

## **ART AND MENTAL DISTURBANCE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents a perspective on psychology that relates directly to Abraham Maslow's focus upon studying the highest levels of human functioning, but is geared specifically toward a psychological study of what I refer to as the "successful creative artist" and the relationship between art and mental disturbance. The focus is upon what I consider to be "natural" as opposed to "normal," i.e. individual self-motivated creative expressions vs. widespread socially approved norms and expectations. Along the lines of Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing, what is referred to as "mental illness" is viewed from a non-judgmental perspective, but with the distinctive feature of suggesting that some people who are considered to be mentally ill may have significant creative artistic potential that can be highly therapeutic for them to engage in. To clarify and justify the main thesis, personal examples and references to current research are utilized, as well as brief descriptions of the work of Otto Rank, Ken Wilber, Howard Gardner, Jean Houston, Julia Cameron, R.D. Laing, Ayn Rand, Thomas Szasz, Ernest Schachtel, Lawrence Kubie, Marion Milner, and the phenomenon of Indigo Children.

### **THE ARTISTIC THEORY OF PSYCHOLOGY**

There has been much historical speculation regarding the relationship of art to mental disturbance, and in recent years there has been much research which lends support to these speculations; in particular see the research studies of Kay Jamison, Ruth Richards, and Nancy Andreasen (Jamison, 1993; Runco & Richards, 1997; Andreasen, 2005). But in order to truly compare the artist with the mentally disturbed person, we need to first understand the psychology of the artistic person. In this article I will explore the psychology of the artistic person and then relate my understanding of this to what in our society is described as "mental illness," which I will generally refer to as "mental disturbance," through considering the psychological and philosophical ideas based upon the work of some of the foremost thinkers of the past century, including Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Ayn Rand, Ernest Schachtel, Carl Rogers, Ken Wilber, Howard Gardner, Jean Houston, Eric Fromm, R.D. Laing, Otto Rank, Thomas Szasz, and Lawrence Kubie.

Ayn Rand describes art with exceptional clarity and beauty in her books (Rand, 1943, 1957, 1964). She writes about a human being's "sense of life," and describes art as the reproduction in the universe of one's innermost being. To Ayn Rand, art is nothing less than the rejuvenation of one's very soul. This description of art is not very different from the meaning that many people find in authentic spirituality, serving a similar function to that of God and religion (Benjamin, 2005A; Cameron, 1992; Rank, 1932). In my own experience, when I play the piano and various melodies and songs play through my fingers without my conscious awareness of what I am doing, this is a communication from a deeper part of me about what is going on within the depths of my being. And my experience of engaging in my mathematical world in the early mornings in bed, i.e. exploring various mathematical ideas and theories as part of my ongoing research in the pure mathematics field of algebraic number theory, is my way of experiencing one of life's true but little understood art forms. How similarly must the fully engaged musician, painter, poet, and scientist feel when they are immersed in their own creative endeavors. One can say that an artistic nature represents the qualities in a person that prioritizes the quest for truth and creative expression over the more earthly material desires of comfort and security (Barron, Montuori, & Barron, 1997; Rank, 1932; Schachtel, 1959; Barron, 1972), and I shall include idealistic beneficial social and ethical innovations here as well. Working musicians, successful painters, celebrated poets, famous writers, popular scientists, and pure mathematicians with mathematics professor jobs--these are the artistic natures that are renowned and respected in our society and are admired for their glorious achievements.

But what about individuals with artistic natures who seem to be fated to non-existence in terms of public approval and respect? Is it because they are not as talented as their happier fellows? Perhaps it is because they are not as lucky or do not work as hard as their happier fellows; perhaps it is a combination of factors. I believe that for some of these individuals, their artistic natures are no less real to them than they are to their more successful counterparts--and yet they end up experiencing the harsh consequences of a seemingly unfeeling society towards their predicament of not being able to express their fundamental artistic needs and potentials in the world. Could it not be that some of these individuals with artistic natures give up the struggle to allow their real selves, i.e. their intrinsic artistic talents and deep inclinations, to emerge, and consequently wind up in mental hospitals--being classified as mentally ill? There is a popular myth that all artists are a bit "crazy"--given weight to by a number of unfortunate cases of alcoholism, drug

addiction, severe depression, abusive behavior, mental hospitalization, and suicide, by some of our most well known creative geniuses: such as Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Picasso, Richard Wagner, Jackson Pollock, Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Byron, Robert Schumann etc., many of whom are described quite vividly in the books Creativity & Madness (Panter, Panter, Virshup, & Virshup, 1995) and Touched With Fire (Jamison, 1993). But my interest is as much with the unsuccessful creative artist as it is with the successful creative artist. It is only the focus upon the psychology of experience, as one finds in existential psychology, humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, and integral psychology (Jung, 1936; Rogers, 1961; Maslow, 1962; Houston, 1982; May, 1969; Wilber, 2000), where the psychologies focus upon the inner world of the person, that enables us to truly understand the deeper experience of a human being. And how often would we be amazed at the depth of human feeling and creative potential that could emerge out of our "psychotic" mental patient (Milner, 1957; Laing, 1967; Szasz, 1974; Jamison, 1993). I am not suggesting that our society should reward lesser ability in an art form for the sake of a person's mental health. This would not be fair to the successful creative artist nor to our more ordinary citizen. But along the lines of Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing (Szasz, 1974; Laing, 1967), I am strongly advocating that our society stop labeling our mental patients superficially, and begin to develop an appreciation of the artistic creative potential that many of our mental patients may possess in the depths of their being.

Thus I am proposing a new theory of psychology; not one to replace what we already have, but one to add to our storehouse of psychological knowledge. I am proposing the establishment of "The Artistic Theory of Psychology." The Artistic Theory of Psychology stresses a different focal point of comparison for our criteria of mental health and normality. I shall define the successful creative artist to be a person who has received the respect and acknowledgement for his work by a community of his peers or society-at-large, and who also is considered both psychologically and ethically to be a "well adjusted" member of his society and the greater world. For a reasonable method of determining a criteria for being psychologically and ethically well adjusted, we may utilize some of the writings of philosopher Ken Wilber, in particular his books Integral Psychology and Integral Spirituality (Wilber, 2000, 2006), as well as scales of morality, ego development, and self-actualization, as described by Lawrence Kohlberg, Jane Loevinger, and Abraham Maslow (Kohlberg, 1981; Loevinger, 1977; Maslow, 1962). For example, Kohlberg describes "universal ethical" and "universal spiritual" highest moral stages (Kohlberg,

1981), Loevinger describes "individualistic," "autonomous," and "integrated" highest ego stages (Loevinger, 1977), Maslow describes "self-esteem," "self-actualization," and "self-transcendence" in his highest stages of human functioning (Maslow, 1962), and Wilber describes "universal-global," "parenhenic" (yogic), "panentheistic" (saintly), and "always already" (sage/siddha) for his highest moral/spiritual stages (Wilber, 2000). I shall take my definition of the successful creative artist as an ideal of what is "natural," which I believe includes individualized self-motivated creative expressions, and healthy in my own society, i.e. the United States in the year 2006. I shall use the term "creative artist" to include various creative disciplines such as music, writing, painting, dance, mathematics, science, etc. as well as socially creative innovations that are beneficial to humankind, such as represented by the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa. I will follow in the footsteps of Abraham Maslow in his study of self-actualized successful people and his reliance upon mental health rather than mental illness (Maslow, 1962, 1971).

I can think of quite a few well known creative artists who have been widely acclaimed in terms of public respect and acknowledgement for their work, including: Einstein, Beethoven, Hermann Hesse, Jung, Freud, Picasso, Ayn Rand, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Bach, Mozart, Goethe, Rubens, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Rumi, Shakespeare, Newton, Gauss, Wilber, Van Gogh, Gershwin, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, etc. In all these cases, a human life was lived and a creative process unfolded. However, it is a more difficult question to determine the "well adjusted" part of my definition of successful creative artist, although this criteria seems to me to be of the utmost importance if we want to formulate artistic creation as a model of human excellence.

If our educational system were more humanistically oriented, I believe there would be tremendously more creative artists practicing their art successfully in my full definition of successful creative artist (Rogers, 1969; Kubie, 1959). It appears that the personal sensitivity and understanding available in a supportive educational environment toward a person who is artistically inclined can have a significant effect upon a person developing her artistic potential in life (Barron, 1972). But for our present purposes, I will concentrate on the "possible" psychology of the human, the God-like epitome of what a human being is capable of achieving in life (Wilber, 1995; Houston, 1982; Schachtel, 1959). For in my more extended definition of art, I consider the religious personages of Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tsu, etc. to also be creative artists, as in all likelihood they lived their lives in the experience of their innermost beings, and they all were highly creative and productive in their own lifetimes (Rank,

1932).

The creative artist knows his mission in life; it is to be who he truly is in the depths of his deepest being and to express his natural creativity through his chosen artistic mediums. With hope, the creative artist will have enough nurturing support from people to get him through his necessary battle with society and "reality"--the forces of our mundane everyday life (see Reality note), and to emerge with a creative product valued by others and a relatively healthy and balanced personality that satisfies the "well adjusted" part of my definition of the successful creative artist. An illustrative description is given of the states of mind of various young student artists in supportive educational environments by Frank Barron (Barron, 1972) which lends support to my contention that earning one's living through practicing one's art is a common obstacle for the potential young artist (see the Reality Argument section of this article).

Thus I usher in a new "normal" human being; more accurately a new "natural" human being, as I view "normal" to revolve around widespread socially approved norms and expectations. Based upon an impressive array of recent research studies as described in the collection of articles in the book Eminent Creativity, Everyday Creativity, And Health, edited by Mark Runco and Ruth Richards (Runco & Richards, 1997), there appears to be an enticing relationship between art and mental disturbance. Focusing upon the possibility that there are a number of people designated as mentally ill who have significant artistic creative potential within them, I believe that incorporating an artistic theory of psychology into our present framework of psychological theory and therapy could be a tremendously effective means of humanistically encouraging constructive and therapeutic creative artistic potential to emerge from a number of people who are mentally disturbed.

## **MENTAL DISTURBANCE VIEWED FROM AN ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVE**

To summarize what I have described as The Artistic Theory Of Psychology, the three main points are: 1) the notion of the successful creative artist at the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy of human potential; 2) there are some people labeled as mentally ill who have the potential of becoming successful creative artists; 3) a sensitive, understanding, and supportive educational environment may be conducive to enabling a mentally disturbed person with creative artistic potential to significantly develop and actualize this potential in life. A number of studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between the personal characteristics of the creative artist and in

particular the person described as bipolar or manic-depressive (Andreasen, 2005; Runco & Richards, 1997; Jamison, 1993). Ruth Richards in particular has conveyed in some of her research studies that significant creative potential may occur in people with milder forms of bipolar manic-depressive mental disturbance, i.e. a higher degree of creative potential than in a comparative group of "normal" people (Runco & Richards, 1997). But if we take the Artistic Theory Of Psychology as a temporary assumption, then our whole view of what is mentally ill must be drastically altered. Think of the meaning of the typical schizophrenic personality descriptions "alienated from reality," "inappropriate affect," "in his own world," etc. (see the most recent DSM criteria for a full listing of the characteristics which are designated to fall under the schizophrenic classification (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)). I contend that each of these phrases could be the common day-to-day experience of the creative artist.

To begin with, what does it mean to be "alienated from reality?" From the artistic model, this phrase may have some positive and constructive meanings. For one, it could mean to not be unconsciously tied to a mediocre and soul destroying day-to-day existence, where a person is earning her living by doing tasks she has little or no interest in, while ignoring her true desires and passions in life. This point is emphasized in the work of Ernest Schachtel (Schachtel, 1959) who was strongly influenced by the work of Eric Fromm (Fromm, 1955, 1956). Schachtel distinguishes between "embeddedness-affect" and "activity-affect," as he describes embeddedness-affect as "completely accepting the closed pattern institutionalized in the particular culture or cultural subgroup in which the individual is born and in which he is living" (Schachtel, 1959, pg. 83) and activity-affect as "active coping with a tension or active relating to the environment" (Schachtel, 1959, pg. 29). Schachtel also distinguishes between "autocentric" and "allocentric" perceptions, as he describes autocentric perception as involving "a close relation, amounting to a fusion, between sensory quality and pleasure-unpleasure feelings" (Schachtel, 1959, pg. 83) and allocentric perception as "one of profound interest in the object, and complete openness and receptivity toward it, a full turning toward the object which makes possible the direct encounter with it and not merely a quick registration of its familiar features according to ready labels" (Schachtel, 1959, pgs. 220-221). Furthermore, Schachtel describes the concept of "secondary autocentricity" as being "in a closed pattern of life, by which man seeks to re-establish something akin to the security of the womb *after* the object world has emerged for him in the exploratory play and learning of childhood" (Schachtel, 1959, pg. 176). It is thus apparent that

Schachtel is emphasizing what I allude to about the commonly experienced mediocrity of day-to-day existence and our economic necessity of animal survival, which I refer to as "Reality" (see Reality note and The Reality Argument section).

In the context of my definition, Reality is concerned primarily with money; i.e. accumulating the necessary means to buy one's food and shelter one's body. Although these requirements are absolutely essential for any kind of life at all, along with Schachtel (Schachtel, 1959) I believe that based upon the dire economic conditions that much of our world lives in, the majority of humankind feeds themselves and shelters their bodies at the expense of their very souls. The exception to this is the successful creative artist. For the successful creative artist (in my above definition, which I assume for the remainder of this article unless otherwise noted) feeds both her body and her soul. She earns a living, but does it while developing her own creativity. The successful creative artist is well integrated into his society, but he is also a fully functioning human being. This experience of earning a living while developing your deepest creative potential is the highest mode of human existence from my present perspective; it can also represent the "self-actualized" human being in Maslow's terminology (Maslow, 1962, 1971), the vision logic and higher states of consciousness in Wilber's terminology (Wilber, 1980, 1995, 2000, 2006), the artist who achieves a balanced and "renunciate" view of life in Otto Rank's terminology (Rank, 1932), and the second and third tiers in Spiral Dynamics terminology (Beck & Cowan, 1996). But if we look at the vast majority of human beings, we find the self-actualized person to be a very rare phenomenon (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Rather, we find most people living under the rule of "reality," and a few people "alienated" from reality. This can also be interpreted in the language of Ken Wilber's Integral Philosophy and the related ideas of Spiral Dynamics, as the transition into higher levels of consciousness from the lower mythic level of consciousness (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Wilber, 1980, 1995, 2000, 2006). This brings us into another classic schizophrenic personality description: inappropriate affect.

How often in my own life have I had to suffer the experience of being perceived to be in "inappropriate affect." I think back to the various social situations I have been in: parties, pot-luck dinners, weddings, social get-togethers, holiday celebrations, etc., and I think about all the feelings I have had which were "different" from the seemingly jolly fun-loving people surrounding me. I believe that the way of handling this experience of feeling "different" in social situations is very critical in regard to whether or not someone gets labeled as being sensitive, creative, or as having

"inappropriate affect."

It is possible to come from a perspective of having self-confidence in your abilities and your feelings, knowing that you cannot relate to this particular social situation because you are "you," and that it is O.K. to feel this way. I have gradually learned how to respond to uncomfortable social situations more in this way as I have entered my middle age years, as I have started to feel more successful in life. I am generally labeled as being sensitive and creative, and not as mentally ill. But many foreigners to the social graces are not as fortunate as I have become, and may not have any kind of loving support when they come home from their social get-togethers. They may begin to see themselves as "below" other people, as unable to have fun and make friends, and they may internalize the messages they sense about themselves from other people--that they are "different," that they are "abnormal." This is very convincingly portrayed in the descriptions of the introverted personality and of the "loner" in the books Party Of One by Anneli Rufus and The Introvert Advantage by Marti Olsen Laney (Rufus, 2003; Laney, 2002). Once a person believes he is abnormal, it may be only a matter of time before he does indeed exhibit abnormal behavior. The premise that our experiences follow from our beliefs is quite dominant in a variety of current new age circles and spiritual organizations, ranging from Wayne Dyer (Dyer, 1997) to Neale Donald Walsch, founder of Conversations With God (Walsch, 1995, 1997, 1998; Benjamin, 2005A) to Harry Palmer, founder of Avatar (Palmer, 1994; Benjamin, 2005A). Perhaps this form of the self-fulfilling prophesy results in the at risk potential creative artist's alienation from the social graces becoming more bizarre and extensive, until she is no longer able to function in society and must be put in a mental institution and labeled as having "inappropriate affect" (Szasz, 1974, 1998, 2004).

Of-course this picture is not meant to describe all patients in mental institutions, but I do believe that this scenario does accurately describe the essential difficulties of some of our creative artists who end up in mental institutions, especially those involved in the creative arts of poetry, fiction and play writing, and composing music (Andreasen, 2005; Runco & Richards, 1997; Jamison, 1993). Often the alienated person will indeed exhibit emotions that have nothing to do with the external situation--such as laugh at sad events and cry at happy events. But I contend that by this point he is likely to be already past the stage where his feelings could be accepted as different from others but as still legitimate. Although a common part of the description of a schizophrenic involves the inappropriate affect reaching the stage of extensive laughter and giggles that have no relation to anything happening in her



immediate environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), I believe that in a number of cases this stage of inappropriate affect is the result of a potentially creative and artistic person not possessing enough self-confidence in her feelings to accept who she is and live with her differences from her fellows in society.

Lastly we must examine the most common of all the descriptions of the psychotic person, which is that the psychotic lives "in his own world." Again, we may look at the successful creative artist for a justifiable comparison. We could choose the novelist, the musician, the painter, the pure mathematician, and many other examples. Lets take the novelist--as almost everybody has at least at one time in their lives been so caught up in a good novel that they lost track of their own lives until they finished reading the story. If you have ever had this experience of being so lost in a novel that the characters became as real to you as the characters in your own life, then try to think of what it must have been like for the writer of this novel. Try to think of how lost this writer must have been in his own novel; in all those fascinating and magnificent characters whom he has created for your reading pleasure. Think about how he must have been living with these characters day and night--for years. Can you conclude otherwise than that your admired novelist lived in his own very private world? I can vouch for the likelihood of the novelist living in his own private world, from my experience of writing my semi-autobiographical novel 25 years ago (Benjamin, 2005B). I also know that this has been the experience my son Jeremy continually has during his immersion in writing his own novels. Certainly you will not disagree that the creative artist has a whole world that is very real and special to her, that she keeps all to herself--until she is ready to share it with others (Barron, Montuori, & Barron, 1997; Jamison, 1993; Milner, 1957). But now this private world is labeled by our American society as a good thing, as something artistic and creative. While in the case of our unfortunate psychotic, living in his own world is labeled by our American society as "sick" and "bad." I believe that a crucial difference is the creative and artistic expression and communication of one's private world to others, plus the ability to move in and out of one's private world into the world of external reality (Rank, 1932; Kubie, 1958; Jamison, 1993; Runco & Richards, 1997). This can also be described in terms of "ego strength" (Barron, 1969; Eysenck, 1994) and "resilience" (Flach, 1988), which generally relates to possessing an ability to deal successfully with the stresses in life that commonly trigger emotional and behavioral disorders.

Another comparison which we can make between the mentally disturbed person and the creative artist involves the area of religion. It has been frequently noted

that people in mental hospitals often seem to be preoccupied with the meaning of life and with God--in a different kind of way from the more "normal" people (see my previous distinction between "natural" and "normal") in the bulk of our society (Rank, 1932). Many "normal" people go to church every Sunday morning, but they are not necessarily experiencing the kind of authentic spirituality which I believe is at the basis of the widespread interest in exploring new age spiritual organizations and Eastern religions over the past three or four decades (Benjamin, 2005A; Robbins & Anthony, 1981; Needleman, 1970). For me personally, religion and God are synonymous with what I refer to as authentic spirituality, which has to do with the wider Self experience (see Self note); i.e. with a deep sense of oneness with the universe, described by Maslow as a "peak experience" (Maslow, 1962) and by Wilber as a trans-rational level of consciousness (Wilber, 1980, 1995, 2000, 2006).

How does one attain this kind of peak experience or trans-rational level of consciousness? And how does one extend this kind of peak experience over time into a more lasting "plateau experience" which is actually the meaning behind Wilber's distinction between "states" and "levels" (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Wilber, 1980, 1995, 2000, 2006). Well, there's no exact formula, but the only way I know of is to be very true to your own deepest Self for a long time and then essentially to leave it to the fate of the universe. In other words, there is a delicate balance between putting intention into actualizing your creative abilities and "going with the flow," knowing when it is time to flexibly respond to the events and circumstances taking place in your life.

And who is it in life that is being true to their deepest Selves in this way? To my mind, a wonderful illustration of being true to one's deepest self is given by the successful creative artist; the person who loves life too dearly to ever compromise the precious natural talents and abilities that are in him, and who has received significant respect and acknowledgement from others for his artistic creations, while he is considered to be a well adjusted member of his society and world.

I believe that in a number of cases the mentally disturbed person may develop from the unsuccessful creative artist who is stuck at a job she does not feel fulfilled at in order to support herself in day-to-day reality. The feeling of not doing what one loves to do and what one feels compelled to do, could very well lead to a severe depression and inability to function in life. So perhaps some of these unfortunate victims of their own unactualized artistic potential have destroyed their Selves rather than allow their Selves to work for the maintenance of their alienated society. There are many poignant descriptions of this in Kay Jamison's book [Touched With Fire](#)

(Jamison, 1993) which resulted in a number of highly creative people having been committed to mental hospitals before (as well as after) they achieved public acknowledgment for their artistic creations, and also some who committed suicide. In these cases I see a bona-fide sacrifice of the deepest Self; a courageous refusal to be what their deepest Self knows it must never be. Part of the role of the psychotherapist should be to discover where a person fits the above description, and to work on unleashing this person's artistic potential, helping the person to understand that she can spend much time developing her art, and that it is worth it to preserve her life thru working in society while she strives to combine her work and art.

The therapeutic value of art is well known to all art therapists, and is movingly illustrated in the free style drawings of Elizabeth Layton (Panter, Panter, Virshup, & Virshup, 1995) as well as Marion Milner (Milner, 1957). Lawrence Kubie strongly argues against the notion that "madness" in the form of unconscious conflicts is a necessary ingredient for artistic creation, as he focuses instead upon the natural creative associations in "pre-conscious" mental activity (Kubie, 1958). However, I believe that many people have traded materialistic comfort and security for the experience of their deepest Selves, and that this is a very serious violation of real life (Da Free John, 1980). For this violation he is rewarded with the comforts of material security, but he all too often spends his life in non-awareness of his real Self, as Schachtel describes thru his concept of secondary autocentricity (Schachtel, 1959).

And we thus see from the perspective of the artistic model of mental disturbance that the foundation of the traditional medical model of mental illness is severely lacking, as has been consistently described for the past 30 years by Thomas Szasz (Szasz, 1974, 1998, 2004). The artistic model of mental disturbance is one that has significant philosophical and psychological opposition to the traditional medical model, and to the status quo of society. For if one does not accept what is considered to be normal in society as any kind of ideal, then how can one accept what is considered to be "abnormal" in society as breaking from this false ideal? (Laing, 1967; Fromm, 1955). In regard to our potential creative artists who no longer seem able to work their way through the many obstacles they have encountered in life, I am not saying that everybody in a mental hospital is a frustrated creative artist. What I am saying is that some people in mental hospitals may very well be superficially diagnosed as psychotic and schizophrenic, and have a depth of untapped creative artistic potential inside of them (Laing, 1967; Szasz, 1974; Vice, 1992). The above mentioned recent research studies by Ruth Richards

lends support to the theory that significant creative potential may occur in people with milder forms of bipolar manic-depressive tendencies (Runco & Richards, 1997). The creative artistic potential of some of these people with bipolar manic-depressive tendencies may be far more than that of the more ordinary "normal" person who is visiting them and of the hospital staff member who is giving them their medications. I believe that this creative artistic potential in many cases could still be actualized in the world, if the necessary self-discipline, self-confidence, and self-understanding could be developed in the context of a nurturing and supportive social atmosphere. And who are best suited to be the teachers of these potential creative artists?

I see humanistic education, based upon the psychology foundations of Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1961, 1969) as the middle ground that can potentially transform the mentally disturbed person into the successful creative artist. On a small scale, I had experimented at my community learning center in the 1970s with offering various classes in a wide range of subjects to the general public for no credit or external reinforcement, only for the intrinsic joy of learning (Benjamin, 2005B). A few of my mental health clients took some of my classes, including Nutrition & Health, Auto Mechanics, Silk Screening, and Sign Language. The results were quite positive, and led me to believe that if mental health clients could spend a period of time primarily learning things of interest to them without any external pressures, then the therapeutic value that they receive could be tremendous (Benjamin, 2005B). At the present time I am facilitating an artists' support group that has been meeting monthly for the past nine months, and it has been gratifying to me to see how some of the artistically creative but frustrated people who attend my meetings receive this same kind of therapeutic benefit. If my assumption that inside many mentally disturbed human beings lies a dormant creative artistic potential is correct, then what is needed is some kind of authentic stimulation to help unleash this potential. I believe that the realness, openness, and joyfulness of intrinsically motivated humanistic education, which can be utilized either separately or in conjunction with an appropriate psychotherapy, is something that is capable of helping someone discover his true nature and desires. However, it is very important to find teachers and facilitators who are both creative artists in their own fields as well as being talented and sensitive humanistic educators.

The artistic person needs to go through a journey of "finding herself." She must go through an experience where she comes to terms with her real or deepest level Self, and learns what her desires, ambitions, and connections to life truly are. Marion Milner offers a revealing and in-depth portrayal of examining her artistic and

therapeutic personal process in her "free drawings" (Milner, 1957); this can also be seen from the self reflective drawings of Elizabeth Layton (Panter, Panter, Virshup, & Virshup, 1995). Indeed, much of the beautiful and personal deepest artistic disclosures in poetry, painting, and other artistic mediums have had this very same therapeutic value to the creative artist (Jamison, 1993). In my own recent experience I have seen the potential benefits and value of igniting the spark of mathematical creativity in children who are living in a mental hospital, through engaging them in my Numberama program (Benjamin, 1993). I am currently taking my Numberama program into retirement homes to work with senior citizens, while I am conducting classical piano and old song sing-along programs in a variety of senior citizen settings inclusive of Alzheimer units. While utilizing mathematics as an art form may be rather innovative in this capacity, there has been widespread interest in using the more common forms of art, music, and dance therapy in various hospital and mental health settings (see for example Tufts Community Health & Nutrition Letter, 2001).

There is no easy way to stimulate the creative artistic potential in people that have become mentally disturbed for any number of reasons, but I believe that a necessary requirement for this to happen is space, lack of external pressures, and gentle encouragement. These conditions are all well provided for in a "Rogerian" teaching atmosphere (Rogers, 1969). I think that if we were to combine Carl Rogers' humanistic teaching and counseling philosophy with R.D. Laing's open space and freedom philosophy and Stanislav Grof's Spiritual Emergence philosophy (Laing, 1969; Rogers, 1961, 1969; Grof, 1985, 1989), we would get a wonderful educational environment to nurture the artistic potential in our mental health clients. To focus upon a positive developing learning atmosphere where people are developing their creative talents and abilities is, in my opinion, a prime ingredient of fostering mental health for anyone.

### **THE REALITY ARGUMENT**

Otto Rank discusses the universal conflict of the artist between his art and his life (Rank, 1932), Ernest Schachtel focuses upon his concept of secondary aut centrality to signify the mundane growth impeding security temptation that occurs in the midst of ordinary adult life (Schachtel, 1959), and Frank Barron illustrates how in many young student artists in supportive artistic educational environments there is already a strong awareness of the impending difficulties and obstacles the artist will need to

face in order to make his living in the world through practicing his art (Barron,1972). It seems to me that nearly every successful creative artist has at one time or another in her life had to face up to my version of these ideas from Rank, Schachtel, and Barron, which I refer to as "The Reality Argument." It goes something like this.

"Life is hard knocks. You need food, clothing, and a roof over your head. You can't go fighting the system. You go where the jobs are--where you can make the most money. Get yourself a good secure job and save up for a down payment on a house. Money in the bank, a second car, saving up to put the kids through college, planning your retirement; these are the things you have to start thinking about. Knowing you're covered in case of injury, sickness, death; these necessities cannot be avoided either. Emergencies spring up all around us, and we must be prepared. Sure there is much wrong with the world--but you're not going to change it, so you might as well accept reality. Cut your hair, buy a suit, and polish up your resume'. Say the right things, act enthusiastic but not too enthusiastic, and don't dare question your employer's authenticity--no matter what you might think. For remember that your family is depending upon you; you are the breadwinner, and if you decide to go on some lark like "finding yourself," what will become of them? Surely you have a sense of responsibility towards those you love. So do your duty, my friend, and take your place in the world of work. Practice your art in your own spare time; it can be a nice relaxing hobby. But stop trying to make your living out of selling your own paintings. It just is not feasible in today's world. I gave up my dream 30 years ago, and it wasn't easy--but I did it just like everyone else did it. And now it is your turn to do it."

The above description I have given of The Reality Argument is painfully familiar to me from my own young adulthood. I believe The Reality Argument is in effect a social psychological principle which represents the tremendous odds stacked against the phenomenon of the successful creative artist. The young painter, writer, musician, with the glimpse of fire and intensity in his eyes, all too often turns into the lackadaisical middle-aged person of society with his "comfortable" suburban home complete with briefcase, pot belly, and secretary. Just what is it that I am trying to say here? In my middle twenties I promised myself that I would learn new things every day, developing my innate abilities in mathematics, music, and philosophy. And how extremely difficult it has been for me to retain my ambitious plan of life, for The Reality Argument has often challenged me to my very limits of endurance.

But I have been fortunate to have within me an entity which I call "the math

teacher," that has enabled me to acquire my share of ego strength (Barron, 1969). The "math teacher" can go into his society, take out his Ph.D., show off an attractive resume' when needed, cite his twenty plus years of being a mathematics professor, and gain the respect and admiration of the "normal" segments of his society. And the "math teacher" can even introduce some innovative mathematics teaching practices into the institution, such as Recreational Number Theory via [Numberama](#) (Benjamin, 1993), and self-paced competency-based mathematics education. Then the math teacher can go home and transcend his role, and once again immerse himself in his art. And The Reality Argument has thereby been fed, without seriously injuring either the artist or society, in spite of the unpleasantness and stress of having to work through the pressures of the teaching and supervision parts of the job that may come with the math teacher territory. But all things considered, thank-goodness for the "math teacher." However, all too few of our potential creative artists have a "math teacher" in them. I fear that for the vast majority of our potential creative artists, The Reality Argument has killed off their deeper potential creative artist selves long before they turned 30. Once again I look inside our mental institutions for some of the victims of destruction of The Reality Argument. I look for the victims who were either unable or unwilling to take their places in the world that I believe is all too full of requirements, compromise, and mediocrity. I look with wide open eyes for pure human feeling and beauty. I an artist want to reach out to other potential artists and teach them how to cultivate a "math teacher" in them so that they too can confront The Reality Argument.

But to try on a different point of view, now that we have examined the intensely destructive effects that The Reality Argument can have on the potential successful creative artist, let us view reality from another perspective. Is reality necessarily all that bad? This is a question that my ex-wife Diane and I had continually discussed throughout our 15 year marriage, and that my significant other Dorothy and I have been discussing as well. To both Diane and Dorothy, reality is not nearly as alienating as it is to me. They can live in both worlds comfortably, the artistic world and the reality world; for them, unlike me, these two worlds are essentially one big harmonious world. Sometimes I marvel at their flexibility and adaptability, and I envy both of them. Just as Diane helped me to accept "reality" and I helped her to accept "non-reality," Dorothy helps me to come to terms with the customs and religious holidays in our society through making our own rituals and personal ways of celebrating, while I open her up to the art forms of music and dance, and taking more leisure time from all her reality work activities. Sometimes I hate reality, and

sometimes I am amused by it. Sometimes I really do like the status and respect I receive from others--both students and colleagues. Sometimes I even like getting dressed up and trying to look "nice," like when I am going ballroom dancing with Dorothy.

According to Otto Rank (Rank, 1932), the successful creative artist finds himself in the rather surprising situation of living on the outskirts of society for quite some time, only to eventually be responsible for ushering in a whole new perspective or movement that becomes a dominant mode in the society in which he lives (we are here using Rank's perspective of the successful creative artist). This viewpoint of the successful creative artist is masterfully portrayed by Ayn Rand in her novels, most especially in The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged (Rand, 1943, 1957). In my own present circumstances, I wonder if I will be able to live up to Rank's perspective of the successful creative artist, as I have recently announced my retirement from the college in which I have been a mathematics professor for over 20 years. I have chosen to finally give myself the opportunity to truly actualize my philosophy in the world, through my writings as well as through my work with people in what I refer to as a "natural dimension" of teaching and counseling and music, and this is my own calling in life--to become a successful creative artist (Benjamin, 2005B). At any rate, we see that The Reality Argument can be viewed from different perspectives, but I believe that virtually every creative artist does need to confront The Reality Argument in one way or another in order to preserve her art and real Self, and to eventually become a successful creative artist.

### **SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND THE SUCCESSFUL CREATIVE ARTIST**

"Self-Actualization" is a term that became prominent in humanistic and existential psychology in the 1960s largely through the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1962, 1971; Rogers, 1961, 1969). Maslow (1962, 1971) describes both his visions and his research in regard to what he views as the nature of the highest level possible human being. Ken Wilber develops these ideas even further in many of his books (Wilber, 1980, 1995, 2000, 2006), brilliantly combining both Eastern spirituality and Western psychology to formulate a series of developmental stages from the lowest to the highest realms of the potential of a human being. But in Maslow's initial work, the crisscrosses with religion and mystical experience are evident in people whom he refers to as "self-actualizers" (Maslow, 1962, 1971; Carkhuff, 1981). The people whom I am admiring and



labeling to be successful creative artists are essentially the same people whom Maslow and Wilber have been studying and analyzing. These are also the same people who Otto Rank was writing about in the context of the "modern artist" (Rank, 1932), Ernest Schachtel was focusing upon in his concepts of "activity-affect" and "allocentric perception" (Schachtel, 1959), Lawrence Kubie was claiming are truly creative by allowing their "pre-conscious" mental processes to emerge (Kubie, 1958), and Frank Barron has studied in the context of young student artists (Barron, 1972). I believe that we are all studying the same phenomenon: human excellence in terms of artistic, creative, and spiritual potential. The basic framework I am offering for the phenomenon of the successful creative artist can be traced back at least as far as Carl Jung and his theory of individuation (Jung, 1936, 1961). In more recent times there is much overlap between creative artistic potential and the multiple intelligences theory of Howard Gardner (Gardner, 1983).

In Howard Gardner's 1983 groundbreaking book Frames Of Mind (Gardner, 1983), he posits a number of self-contained "intelligences," in addition to the dominant cognitive intelligence that our society generally focuses upon. These intelligences include linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, introspective, and social. The major point of Gardner's work is that the term "intelligence" is a far broader concept than the narrowly defined verbal and analytical limitations generally assigned to it. "Intelligence" is expressed through the domains of creative writing, musical ability, artistic talent, athletic giftedness, inner awareness, and social awareness. The theory of multiple intelligences directly reinforces the emphasis I have been placing upon the creative arts. Through society's ignoring of the rich array of multiple intelligences inherent in human beings, the natural artistic talents of individuals may also very well be ignored. It would be a fascinating area of research to explore mental disturbance from the perspective of these multiple intelligences. In other words, what kinds of undeveloped intelligences potential did people have before they took on the label of being mentally ill? Or even more importantly, what kinds of undeveloped intelligences potential do people have who are currently designated as mentally ill? The continuous and ongoing impact of Thomas Szasz since his radically influential book The Myth Of Mental Illness came out in 1974 (Szasz, 1974, 1998, 2004) emphasizes that society may very well be labeling people as mentally ill in many cases without justification.

Along the lines of multiple intelligences, the phenomenon known as "Indigo Children" has been recently gaining in public awareness and recognition, though there is certainly a divergence of views held in regard to the claimed gifted nature of

these children. The term "Indigo Children" was coined in the 1980s in the context of parapsychology and the discovery of children who appeared to have highly developed psychic abilities, but who often were labeled as "autistic" (Day & Gale, 2004A). These children were generally highly creative and extremely sensitive to feelings and "vibrations," both in their immediate environment as well as in faraway places, sometimes thousands of miles away. This phenomenon quite recently appeared in a movie entitled "Indigo Children," starring Neale Donald Walsch, the founder of Conversations With God (Walsch, 1995, 1997, 1998). But what I find especially interesting and relevant to my theory of art and mental disturbance, is that these Indigo children are often simultaneously living in the world of artistic creativity as well as in the world of mental disturbance. Their exceptional artistic and creative and psychic abilities have been well documented, and their social challenges and difficulties are also common knowledge (Day & Gale, 2004; Carroll & Tober, 1999). A number of alternative schools and summer camps have been recently established to nurture the artistic potential of these children while helping them to develop the necessary social skills to function effectively in their societies (Day & Gale, 2004). It leaves one to speculate how many children who have been diagnosed as "autistic" are actually Indigo children in disguise, having the potential to fully blossom in an optimal learning environment for them? This kind of relationship between artistic creativity and intra-psychic processes can be seen in particular detail in Marion Milner's self-revealing book, "On Not Being Able To Paint," describing her "free drawings" (Milner, 1957), as well as from the diverse illustrations of the lives and artistic creative processes of a number of well known creative artists portrayed in the books Creators On Creating (Barron, Montuori, & Barron, 1997), Creativity And Madness (Panter, Panter, Virshup, & Vishup, 1995), and Touched with Fire (Jamison, 1993). Once again there appears to be an important but delicate relationship between the worlds of art and mental disturbance.

Perhaps the most concrete illustration of the world of the potential creative artist, which goes hand in hand with the world of the self-actualized person, is given by Julia Cameron in her book The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path To Higher Creativity (Cameron, 1992). In this book Cameron describes the nuts and bolts of the creative artistic process, offering much inspiration and advice to anyone who wants to embark upon the path of the creative artist. A constant theme of the book is that problems in life, both mental and physical, often develop when a person is not living out her artistic potential. This theme is at the cornerstone of my whole philosophy of art and mental disturbance (Benjamin, 2005B) and is at the basis of my Artistic Theory Of

Psychology (Benjamin, 2006). Cameron describes the close connection between artistic creativity and authentic spirituality, as she very much associates artistic creativity with a spiritual force that goes beyond our conscious awareness (Cameron, 1992), a theme which I have discussed in this article. The connection between artistic creativity and spirituality & religion has been studied from an extensive historical perspective earlier in the century by Otto Rank (Rank, 1932). One can also find an art form in spirituality in the context of love and sexuality; in particular from the writings of John Welwood (Welwood, 1997), David Deida (Deida, 2002), and from Eric Fromm's highly influential book in the 1950s: The Art Of Loving (Fromm, 1956).

Perhaps the world's most currently active and successful spokesperson for the enhancement of artistic creative abilities in all kinds of people, helping to move people onto the path of self-actualization, is Jean Houston. Houston has worked personally with hundreds of thousands of people all over the world in a diversity of cultures, teaching people to incorporate myths into their own personal lives (Houston, 1982, 1996). In her extensive workshops she shows people how they can significantly extend all their artistic "intelligences," from kinesthetic to linguistic to musical to spatial to cognitive, etc. (Houston, 1982, 1996). Jean Houston is certainly a larger than life human being, and I consider her to be a successful creative artist in the context of artistic philosophy, as she is not only widely acknowledged as an innovator and leader in her art form, but she also appears to be extremely well adjusted to both her society and her extended world. Houston has made it her life's mission to awaken and kindle the dormant artistic potential of as many people in the world as she is able to reach. Although her general focus is upon the highest spectrum of human possibilities, her workshops are open to the public and may very well be attended by people with significant mental health challenges. Her work is an exemplary model of the potential that an artistic human being can achieve in life, and along with Julia Cameron she is serving as a catalyst for the emergence of the successful creative artist in the context of the self-actualized person.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, there appears to be an enticing relationship between the worlds of art and mental disturbance, although in spite of the large amount of recent research in this area we still do not know exactly what this relationship is. Focusing upon the possibility that there are a number of people designated as mentally ill who have significant artistic creative potential within them, I believe that incorporating an

artistic theory of psychology into our present storehouse of psychological theory and therapy, as I have described in this article, could be a tremendously effective means of humanistically encouraging this creative artistic potential to emerge from some people who are considered to be mentally ill. The Artistic Theory Of Psychology places the successful creative artist (in the way I have defined this term) in the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy, and suggests that some people who are mentally disturbed may have significant creative artistic potential within them that could be actualized through the nurturance of a sensitive, supportive, and understanding educational environment.

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Benjamin, E. (2005B). *Art and mental illness*. Swanville, Maine: Natural Dimension Publications (available by contacting the author at [ben496@prexar.com](mailto:ben496@prexar.com)). NOTE: This book includes excerpts from my unpublished semi-autobiographical novel, *The Maturation Of Walter Goldman*, and excerpts from my unpublished book of personal and philosophical essays, *Natural Dimension*. It also includes a description of my preliminary mental health program in Massachusetts in 1980 thru my community learning center, Natural Dimension

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Objectivism in her non-fiction books, such as in her book The Virtue Of Selfishness.

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