, it was the clearest and most well defined choice before me.

It did not take long for me to find a comfort zone and I quickly felt more than adequately equipped for the role I was ex-

pected to fill. I continued to touch people's lives and form authentically affectionate bonds with some wonderful elders, which allowed me to experience a professional standard beyond the paper-pushing and petty departmental bickering and banter that tends to shroud all sense of purpose. But I would not come to discover the depth of my theoretical and practical comprehension and the efficacy of my ability to lucidly communicate what I knew until, mostly out of a nagging sense of monotony, I offered schools my services as an internship supervisor. Becoming a supervisor would be the glue that kept my sense of professional identity and integrity accessibly intact.

The school with which I had come to collaborate was an art school that offered a free course for each semester of supervision. This gave me incentive and a structured space within which to explore art-making again. I had also begun to write vignettes of my experiences within the facilities that employed me, as well as other stories. Within a couple of years, I had supervised several students and post-grads seeking certification, I had begun to visualize a new book-project, and I had found an art material—oil pastels—that allowed me to feel fully at home again within the zone of creativity.

Today, as I write this with the intent of illustrating a personal example of having crossed over a bridge built from my own blocks (although the critic in me insists that it sounds more like a résumé, a cheesy hallmark classic, or a shameless call for applause), a year-and-a-half has passed since I have been “self-employed” with a humble, but steady private practice as my professional anchor of consistency. During this financially challenging, but incomparably fruitful time, I have also led my workshop (which, rather than serving to close a door behind me, as I had imagined it would, has actually opened one to a world filled with unforeseen possibilities), edited a scholarly book scheduled for publication, developed

curriculum and taught for a full year at an institute, and most recently, I have matted, framed, and arranged my first solo exhibition, consisting of 32 out of sixty to seventy works of art produced over the past year. On the personal level, running six miles three times a week and writing three pages of anything nearly every morning during this period has fastened me to a healthy sense of continuity. I still face many of the same obstacles daily, to be sure, and the blocks I have presented here, the temptation to embrace utter stasis and passivity and to not make my mark in the world, is perhaps as present today as it ever has been, but I am right now, this very moment, a life in motion, a work in progress, an unfolding process of experience, a voice that is heard. I can make the moment happen with as great acceptance as I can let it happen. And I am pleased to have arrived at my own doorstep and to be welcome home.

WALKING ON GROUND: GETTING OFF THE ROAD TO PAVE A PATH

I arrive at my former office space in the East Village an hour or so before the workshop is scheduled to begin, having rented it on a Sunday from a colleague who has not yet found clients and is happy to have received some compensation. Six participants are enrolled. Although George and I have discussed the structure of the workshop and I have typed out a well honed outline, we have otherwise not rehearsed and I suppose both of us have no idea how well we will work together. I am nervous. I have been both dreading and anticipating this moment for days, if not weeks, but I have worked off some steam by walking the four-and-a-half miles from my apartment uptown. Soon, George arrives. His smiling presence somehow sets me at ease, assures me that all will go well. We have spoken several times since our first meeting a couple of months ago and it already

seems as though we are old friends.

All our materials are already in the studio, as I have had the foresight to bring them here a couple of nights ago. We gather and lay them out strategically: the air-hardening clay substitute in white and terracotta colors, the boards, the paper, various drawing materials and color sticks, some small but heavy found objects, feathers and adornment materials, and anything else that might be of use. Then, after we have tired of going over the details, we grab a quick bite at the crêperie across the street and return with a couple of gallons of water—a last minute detail.

By the time our participants begin to arrive, we feel settled into the space. One or two are a bit late. We wait for them and informally welcome everybody in the meantime, making small talk. George seems to have already established relationships with them. I am sure he has mentioned his connection with the five participants he has drawn, but I can't seem to remember the details. After ten minutes have passed and we are one short, we decide to begin. George initiates the introduction, as I have requested, and he swiftly leads into a guided meditation, generating a wonderfully soothing hum from a large crystal bowl that he has brought with him. His words and the tone of his voice are gentle and grounding, evoking a sense of stillness and peace, which seems to assure everyone—certainly it does me—that this is a safe space to inhabit together.

Slowly, we return to ourselves, as our sixth arrives. We welcome her, give the group a moment to adjust, and George asks everyone to introduce themselves as they wish. The circle seems to flow more freely than I have usually experienced in groups and it begins to become clear to me that we have already established a sense of rapport. Surprised by my own level of comfort, I speak a bit about why we are here and instigate a discussion about what a block is and what might be the purpose of engaging

with one consciously...

A block is an inner construct, schema, or pattern that has crystallized a learned sense of inability and inactivity based upon the unconscious negation of normative function for a particular being. A block can manifest in the body on a physiological level, such as a blood clot; on a somatic level, otherwise unexplained by detectable physiological symptoms, such as a persistent difficulty catching one's breath or a chest pain occurring for no particular reason; on a metaphorical or energetic level, such as the experience of a closed heart or a restricted throat; and so on. A block can manifest in the psyche, perhaps causing a person to experience an inability to do something that s/he has always enjoyed doing, or to express something to a loved one that s/he has long intended to express. A block can manifest as a perceived aspect of one's personality or as a long established personal parameter, as in my own diminished capacity to enter my voice for much of my lifetime. Or a block may simply be a momentary manifestation, as in the utter inability, no matter what efforts are made, to make a decision about what to order at a restaurant. Perhaps there are other ways of the block. For the purposes of the workshop, what is most significant is that the block is a manifestation, that it can be represented and given physical form outside of one's bodily experience, that it exists for a reason, and that it vies for its host's attention.

When I first considered the word and why I was drawn to it, I thought about how I played with blocks all the time as a child, delighting in the construction of castles and towers. What struck me was the transformative and transcendental aspect of the block, in that it could be joined with others of its kind, even exact replicas, to produce something far grander in scale, completely different from its original form, and as beautiful, useful, or odd as the imagination could envision. Perhaps, I then speculated, the negative aspect of this very same block

is what we experience when we do not perceive its use and function as a metaphorically irreducible building material and we instead experience its qualities as a static, fixed, and final form. If this was true, I mused, it was possible to conceive of an inner block as benevolent in character: the bearer of a challenge, a lesson, or a call for action. Its persistent nature was simply an indication that its message was essential and the level of suffering that it caused insinuated the urgency of its plight.

As I began to understand the value and importance of the block, I came to appreciate its essential set of functions to include not only building and transformation, but also bridging, insofar that the bridge represents a crossing path from the space of familiarity, containment, and identity towards another, otherwise unreachable locale, experience, and orientation. Finally, amidst conversations with colleagues on this theme, I discerned that balance was a key component of the block as well, without which its potential for building and bridging was nothing more than an inaccessible ideal. This suggested to me that the block's essential field of communication was lack of balance.

For example, if I have unconsciously generated one hundred *you're not good enough* messages for every one *you are good enough*, (better yet, *you're damn good!*); and if I have then developed a fixed and highly probable pathway towards feelings of self-defeat when faced with a desired opportunity; and if I have even arrived at an inability to recognize a desired opportunity, the presence of such a block, perhaps manifested as a constant feeling of *not being able to get anywhere*, would be signifying a need for consciousness of what messages I allow myself to receive and generate, followed by conscious efforts to manifest experiences of affirmation. A balancing response might be the repetition of an affirming mantra on a daily basis, or the addition of a new routine, such as joining a runner's club, in

which one could consistently experience self-satisfaction and validation from others. Conversely, if I have persisted with a belief that *I am a disciplined writer capable of writing a book*, and have only entertained the notion once in a blue moon that *I am not such a disciplined writer and I am incapable thus far of writing a book*, the occurrence of a block in the form of experiencing a repetitive inability to write might denote the opposite. Here, conscious negation of beliefs that consistently do not match one's experience of reality may be the source of constructive transformation. Heeding the call of the block might entail taking a novel writing class, in which more opportunities may arise to experience both criticism and a clearer sense of supportive recognition in a safe environment. In either case, the awareness of imbalance is asking for a change in self-dynamic.

The problem, however, lies in that the block is a conscious experience of a chameleon-like unconscious process that adapts its camouflage to the changing landscape of one's awareness. It is easy to know that it is present, but difficult to understand why and how it has come to be. Further, its monotonous and untiring persistence ironically generates a "comfort zone"...Our discussion illuminates these insights, as our workshop participants begin to tell their own stories to one another. I introduce a warm-up exercise designed to get us all into our bodies and become acquainted with the use of art materials in an introspective manner. Afterwards, we continue our discussion, considering such questions as: *What is your heart's desire for yourself? What excites you when you think about doing it? How would you live your life if you could live it however you wanted to? As a child, what activities did you enjoy doing and what did you imagine you would be when you grew up? If you knew for certain your purpose in life, what would it be? Name one thing within you that prevents you from realizing and manifesting the answers to these questions.*

As I ask each participant to identify a specific block with which they would like to work, I notice a general sense of uncertainty. George picks up on this quickly and concretizes the directive by suggesting that they can choose to work with a part of the body that feels as though it is blocked. We had not discussed this possibility, but I think it is just what is needed and I am wondering how I could have possibly overlooked such a thing. Suddenly, everyone has their block in mind; the body in the moment holds the key.

George leads another short guided meditation through a suggestion of sensing the block as an external physical entity, asking such questions as: *What is it like to hold it in your hands? What does it feel like? What physical qualities and characteristics does it have?*—and so on. Afterwards, I explain the main directive: each participant is to give the block physical form, using clay as the primary material. An optional approach is to choose a “core” that suggests the block’s central characteristics from an assortment of found materials, such as stones, small but heavy metallic weights, dried starfish, seashells, and several other items; then to mold the clay around the core; and finally to adorn the block with a “skin” or outer layer, consisting of other random materials.

Throughout the experiential exercise, a palpable intensity and heat permeates the room. Instantly, each participant is immersed within their own process, demonstrating a shared sense of trust. When the last person is finished, some forty minutes later, I sense serenity and a field of emotional possibility that is wide open. I had imagined a much more literal approach than what has resulted: none of the pieces even nearly resembles the toy building blocks from my childhood, which I had expected to be the representative template, and nobody has chosen to work with the core and skin method, which I had imagined would provide an interesting sense of structure for those uncertain about how to proceed.

Nevertheless, the artwork validates for me that my choice of a clay-based material for this theme was exactly the right one...

While developing the workshop, I had chosen clay because I wanted to evoke a sense of blocks as a malleable form. I had hoped to impress that not only have we unconsciously shaped our blocks ourselves (like clay, the block also dries and hardens into a more fixed form, once we have agreed to its details), but that we can also consciously continue to mold, by reshaping our orientation vis-à-vis the block towards a discovery of the recognizably constructive form that lies latent within it. Another facet of clay that I had considered useful was that it is a material that stimulates regression, as it conjures bodily gestures learned during infancy, such as grasping, pounding, holding, squeezing, and so forth.⁴ The potential of accessing areas of personal development that exist previous to block formation seemed to be a powerful advantage for the process I had hoped to inspire.⁵

...As we look around the room, George and I offer some words of genuine appreciation and share our experiences of witnessing the group’s process, after which I invite each participant to speak about her own creative experience and to tell the story of her block. There is a slight hesitation, but one woman takes the torch and begins to talk about her lifelong wish to be a famous vocalist. She indicates that her block is located in her throat. She speaks at great length with an air of heaviness that punctu-

⁴The qualities of clay and of art materials in general are presented here simply by way of abridged example. For a comprehensive overview of how specific materials can be used to help navigate areas of therapeutic terrain, see Judith Aron Rubin’s (1984) *The Art of Art Therapy*. For a more specific investigation of clay, including case examples, see David Henley’s (2002) *Clayworks in Art Therapy: Plying the Sacred Circle*.

⁵Michael Washburn (1995) offers an interesting discussion on the topic of regression as a pathway towards transcendence.

ates the surrounding silence, and she is so nakedly vulnerable that everyone seems to be teetering on the edge which separates discomfort from compassion. When George improvises one more time and asks her to hold her clay block next to her throat, explaining that this may help her to connect with her block, she instantly experiences a release or a discharge.⁶

I can hardly believe the power of this form—the holding capacity of a block of clay and of a relatively unrelated group of people. I had hoped for openness, but I never imagined experiencing such an undeniable immediacy of empathy, such a direct and instant heart to heart connection. This woman is actively mourning before our eyes. George and I hold the space through lengthy, sometimes arduous moments of both speech and silence. At no point do we attempt to recover from feelings of awkwardness or uncertainty; rather, we honor them with acceptance and with restraint from exercising an impulse to control and avoid. After a long period of time, through stops and starts, peaks and valleys, the woman lets us know when she is ready to let go.

And so it continues, until each person has had a chance to experience being at the center of this group. The heart channel remains open throughout, producing a rich assortment of emotions that graces our presence. One woman, having focused her presentation on what her block appears to be, hesitantly reveals a tiny, almost imperceptible baby that would never have been noticed otherwise, as it lies hidden inside

⁶ Several books dealing with energetic bodily systems use this type of language. Alexander Lowen (1975) offers a particularly lucid illustration of a notion of charge and discharge, in which the quality of a person's respiration relates directly to his/her level of energy and in which functional capacity rests upon a balance between charge and discharge. In the current example, discharge does not simply signify crying, or the expression of emotion, but rather it connotes the activation and release of *suppressed* emotion.

another eclipsing form that is meant to correspond to her womb. Uncertain as to how deeply she would like to reveal herself, she shares that her mother never noticed or held her during her early years and that she was never allowed to experience her mother *as a mother*. As George asks her if she would like to hold the baby, she does so tenderly and with great care, knowing that it is herself in her arms and it occurs to her with bittersweet humility that she must fill the role that her vacant mother has forever abandoned.

Another presents a heart, half white and half terracotta, like a black and white cookie, surrounded by a solid coiled "wall" in which the two colors are weaved together. Her wall, or her boundary system is integrated, she tells us, but her heart is not, as it embodies the binary nature of otherness. As she holds the block to her chest, it almost falls apart, and she expresses how apt it is that her block is such a fragile thing. Recognizing that she must handle it delicately, she keeps the block in place. Despite her short-lived battle to present a controlled front, she too releases the great suffering that a divided and inaccessible heart has long caused her to feel. She is also aware that her block is communicating another split between her mind and her heart, and that it is actually her dominant intellect that has encapsulated her heart with the thick wall cut from its very essence, but manipulated into a closed form. Consequently, it has been her intellect that has regulated the flow of her circulation within the world, deciding what enters her as well as what flows outward from her. I ask her if she would like to remove the wall. She thinks about it and responds that she needs to leave it as it is, but that now that she understands why it is there and the function it has served, it is okay to know that it is there and to simply let it be. As she says this, she smiles and lets out a little chuckle of relief, which it seems we are all able to feel.

The next person has fashioned a lifelike

hand to size that is slightly cramped and appears as though it is cleanly cut at the wrist from its assumed body. She shares that she is an artist and that her right hand has been her greatest bodily communicator, but that she sometimes feels as though it has a life of its own, apart from her will. The hand is also particularly important to her as she is a foreigner in this country and she does not speak English as well as she would like to. Her ability to communicate with hand gestures is a crucial aspect of how she makes herself understood, so it is specifically distressing for her on a social level to feel a disconnect from her hand. As she holds and examines her weighty block, she understands that it is speaking to her inability to own her actions, or to even experience herself as a source of action.⁷

When we come to the end of the workshop, it feels as though it has been a rich, but exhausting experience. George initiates a brief honoring ceremony and he invites us all to join him in a spontaneous chant that is meant to hold and release the intention of honoring our blocks as teachers and to validate what we have all experienced together. The workshop has lasted nearly an hour longer than expected, but we are all, it seems to me, filled with a sense of warmth, authenticity, and gratitude.

Prior to the honoring ceremony, I am struggling with the awareness that I had intended the last part of the workshop to consist of a creative group effort in which the blocks are used to physically form a bridge. I had imagined this would serve as both a metaphor and an activity to signify the solidarity of the group. But the hour has become late, and when I nevertheless offer the

suggestion, since it is listed on the agenda that everyone has seen, the fifty something year-old hidden baby destined to be her own mother returns the most fitting response, just as I am thinking the exact same thing. *I feel*, she says, *as though we've already built the bridge*. Immediately, perhaps a bit out of exhaustion, but also in full earnestness, the rest of the group, including George and I, chimes in, almost in unison, *I was just thinking that too*.

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⁷ Not all the participants are presented here. It is customary to offer more precise basic distinguishing details, such as age, name (whether actual or invented), and background information. This sketch, however, is not intended as a therapeutic case study; rather, it is more so an illustration of my process and my experience. For this reason, I feel that a greater sense of anonymity is more appropriate here.