

*Earth Palette from Finding Beauty in a Fractured World series, Nancy Adler, 2015*

## Finding Beauty in a Fractured World: Art Inspires Leaders—Leaders Change the World

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*What we cannot comprehend by analysis,  
we become aware of in awe.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel (2001: 3)

In the midst of chaos, how do we see beauty? Surrounded by turbulence, how do we discover simplicity? Living together on one planet, how do we simultaneously celebrate our collective humanity and the unique resonance of each of our individual voices? Given the power of analytic understanding—driven as it is to claim life as *knowable*—how do we re-recognize the *unknowable*? Knowing all that we know, how do we surrender to the humility it takes to stand in awe of life's mysteries?

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This essay is based on my work as an artist and management scholar, including my Artist Statement, multiple keynote addresses, the programs from my exhibitions at The Banff Centre and in Montreal, and designs from many of my management seminars. I would like to thank the TD Fund for Leadership, McGill University, and The Banff Centre for their generous support of my work integrating the arts and leadership.

Allowing a painting to be born is to stand in awe of one of life's most beautiful mysteries. Invited by the blank paper, my best intentions enter into a dance with uncontrollable coincidence. Neither the process nor the resulting art is ever completely defined. Which way will the colors run? What surprises will the ink reveal? I purposely work primarily with water-based media and monotype print techniques as there is never any illusion that I control the process or the outcome. I enter the dance; paintings and monotype prints emerge. Creation—whether on a canvas of words, visual images, organizational spaces, or the world's stage—is about giving birth to the possibilities inherent in mystery.

As an artist and a global leadership scholar, management consultant, and educator, I draw inspiration from many of the world's most influential artistic and societal leaders, including

Marc Chagall. Many of Chagall's contemporaries rejected him for refusing the avant-garde's invitation to create art for art's sake, dismissing him as a colorful painter whose art simply conveyed his *joie de vivre*. Years later, in a major twenty-first-century retrospective,<sup>1</sup> critics no longer wrote him off but, rather, acclaimed his paintings' striking humanity and offered him their highest praise: "Marc Chagall gave this nihilist century a worthy concept: hope" (Riding, 2003). Art, and artistic processes, have the power not only to offer us hope but to guide us in rediscovering and creating beauty in our fractured world. Art does not dismiss science but, rather, partners with all ways of knowing to go beyond what any one approach can produce on its own.<sup>2</sup>

I didn't begin painting with a plan to integrate my art into my management world. Far from it. Best described as two solitudes, I purposely kept my art and management worlds completely separate, not even allowing my artist friends to know that I was an international management professor. My agreement with the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, when they invited me to be a guest artist with them in Vancouver for a half year, was that no one would know my other identity. Luckily, they agreed, but requested that, at the end of my time at Emily Carr, I give a lecture to the entire artist community. That lecture, "The Artist As Leader, Leader As Artist," was the first time I realized the profound overlap between my two worlds.<sup>3</sup> It was then that I began to understand that art was giving me a process and a vocabulary to talk about what had become most important to me as a management professor. Art was allowing me to support people—myself included—in bringing beauty into the world. Following the Emily Carr talk, I stopped hiding in my two solitudes and began going public with what has since become known as leadership artistry. That said, to this day I have never gone to the studio thinking about leadership, management, or that I am a professor. I'm simply

drawn to painting and to making art; I paint because I am excited to discover what will be born.

### IN THESE UGLY TIMES, THE ONLY TRUE PROTEST IS BEAUTY

*When I am working on a problem,  
I never think about beauty.  
I think of only how to solve the problem.  
But when I have finished, if the solution  
is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.*

Buckminster Fuller, Architect,  
Designer, Futurist

After painting for a decade, I first heard singer and songwriter Phil Ochs' prescient plea, "In these ugly times, the only true protest is beauty." I knew immediately that he had captured a truth that brought my artist and leadership worlds together—a truth I had sensed but never articulated. Only then did I more consciously begin asking the questions that previously had remained within me, unvoiced as I traveled between my two solitudes. Initially, they were conversations I held privately with myself within the pages of my journal. Only later, having gained confidence in what was emerging, did I begin to bring the same questions and conversations out into the world in my writing, speaking, and teaching. What follows offers a glimpse at those conversations, held with both artists and leaders.

### FINDING BEAUTY IN A FRACTURED WORLD

*Beauty will save the world.*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

When faced with the uncertainty, calamity, and crises that define twenty-first-century society, how can we have the audacity to even consider seeking beauty, let alone actually find it? Not by avoiding or denying reality but, rather, by seeing reality accurately, yet differently, and then transforming it. Art offers a unique perspective with which to confront the chaos and unpredictability that surround us. Inherent in the artist's craft are distinctive approaches for transforming seeming disasters back into beauty. Perhaps not surprisingly, research has documented that companies that markedly outperform their

<sup>1</sup> This was an exhibition—"Chagall: Known and Unknown"—of 180 of the artist's works at the Grand Palais in Paris, March 14 to June 23, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Originally written as an Artist Statement, an earlier version of the opening paragraph first accompanied my paintings at the *Aqua13* exhibition in Montreal, curated by Heather Midori Yamada, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The Emily Carr Institute for Art and Design talk, to an audience of artists, later evolved into a talk for managers (see Adler, 2006).

peers are particularly good at transforming “bad luck” into beauty, even though in management such “beauty” often disguises itself under the label of “opportunity” (Collins & Hansen, 2011a,b). Such outlier companies consistently produce outstanding results no matter what type of luck befalls them—not simply from good luck but, equally consistently, from bad luck. Art challenges each of us, whether as thought leaders or as societal leaders, whether as individuals or as CEOs, to invoke beauty, not by blinding ourselves to reality but by rediscovering how to see reality. Art invites us, as leaders in any domain, to open our eyes and our minds to the beauty camouflaged within everyday ordinariness and to transform what is back into what could be.

#### THE 20TH CENTURY: A LONG EXPERIMENT IN UGLINESS<sup>4</sup>

*Almost always, the creative minority  
has made the world better.*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

While in residence as an artist at The Banff Centre, I was amazed once again by the ever-changing beauty of the Canadian Rockies, and was reminded of the words “*We walk sightless*



<sup>4</sup> I initially developed the ideas presented here for a keynote celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the IEDC Bled School of Management in Slovenia, October 2011 (see Mirvis, 2011), and later expanded them for a keynote given to a global audience at the PRME (Principles of Responsible Management Education) Conference, September 2013, Bled, Slovenia.

*among miracles.*” Most of us recognize the source, given that it is rooted in a 5000-year-old tradition. The proclamation that “we walk sightless among miracles” comes from the Bible, from the opening pages of Genesis, and is thus rooted in all three of the Abrahamic religions that have so profoundly shaped history and culture. Nonetheless, I, along with many others, remain strangely blind not only to beauty but to the very existence of the miracles that the world most needs in order to create the future that each of us so fervently desires, not just for our own children but for all the world’s children. As scholars, executives, and leaders, we have become expert at seeing only that which can already be explained, while having allowed our skills at seeing that which is desired, but beyond our current comprehension, to atrophy. We are rejected as unprofessional when we bring our belief in artistry and miracles to the table along with our consummate analytical skills.

When I and others think about the condition of global society and the planet in these opening decades of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves relegated to the results of the twentieth century’s long experiment in ugliness. Whether we look at the incessant wars and lack of peace or at the ecological disasters, whether we look at income inequality-induced poverty or at the startling incidence of curable diseases, the evidence of ugliness assaults our senses and our sensibility. How do we lead when confronted with such ugliness? The answer, endlessly repeated but not yet embraced, is by reclaiming our innate ability to see, to care, and to believe that what seems impossible, while not probable, may, in fact, be achievable.<sup>5</sup>

Could it be that the leadership approaches we can learn from artists offer us the potential to transform the world’s ugliness back into beauty (Adler, 2011; Mandell, 2010, 2015)? Could artistic perspectives and processes support leaders in transforming recessions back into vibrant economies, environmental disasters back into flourishing ecologies, and poverty back into prosperity? Could artistic perspectives transform our conceptualizations and research paradigms, rendering the impossible a bit less improbable? The

<sup>5</sup> For a recent discussion of the importance and role of caring and compassion in management scholarship, see Adler and Hansen (2012) and Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, and Margolis (2012).

answer for me came when friend and management thought leader Andre Delbecq handed me John O'Donohue's book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (2003). Philosopher, poet, and sage sought after by leadership teams, O'Donohue unequivocally proclaims the power and importance of beauty:

These times are riven with anxiety and uncertainty. . . . In the hearts of people some natural ease has been broken. It is astounding how this has reached deep into the heart. Our trust in the future has lost its innocence. We know now that anything can happen. . . . The traditional structures of shelter are shaking, their foundations revealed to be no longer stone but sand. We are suddenly thrown back on ourselves. Politics, religion and economics, and the institutions of family and community, all have become abruptly unsure. At first, it sounds completely naïve to suggest that now might be the time to invoke beauty. Yet this is exactly what . . . [we claim] (2003: 2–3).

After reading O'Donohue's book, and continuing to paint, I realized that leadership artistry, whether for executives or scholars, requires not only that we take responsibility for returning the world to beauty but that we acquire the conceptual frameworks and practical skills to do so. The challenge is not merely to attempt to make the world a little less ugly. That's pedestrian, and so much less than what we, as leadership artists, are called to do. As artists, "less ugly" is never good enough, and we know it.<sup>6</sup> The time is right for the artistic imagination of each of us to cocreate the conceptual frameworks, scholarship, and global leadership that the world most needs and deserves.

## NOW IS THE TIME TO INVOKE BEAUTY<sup>7</sup>

*Beauty does not exist to be ignored.*

Linda Saccoccio, American painter

Beauty has a thousand definitions and could easily be understood as inherently subjective. As O'Donohue suggests, perhaps we know beauty mostly by its absence:

<sup>6</sup> McDonough and Braungart (2002) introduced the notion that less bad was not good, on which the concept "less ugly is not beautiful" is based.

<sup>7</sup> I originally developed the ideas in this section for my Montreal exhibition *Reality in Translation: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management*, which opened during the 2010 Academy of Management meetings in Montreal.

There is an unseemly coarseness to our times which robs the grace from our textures of language, feeling and presence. Such coarseness falsifies and anaesthetizes our desire. This is particularly evident in the spread of greed. . . . Greed is unable to envisage any form of relationship other than absorption or possession. However, when we awaken to beauty, we keep desire alive in its freshness, passion and creativity (2003: 4).

We remember once again that "ownership of something beautiful does not make it more beautiful" (William Carmen Soyak III, painter).

According to Joan Chittister, beauty may be what is

most missing in this highly technological world of ours. . . . We value efficiency instead. . . . We create trash. . . . But beauty, right proportion in all things, harmony in the universe of our lives . . . eludes us. We forgo the natural and the real for the gaudy and the pretentious. We are, as a people, awash in the banal. . . . Beauty takes us beyond the visible to the height of consciousness, past the ordinary to the mystical, away from the expedient to the endless true (2000: 26–27).

While we need to re-ask ourselves how we can reclaim our ability to yearn for and envision a world filled with beauty, we also need to place beauty in context. As I discovered, beauty has been almost completely absent from most discussions of twenty-first-century leadership and scholarship and condemned by most contemporary art critics and theorists.<sup>8</sup> Why is beauty so summarily dismissed? According to art critic James Hillman:

The arts, whose task once was considered to be that of manifesting the beautiful, will discuss the idea only to dismiss it, regarding beauty only as the pretty, the simple, the pleasing, the mindless and the easy. Because beauty is conceived so naïvely, it appears as merely naïve, and can be tolerated only if complicated by discord, shock, violence, and harsh terrestrial realities. I therefore

<sup>8</sup> Whereas beauty is rejected by most contemporary scholars, it is deeply rooted within discussions of aesthetics, a seminal branch of philosophy. See, for example, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1951/1892, original German publication in 1790) with its opening section on the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment. See also Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (*Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, first published in 1795 in letter form), which was inspired by Kant (see Berghahn, 2000), and Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* (*Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, original lectures given 1818–1829 and later compiled by Hegel's student [see Hegel, 1975]).

feel justified in speaking of the repression of beauty (quoted in O'Donohue, 2003: 7).

Hillman argues that "'beauty' is one of the most repressed and taboo concepts in our secularised and materialistic times" (1998; quoted in Ladkin, 2008: 32; see also Gablik, 1998). I certainly discovered that condemnation firsthand as I began exhibiting my paintings and received disparaging comments about any illusion to beauty. It was then that I began to ask, "Is it possible that management scholars and global leaders will reclaim beauty at just the moment in history when the art community is struggling with, and in many cases rejecting, this historically foundational concept?" Perhaps.

From a management perspective, what is beauty? What would leading beautifully look like (Adler, 2011)? Would we even recognize it if we saw it? Positive psychologists, along with the scholars who have introduced positive approaches into our organizational vocabulary, have focused their scholarship on courage, happiness, wisdom, and a wide array of other human virtues (see, among many others, Cameron & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Seligman, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Yet rarely have they engaged with the power and profound influence of beauty (for notable exceptions see Adler, 2011; Ladkin, 2008; Merrit, 2010; Stephens, 2010, 2015, in press; Taylor, 2013, 2014). Given the decades of cultural neglect, can we still see the beauty that exists in the world? Can we see the beauty in our organizations and our lives? Are we still capable of envisioning a world that is beautiful, rather than one that is merely less ugly? How do we regain our ability to cocreate a more beautiful world? How do we reclaim our profoundly human role as creators and leaders?

#### **BEYOND EVERYDAY BLINDNESS: RECLAIMING OUR ARTISTIC ABILITY TO SEE**

*The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's  
or the poet's, must be beautiful; the ideas,  
like the colours or the words, must fit together  
in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test:  
there is no permanent place in the world  
for ugly mathematics.*

G. H. Hardy, English mathematician (1940)

How do we reclaim our ability to see beauty? By reclaiming our ability to see. One of the most striking changes for me as I began studying art was to realize that whereas I thought I was a keen observer of the world around me, I was missing most of what was actually there.

Years ago, when I was learning to draw, I was driving home from the art studio on a typically blustery grey November day. The leaves had long ago fallen, and November, with all its barren trees and dreariness, surrounded me with the long winter that was about to engulf Montreal. Canada was certainly not like my native California, where winter produced no snow, but rather more sunshine and temperatures that brought nearly the warmth of summer. Just as I was about to give in to feeling sorry for myself, everything changed. Rather than seeing desolate barren trees, I saw the incredibly interesting shapes of the branches. Had they always been that majestic? that twisted and rugged? that fascinating? Having just spent all afternoon in the studio drawing, my eyes rewarded me by introducing me to the beauty that was worth seeing in my world, to what had been there all along, hidden in plain view (personal reflection).

Clearly, it is not relevant to ask how we can reclaim our ability to see and to create beauty until we can reclaim our underlying capacity to see. As artist, friend, and renowned MIT management professor Edgar Schein observed, "Art and artists stimulate us to see more, hear more, and experience more of what is going on within us and around us" (2013: 1).

The first essential skill that art offers artists and nonartists alike is the ability to see. For artists, me included, art offers a whole set of classic studio exercises specifically designed to increase our capacity to see, with some now being brought from the artist's studio into the management classroom (see, among others, Barry & Meisiek, 2015, and Taylor & Ladkin, 2014). Below I briefly describe a few of the most powerful exercises that my artist colleagues and I regularly use to guide executives, managers, MBAs, and leaders.

#### **Paying Attention: Contour Drawing**

In contour drawing, artists very slowly, almost meditatively, draw the exact outline of an object—a flower, a leaf, the artist's own hand, or any other object. As I practiced this approach to drawing, and thus to seeing, it literally felt like my drawing hand and the object became one (see

Franck, 1973, 1993). Such exact drawing forces you to see what is actually there, rather than allowing you to impose a caricature of what you imagine the object to look like. As you attempt to depict your hand, for example, contour drawing compels you to see your particular hand, as opposed to some semblance of what hands in general look like.

In the context of leadership, contour drawing gives us back the capacity to perceive uniqueness—for example, the dynamics of a specific company at a particular moment in time, rather than a composite of how most comparable companies act in similar situations. This type of close attention is particularly powerful for highly experienced leaders. It gives them back the ability to combine their experience-based expectations with a capacity to see the novelty in the situations currently confronting them. The power comes from the integration of data-driven, experience-based pattern recognition with their reclaimed ability to see the unique specificity of the present situation. Both thought leadership and organizational leadership require newness, the ability to see beyond previously recognized patterns. What is needed is the ability to see that which is unique within a context of that which is comfortably familiar—that which has been previously recognized to be true, normal, average, or reliably predictable. For theorists, this ability produces new conceptual frameworks that are within the context of prior scholarship yet simultaneously have the power to transcend past perspectives. The brilliant work that led to the introduction of positive deviance as a conceptual lens is an excellent example of the ability of scholars to see beyond others' interpretations of existing trends, patterns, and data—to see that which had been there all along but had, owing to its uniqueness, remained invisible (see Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010, and Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003, 2004). Taleb's (2007) conception of black swans also vividly exemplifies the notion of seeing the unique, unfathomable possibility that stands well outside dominant accepted patterns and paradigms. Such scholars see with an artist's eye, for which society remains indebted.

### Seeing Context: Drawing Negative Space

Another classic studio exercise designed to increase artists' capacity to see focuses on "negative

space." Instead of drawing an object itself, the artist draws the shapes surrounding an object. In sketching barren November trees, for example, the artist draws the shapes of the spaces between the branches, rather than the branches themselves. Because we have fewer preconceptions about the shapes of the spaces-in-between—the negative space—we tend to see them more accurately and, as a result, to render the whole image more precisely.

After I introduced a group of global managers to the idea of negative space, they delighted themselves with the surprising accuracy of their drawings. Still amazed by their accomplishment, they began to understand how negative space frames their organizational domains. They recognized that organizational culture, for example, is, in fact, the negative space surrounding all leadership actions and that, likewise, societal culture is the negative space surrounding and defining all business strategy. They understood that increasing their focus on negative space would allow them to more accurately appreciate the context within which they implement strategy and respond to market demands. Focusing on negative space would force them to see that which is important but has often remained concealed from their conventional action-oriented gaze.

Thought leader C. K. Prahalad's (2010) "discovery" of the "fortune at the bottom of the pyramid"—the huge market potential offered by the two-thirds of the world's population that lives on less than two dollars a day—is a vivid example of seeing negative space and then transforming that new perspective into both a revolutionary theoretical perspective and a profitable business strategy for firms choosing to capitalize on the newly "seen" markets (see also Hart, 2005). Likewise, increasing one's focus on the environment—another critical form of negative space—renders the externalities of corporate action, along with the possibilities inherent in sustainability, both visible and inescapable (see, among many others, Anderson, 1999; Hawken, 1993; Worldwatch Institute, 2012).

Similarly, with my training as an artist, it is now easy to understand that the development of the field of international management relied primarily on the incorporation of negative space. Most management theories, as they were originally conceived (especially those developed by American-trained scholars working in the

United States, one of the lowest-context cultures in the world [see, for example, Adler, 2008]), implicitly have been presented as “context free”—that is, the negative space of context was ignored or considered irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> Even though such theories were developed using samples from a single country, they were tacitly portrayed as universal. Cross-cultural management was founded on the notion that negative space mattered for managers as well as for management theory—that the cultural, economic, political, and societal context of each country was consequential (see, among others, Adler & Boyacigiller, 1995, and Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991, 1997). Cross-cultural management scholars rejected prior theorists’ choice to ignore context by tacitly assuming a homogeneous world.

### Changing Perspective: Turning the World Upside Down

Another classic artist exercise is to draw an object that has been turned upside down. Similar to contour drawing, the unusual upended perspective forces artists to see what is in front of them, rather than relying on their stereotypes of what they think the object should look like. Earlier this year we invited 100 managers from around the world to make charcoal drawings of an upside down horse. They initially protested,



<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the multiple forms of missing context in our organizational behavior theories, including the work, industry, regulatory, and institutional environments (not just the national and cross-cultural milieu), see Cappelli and Scherer (1991).

asserting that they didn’t know how to draw and therefore couldn’t draw a horse. Fifteen minutes later, as they turned their sketch pads right side up, shocked expressions emerged from throughout the room: “This is actually good! It actually looks like a horse!” Not only did these nonartists learn that changing perspective can be a very powerful tool for allowing them to see reality more clearly, but they also discovered that they were capable of doing something they were convinced they couldn’t do. In a world in which change is endemic, the need to do that which is new, and therefore often feared, is omnipresent. By becoming artists for just fifteen minutes, the managers gained essential confidence in their ability to perform in areas beyond their expertise. They were delighted. Although there are certainly other ways to gain confidence and to see more accurately, artistic approaches offer some of the most useful and fun.

### Changing Perspective: Taking a Step Back from the Canvas

Another classic studio exercise is to frequently take a step back from your work—to hang your as-yet-unfinished painting on the wall and see what it looks like from a distance. One Japanese artist I worked with would have me hang my paintings right side up, upside down, and rotated to the right and left, just to make sure the balance and harmony worked in all directions. This change of perspective—from viewing the painting up close to viewing it at a distance—is wonderful for seeing the painting and its impact as a whole. There have been many times when I was about to give up on a painting, when stepping back rescued me (and the painting).

Recently, as I read Thomas Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, I was struck that his frame-breaking contribution to economic theory was gleaned using the scholar’s equivalent of stepping back from the canvas. Piketty stood back in time to take in a broader perspective (a number of centuries, up to the beginning of the twenty-first century) than had Simon Kuznets (1951, 1961, 1966, 1967), the Nobel Memorial Prize-winning economist whose model had, prior to Piketty’s work, dominated the field (see, among others, Galbraith, 2007). The Kuznets curve, the formerly reigning paradigm, had been derived from a narrower, “close-up” time frame focusing primarily on five decades, 1930–1975. Kuznets

presented 1930–1975 as if the downward trend in income inequality across those decades was “the trend,” when, in fact, it was a five-decade aberration.<sup>10</sup> Kuznets’s narrow, close-up view had previously convinced theoreticians and policy makers alike that

while societies become more unequal in the first stages of industrialisation, inequality subsides as they achieve maturity. This “Kuznets Curve” had been accepted by most parts of the economics profession until Piketty and his collaborators produced the evidence that it is false. In fact, the curve goes in exactly the opposite direction: capitalism started out unequal, flattened inequality for much of the 20th century [the five referred to decades], but is now headed back toward Dickensian levels of inequality worldwide (Mason, 2014).

Piketty’s perspective reversed Kuznets’s theory and led to an extremely serious societal warning:

Wealth will concentrate to levels incompatible with democracy, let alone social justice. Capitalism, in short, automatically creates levels of inequality that are unsustainable. The rising wealth of the 1% is neither a blip, nor rhetoric (Mason, 2014).

As Piketty’s work demonstrates, the value of standing back from the canvas cannot be underestimated, either for factual analysis or for societal implications.

One traditional way that most artists take a step back from their day-to-day concerns is by engaging in a regular practice of reflection. Having kept a journal for years, I grew to believe such reflection was so important that I created *Leadership Insight* (Adler, 2010b), a journal with twenty-seven of my paintings and lots of blank pages to reengage managers, scholars, students, and leaders in the practice of regularly gaining perspective. The paintings invite a form of aesthetic reflection that supports nonartists in going beyond the dehydrated language of their daily lives (Adler, 2010a).

<sup>10</sup> Piketty argues that the trend toward higher inequality was reversed between 1930 and 1975 because of the exceptional circumstances of two world wars, the Great Depression, and a debt-fueled recession that destroyed much wealth, particularly that owned by the elite. These events drove governments to initiate steps designed to redistribute income, especially after World War II. The rapid economic growth during the period thus temporarily reduced the importance of inherited wealth (Pearlstein, 2014).



### Studying Art: Increasing Diagnostic Accuracy

Whereas each of the prior examples describes a studio art practice, this final example highlights the value in simply viewing paintings, even if one never draws, touches a paint brush, or makes any art themselves. Research conducted at Yale Medical School illustrates just how powerful exposure to art and artists’ ways of seeing can be (Jones & Peart, 2009). After conducting an experiment in which half of Yale’s medical students attended an art history course in addition to their regular medical school curriculum, researchers discovered that the art-trained students’ diagnostic skills improved significantly more than did the skills of their non-art-trained colleagues (Dolev, Friedlaender, Krohner, & Braverman, 2001). It appears that the medical students who had studied art not only had fundamentally learned how to see but also had gained a deeper appreciation of the relative nature of interpretation. The art-trained physicians-to-be saw more detail and recognized more patterns than did their non-art-trained colleagues. They saw more of what they were looking for and, more important, more of what they were not looking for. Their diagnoses were therefore based on a richer set of data and, not surprisingly, were, on average, more accurate. Equally important, they were more aware than their non-art-trained colleagues that their diagnoses were best guesses and not, in most cases, definitive conclusions. They were therefore more likely to notice variations in patients’ responses to treatment and to modify their initial diagnosis accordingly. They appreciated that, as with art,



there are always multiple possible interpretations when viewing complex images, whether presented by patients or paintings. The research at Yale leads me to question how our interpretation of data from qualitative and quantitative studies might improve if we used an artist's lens to see more and to interpret what we see in more novel, complex, and multilayered ways.

**IN THESE UGLY TIMES,  
THE ONLY TRUE PROTEST IS BEAUTY**

*In art, economy is always beauty.*

Henry James, American writer

Reclaiming the artist's ability to see, while critically important, is not sufficient when we are confronted with the overwhelming ugliness bequeathed to us by the twentieth century. Phil Ochs urges us to remember that "In these ugly times, the only true protest is beauty." Leadership artistry is not simply a way to see what is wrong with the world, nor is it merely a means to distinguish between what is common and uncommon. Whereas artistic perspective invites us to see patterns more accurately, including ugly and threatening patterns, its bigger invitation asks us to transform patterns-of-ugliness, once seen, by finding and creating patterns-of-beauty.

Over the last decade, I, along with other artist-scholars, have experimented with bringing various artistic processes into corporate strategy and organizational life (see, for example, Adler, 2002). More recently, Ariane Berthoin Antal and her colleagues have begun researching the efficacy of such interventions.<sup>11</sup> My own examples include working in Europe with a team of senior pharmaceutical executives, who had just gone through a contentious bicontinental merger. In response, I asked them to create huge (five-foot-high) murals expressing their collective vision of the firm's future—a task that had eluded them, to the detriment of the firm's performance, when

they had limited themselves to the conventional process of just using words. Another example: at a multinational meeting in North America, I invited a team of women who were senior executives from around the world to expand their overwhelmingly negative conceptions of power— notions drawn primarily from observing how the previous incumbents of their leadership positions, all of whom were men, had wielded power. Instead of suggesting that they discuss power, I invited these women to paint their relationship to power. The painted images, which all portrayed positive connections to power, allowed the women to reclaim a critical element of their new executive roles (Adler, 2005a,b). With other groups of executives, most recently in Istanbul, we created a leadership portrait gallery displaying the participants' self-portraits showing themselves leading beautifully. Portrait drawing more profoundly brings out leaders' authentic identities and aspirations than does any exercise that relies on the more familiar use of words (rather than images).

Because leading beautifully and using artistic processes have not been part of our organizational vocabulary, they risk being assumed to be irrelevant or nonexistent. However, was not "leading beautifully" Steve Jobs' secret strategic approach? In an economy dominated by technological functionality, Jobs reintroduced beauty, brilliantly incorporating a level of beauty that previously had rarely been part of the technological product landscape. Jobs succeeded because he became the world's premier business artist, not merely a competent business strategist (Douthat, 2011). And the result of his tech strategy of "leading beautifully" was that Apple became the then highest net worth company in the world. As former management school dean Roger Martin (2000: 7) recognized before most of the rest of us, what the world needs now is more business artists, not simply more business analysts.

**SERENDIPITY:  
TRANSFORMING UGLINESS INTO BEAUTY**

*I am not a businessman, I am an artist.*

Warren Buffett (quoted in Bryan, 1998: ix)

Serendipity was one of the first big-adult-words that I fell in love with as a little girl. To invoke

<sup>11</sup> For examples of artistic interventions and research on their efficacy, including Ariane Berthoin Antal's state-of-the-art studies, see, among others, Austin and Devin (2003); Berthoin Antal (2009, 2011, 2012, 2013a,b,c, 2014, 2015, in press a,b); Berthoin Antal and Strauß (2013a,b, 2014, in press); Berthoin Antal, Taylor, and Ladkin (2014); Brydon-Miller, Berthoin Antal, Friedman, and Gayá Wicks (2011); Ippolito and Adler (in press); Johansson Sköldberg, Woodilla, and Berthoin Antal (in press); and Sutherland (2013).

beauty, we need to embrace serendipity, both as a concept and as a process, and perhaps equally important as a strategic approach. Although serendipity is a particularly powerful idea, it is also one of the most difficult words in the English language to define. Serendipity means turning something bad into something good. It means finding something wonderful in a disaster or in an unpredicted mess. Serendipity means discovering something good after confronting a situation that has gone completely awry—a situation that has resulted in outcomes that you neither planned for nor want. Consistently getting high returns on bad luck distinguishes extraordinarily successful business people, such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, from everyone else (Collins & Hansen, 2011a,b). Serendipity is the discovery process, labeled accidental innovation, used by the world's top IT designers and most successful design firms (Austin, Devin, & Sullivan, 2012).

Serendipity means confronting ugliness and transforming it back into beauty. It therefore requires the artist's perception and design skills. Discovering something good after something bad has happened requires seeing the world in new ways, which is a perception skill. Creating something good out of something bad requires innovation, a design skill (see Boland & Collopy, 2004).

### Getting a High Return on Bad Luck

For those of you who have not been playing with the concept of serendipity since you were a child, let me describe my experience with serendipity as an artist, and then in my management world. As an artist, the monotype prints I create often emerge from the press looking totally different from what I had expected and had

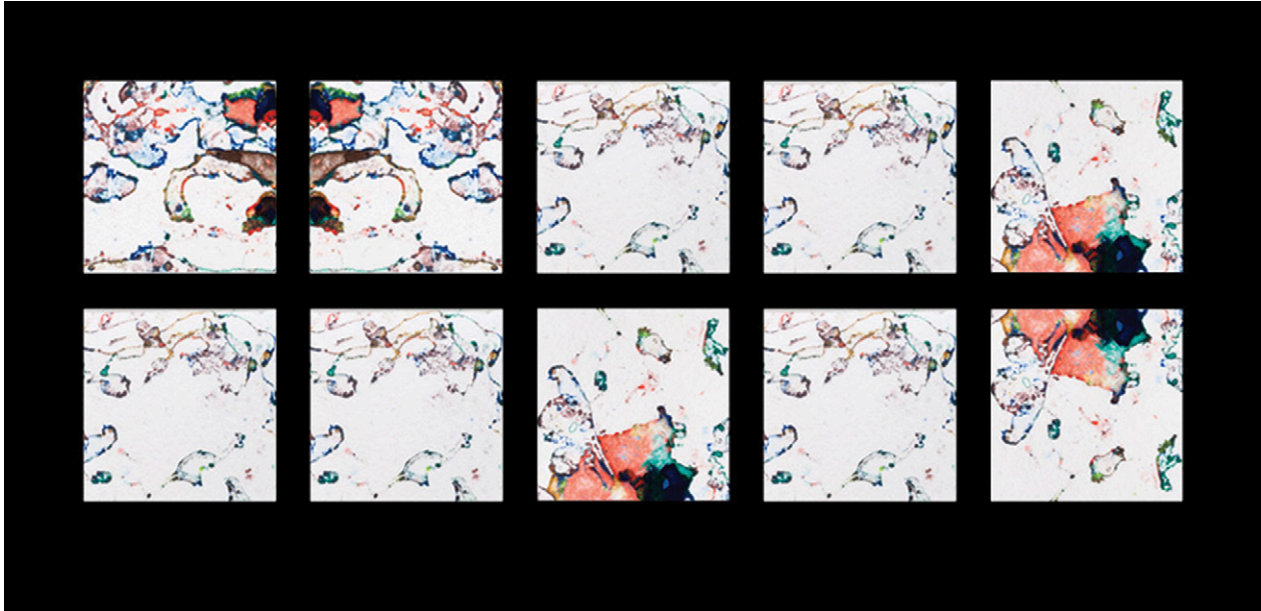
hoped for.<sup>12</sup> For a noteworthy example see the image to the bottom left, with paint running outside the forms. In order to salvage the all-too-frequent errant results, I often look for the print within the print—that is, I search for a small part of the print that is compositionally interesting, even if the print as a whole looks more like a disappointing mess than anything I would want to exhibit. The newly found smaller compositions are frequently more powerful and engaging than I could have originally imagined: jewels of beauty discovered within the chaos of disastrously messy surfaces. In one such wonderful moment of serendipity, the monotype print shown in the left column, after eleven more runs through the press and much searching, revealed a much more interesting composition and was transformed into the image at the top of the next page.

### Serendipitous Beauty Emerges

Similar to the serendipitous beauty that can emerge from the randomness of artistic process, equally powerful instances of serendipity regularly occur in society (even if they all too frequently remain undiscovered). One personal example occurred while I was working with a group of Scandinavian innovation managers. After taking them to the studio to personally experience the process of serendipity, a Norwegian executive confronted me: "Nancy, are you really asking me to use serendipity to see beauty in the ugliest situations I have encountered? Are you asking me to see beauty in the more than seventy-seven people who were murdered in Norway in 2011 simply because of their political affiliation?" Although unspoken, my immediate answer was "No! How could anyone see beauty in the murder of seventy-seven innocent people, most of whom were children?" In the ensuing silence a Norwegian woman spoke up: "Serendipity did emerge from the horror. Following the carnage, all Norwegians publicly recommitted themselves and their country to freedom and openness. We reembraced our quest for safety and security in an open democratic society. We refused to accept that losing our freedom was the price that we, or any society, must pay today for



<sup>12</sup> Petru Voichescu's and my monotypes were shown at our *Serendipity Suite* exhibition at The Banff Centre's Other Gallery in September 2011.



From *Finding Beauty in a Fractured World* series, Nancy Adler, 2015

security. We strongly, explicitly, and publicly reasserted our values.”

Transcending the horror of the murders, Norway gave the world a model for how a civilized society can, and perhaps must, act. More recently, the 2015 terrorist assaults in Paris on the *Charlie Hebdo* office and the kosher supermarket resulted in more than two million people, including forty world leaders, marching together in support of free speech. Will the result of the act of carnage in Paris be that the world’s leaders and the broader community come together for the common good? The ultimate outcome is not yet known, but the serendipitous nature of the gathering underlines the importance of finding ways to re-create beauty out of ugliness.

Ecological examples of serendipity also abound. The earthquake in Japan that caused a tsunami and led to the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant provides just such an example. The meltdown ultimately forced Japan to close most of its nuclear reactors. As the high-energy-consumption summer months approached, the Japanese government faced the dismal likelihood of a national energy disaster. Feeling helpless, the government resigned itself to a strategy of rolling blackouts that would sequentially cripple large areas of the country. However, as summer arrived, the Japanese “powered down.” Businesses and the public embraced *Setsuden*—drastic, and

very creative, energy conservation. The Japanese invented thousands of ways to markedly lower power consumption:

Industries, offices and private households turned lights off and thermostats up. . . . Office workers traded suits and ties for *kariyushi* shirts, the Okinawan version of aloha wear. They moved their shifts to early mornings and weekends, climbed the stairs and worked by the dim glow of computer screens and LED lamps. Families stopped doing laundry every day; department stores and subway stations turned off the air-conditioning. Posters of happy cartoon light bulbs urged everybody to pitch in (*New York Times*, 2011).

Much to everyone’s surprise and delight, *Setsuden* worked. The Japanese experienced no brownouts, let alone blackouts. They completely avoided the forecast national energy disaster.

Not only Japan but the world learned that there are viable, sustainable options, ones that to date have only fleetingly been considered. Japan’s experience in transcending the terror of the tsunami-caused calamity provides all of us with a powerful example of serendipity.

Does ugliness—whether in the form of restrictions, disasters, limitations, bad luck, or other forms of disadvantage—have to limit aspirations? No! Serendipity requires that we accurately see and diagnose the situations we face, but we

should never allow ourselves to believe that the generally accepted negative prognosis will become our fate. Rather, by embracing the artist's notion of serendipity, we can design options that go well beyond current reality. In acting as leadership artists, we can refuse to become trapped in the projections and predictions of traditional analysis.

## NOW IS OUR TIME TO INVOKE BEAUTY

*Find a way to make beauty necessary  
Find a way to make necessity beautiful*

Anne Michaels

Why would we seek out the wisdom of artists? Why would we embrace beauty? Why would we adopt the unconventional and risky conceptual and leadership approaches of artists? Because we passionately care about the future of our families, organizations, and country—because we care about our planet and civilization. Now is the time for each of us to reclaim our artistic skills. Now is the time for all of us to invoke beauty.

## ART NOTES

Art images included in this essay are by Nancy Adler. To see original paintings, contact Adler at [nancy.adler@mcgill.ca](mailto:nancy.adler@mcgill.ca).

- Page 480: *Finding Beauty in a Fractured World* series, digital mixed media. Image created from Variation 1 of Adler's *Earth Palette* series, earth pigments and transparent watercolor on Papier d'Archives, 30" x 22", Paint Pots, British Columbia. Exhibited at The Banff Centre, Alberta, and at Galerie MX, Montreal. As described on page 489, Adler used a serendipitous discovery process to select a detail from the original monotype print and then transformed it into the final digital image.
- Page 482: Photograph taken at sunrise by Adler in Banff, Alberta.
- Page 486: Photograph taken by Joseph Ariwi at the Global Leadership: Redefining Success seminar in Montreal, Quebec.
- Page 487: *Leadership Insight* journal (Adler, 2010b), as shown at <http://www.mcgill.ca/desautels/integrated-management/beyond-business/teaching-and-research/art-leadership/journal>, available from Routledge: <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415877626/>.

- Page 489: *In these ugly times, the only true protest is beauty, Variations on Transformational Coincidence Inspired by Phil Ochs*, Variation 1 of 11. Monotype from Adler's *Serendipity Suite 3* series, watercolor, BFK Reves paper, 15" x 22". Exhibited at The Banff Centre, Alberta.
- Page 490: *Finding Beauty in a Fractured World* series, digital mixed media. Image created from Variation 11 of Adler's *In these ugly times, the only true protest is beauty, Variations on Transformational Coincidence Inspired by Phil Ochs* series, monotype from Adler's *Serendipity Suite 3* series, watercolor, BFK Reves paper, 15" x 22". Adler started with the monotype shown on page 489, ran it through the press eleven more times, and then transformed a detail of it into the final digital image shown here.

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