

Spiritual Opportunities

Deborah Ravetz

Kierkegaard said that our relationship to anxiety determines the failure or fruitfulness of our life.

When I was growing up, my mother appeared to be allergic to me. I became the scapegoat of the family. As soon as I was old enough, I left home and found my own people. I studied literature and philosophy and then worked in Camphill, where one of my major roles was helping people to discover their vocation. Despite the break with my family, it seemed important to maintain a thread of connection as a kind of hope for the future by keeping touch around Christmas and birthdays.

When I was in my early thirties, my mother became very ill. I reconnected with her and began to visit whenever I could. I felt that she needed support to bear the frightening consequences of her terminal illness. Because I had long accepted she was not able to be motherly I did this expecting nothing in the way of personal resolution.

The last time I saw my mother, she was about to go into hospital for a minor procedure. Being with her at this time was poignant because the high tech interventions and drugs with which she had been treated radically changed her appearance and left her very unfocused. As we sat together hardly able to maintain a conversation, the whole atmosphere suddenly changed and my mother seemed to slip back into focus as if she wanted to tell me something very urgently.

She told me about her art training. She had been unable to endure the anxiety of being creative. This had led her to abandon a career in the arts and to send her creative self into exile. She then explained why she had never made me welcome in the family. I would paint and draw, write musicals, read and read and write poetry. Furthermore, I looked very like her. It was as if she had borne a child who was the mirror image of what she was trying to repress. She had responded to me with fear, the opposite of love. This manifested as coldness, sarcasm and mockery. Now that she was dying, she regretted not having lived up to her potential. She was also filled with remorse that she had not been the mother she should have been. This conversation ended with our exchanging a look of love and acceptance. Unexpectedly she died as a result of her procedure and I never saw her again.

These revelations gave me the key to understand the painful confusion of my childhood. My mother's behaviour to my youthful self meant that I had always believed that there was something very wrong with me. Now it was clear that I was not to blame for the unhappy lack of connection between me and my family. I understood as well that despite loving art and despite coming home from school with prizes, I had absorbed and internalised my mother's fear and disapproval of who she was and therefore of who I was. Instead of making art, I helped others to make art; I looked at art, studied it and gave lectures about it but never made any work myself. Just after my mother's death her revelations meant I finally redeemed this state of affairs and started my art training. I was thirty five, which felt quite late; I was comforted by the fact I was the same age as Kandinsky when he decided to abandon his first career in law and attend art school in Munich.

Overcoming obstacles

Making art demands that we live in a constant state of insecurity because to make art means to stay in process. This makes it a fitting metaphor for life. Seeing the impact of the fear of process on my mother's life made me turn to this challenge in my own work as a Social Sculptor Practitioner. In several aspects of that work I have sought out the stories of many people in order to understand more clearly what makes us so afraid to embrace process.

The artist Paula Modersohn-Becker only lived until she was thirty-one. In her short life, she embraced difficult emotions and pushed through to her goal. This meant that she managed to connect with her deepest longing to become an artist. This was in a time when there was no role model for a female artist to follow. She was actively discouraged from taking what was described as an egoistic and unloving path.

Modersohn-Becker wanted to be an artist as well as a whole human being. She wanted to work, to experience love and also to have her own children. In the end she achieved them all even though she died young. Sensing that she would not live into old age, she said 'is a festival any less wonderful because it is short?' For her manifesting her potential was a holy egotism, a manifestation of her responsibility to the Holy Spirit.

When she married the painter Otto Modersohn, Paula Modersohn-Becker hoped that he would teach her all he knew about making art. Because she was a woman she was also expected to be a conventional housewife. She asked what seems to us a simple question: Why can't we find a way of caring for these needs mutually without killing either of our potential. She took four trips to Paris where she expanded on what she had learned from Otto by absorbing all that was both radical and new and all that was ancient in that great city.

It was on her last visit in 1906 that Paula Modersohn-Becker's painting *Self Portrait on my Sixth Wedding Anniversary* came quietly into the world. It is immensely powerful in its strong gentleness, which embodies Gloria Steinman's insight that what is special about women is not that they are better in some way than men, but that they can show that they are vulnerable. In the painting the artist is unclothed but she is not an object of desire or worship. Instead she is her completely naked self, asking 'Who am I?' She holds herself as if she is with child. She adorns the image with what she called her characteristic runes or whispers: around her neck there is an amber necklace; her hands are carefully positioned around her chakras. The child that is being born is not an ordinary child. After painting this picture Paula Modersohn-Becker wrote that she no longer needed to sign her name. Instead, she said: 'I have become myself.'

To be vulnerable is to be completely disrobed and free of protection. To be vulnerable is to be prepared to face the unknown. It means to be frightened and anxious without numbing out or running away. It means enduring those feelings until they give up their secret.

Why is this so important? This desert place is not a mistake. Only by passing through this realm can we find out who we really are divested of habit and convention. It is important because we need to understand the geography of our souls as much as we need to understand the geography of the world. Only then will we give birth to our unique self and to our potential; only then will self and world be properly connected.

In 1906 Paula Modersohn Becker's embrace of her vulnerability led to her finding herself. When she died in 1907 she left behind a radiant body of work.

For some years my feeling of responsibility and agency has been dulled. It was drowned out by the frantic invitation to be a consumer. It was weakened by a feeling of powerlessness in the face of global capitalism. It was made inaccessible by a feast of distraction that enticed me to numb my anxiety in the face of this loss of purpose. The political upheavals heralded by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump seem to have broken through this numbness.

I have noticed how women are embracing feminism again and challenging the old guard in American politics. They seem to be struggling not only for equality as in the past, but for a more loving world. These women speak they are strong and they are articulate. Their strength comes out of connecting compassionately to the needs of the world. They seem to be acting because they care, not because they are driven by careers and ambition. They are connecting with their deeper selves, not the phantom self of status and power. It seems as if the spirit of Paula Modersohn-Becker that was embodied in her wonderful portrait is becoming part of the zeitgeist in the work of these gentle but strong women.

We are also witnessing the emergence of a new youth movement. Children and teenagers are looking to their elders and demanding action on climate change all over the world. Teenagers who saw their fellow students shot at school are now challenging the gun lobby in America. They were responsible for organising the largest rally ever seen in Washington. It is as if the world is awaking to the need to make democracy rather than to just take it for granted.

All this activity made me feel as if not only I but many people have awoken to the fact that we can make a difference despite the power of the present status quo.

There is a battle for the structures of society, for the environment, for healthcare, education, tolerance and interdependence. There is also a battle for the free human being.

The artist Joseph Beuys experienced the Third Reich as a young man. After the war he had had to face what had been done in the name of the German people. Tyranny is only possible if there is no one to say 'no'. The cultivation of self-making becomes more than a matter of personal fulfilment when we see what depends on it. If we do not work on becoming ourselves in the small things when we are confronted with serious attacks on the dignity of the human being we will lack the inner muscles with which to stand up to oppression.

When Beuys tried to address these issues he encountered a great unwillingness to face the past or to acknowledge the anxiety that was caused by the cold war, which was escalating at that time. He decided to use aesthetics to break through the silence, to overcome the an-aesthetic, the decision to numb out the pain of the past and the challenges of the present.

This meant using art to cultivate our capacity to face our vulnerability. By warming the wound, the artist might elicit a response, a change of heart. To respond in this way is to move from numbness to concern and from concern to responsibility and action. In this way, Beuys sought to cultivate an ethical aesthetic. Art becomes a kind of medicine and the free human being becomes the maker and deliverer of that medicine.

Recently when David Attenborough showed the consequences of plastic pollution in a nature documentary, there was a spontaneous movement to change some behaviours. This movement is expanding and gathering momentum and effectiveness. Such a change of heart could not have been predicted, because it stems from compassion, rather than from fear or a moral threat.

Society has cultivated an image of freedom which makes it nothing more than the freedom to consume. Individuality is seen as the right to do whatever one feels like. The current crisis of global leadership and values seems to be galvanising people to stop numbing out their anxiety and concern. What seemed like the most disastrous events have actually shaken us awake. If we can endure this vulnerable place of uncertainty, we may finally become ourselves. True selves understand freedom as self-mastery and not self-indulgence and leadership not as a hero who will come and save us but as self-leadership and agency in the world. The poet e. e. cummings says:

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but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself
To be nobody-but-yourself — in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else — means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

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If our current danger ignites the fire of urgency to become true selves, it may not defeat us. Instead, ever more selves will join together with others to play their part in building and creating a better world.