

Chapter 3

Choosing Our Colors

On August 8th, 1999 I received the call from my mother: “Bryce, it’s happened.” My father had died after his long struggle with bladder cancer. It was hardly unexpected but I still felt profound grief. We had a week to prepare for the funeral but I had been preparing in other ways for at least 30 years. We had shared hunting trips together for decades largely because of my awareness that our time together would be limited. I had thanked him 8 years previously for all of the memories, his love and his support.

As my father’s funeral grew near, I felt a solemn responsibility to give the service myself. It didn’t seem right to have my father’s eulogy given by some pastoral stranger who didn’t know my father and his life. That idea felt like it would have been a betrayal not only of my father but also of my self. I also couldn’t let the spiritual opportunity pass me by.

My father had been a true artist. Although he had sometimes been a gruff irritable man, he had also been very sensitive to aesthetic appreciation. It seemed that every wall of my childhood home had been adorned with one or more of his paintings or sculptures. When we had taken walks together, he would point out interesting shapes and colors in the many pastoral scenes that we experienced together. One of my first memories was of being a 3 year old child and his teaching me how to dance. When I once wondered out loud what the frogs looked like that made the peeping sounds in early spring, I remembered his response: “Hey, do you want to find out?!” We froze our butts off that night but I went to sleep that night with a tiny frog peeping in a jar beside my bed. When I wondered what it would be like to be outside during a thunderstorm, I remember us both subsequently cowering in the wind and rain in our bathing suits. We had shared a lot of wonder together. Wonder and creativity were values that were worshipped in my family.

Shortly after my father’s death, I discovered the following poem among his estate papers:

Watching Clouds

A long time ago when I was young
my dad and I would sit together
watching clouds as they drifted by
imagining faces in their shapes
and horses, whales and sailing ships
and as the clouds would move away
new imagined shapes would appear
in the new clouds that followed
what a wonderful time we had

discovering those things together

Now I am old, but I still watch clouds
hoping to discover what we once shared
imagining that there still are faces
and horses, birds and butterfly wings
and all sorts of imagined things
I imagine too, sitting close beside me
My dad, watching clouds

- Ernest Kaye

My father's poem now hangs on the wall in my office because it represents one of the greatest gifts in my life. Although it's not technically brilliant, it effectively captures the values of wonder and creation that were gifted to me during my earliest years.

When I gave my father's funeral, I talked about the varied passions of his life. There had been early struggles as the unwanted child of the neighborhood's immigrant janitor. I spoke of how he had become a successful commercial artist, how he had painted and sculpted as a private passion, how he had met my mother at the opera and how he had successfully supported and loved his family. When it came time to finish my eulogy in front of our family and friends I had to somehow summarize the man's life. It was no small task because it cuts to the central question that we all ask ourselves. What does it all come down to? What does it all mean? When someone close to us dies, we all contemplate the meaning of our own short lives. The best I could muster for my father was this: Across the canvas of time he painted a life rich in color and passion. I was referring to his relentless creativity but I was also identifying on another level. It would be up to me to creatively paint my colors as best I could on my own canvas.

Not all of us have been gifted with rich colors. Some are endowed with darkness instead. Although we've used the idea of color as a metaphor for meaning and values, it may come as a surprise to some that the reference to color isn't just metaphorical. People who are uptight from early trauma are sometimes restricted in their ability to notice and think about color. This is because the unconscious evokes emotion to color. Some people are so defensive against any emotion that they unconsciously block their ability to notice color. On the Rorschach inkblot test, they'll ignore color in their associations to the blots. I once had a patient who claimed he couldn't see color or see other people's faces. Of course he would actually register the sensations in his visual cortex but his unconscious would edit out faces and colors from his conscious awareness. His painful emotions had to be avoided so his unconscious was blocking anything that smacked of emotion (e.g. color). As a child, his father used to hang him in his closet in a Vietnamese torture position. After therapy helped him to resolve his traumatic memories he could see both color and faces. Another patient used to report a sudden brightening of colors whenever he would use autohypnosis to ask his younger injured self-part to "step into the driver's seat and look through his eyes." He had also experienced early trauma that had induced him to defend against emotion with the collateral dampening of his colors.

Many people use autohypnotic defenses throughout life without knowing it. That's how dissociative disorders are frequently born.

It's generally considered bad form to mix metaphors and I could be accused of doing so. Earlier, I had suggested that meaning is like a musical score playing in the background of our life stories. Now I'm suggesting that it's like painting colors into a picture. I feel compelled to use both of these metaphors because each one is too appropriate and too relevant to jettison. Both are forms of art that evoke emotion and it's likely that they're emotional because they stimulate resonance in the same neural circuits that generate the felt sense of spiritual meaning. All forms of religion have incorporated music and visual art in the practice of worship. It's not just coincidence.

In his profound tome *Philosophical Explanations*, Robert Nozick conjectured that the meaning of life might just come down to an art form. I would agree but the concept suggests another question. If spiritual meaning is an art form, then is there such a thing as bad spirituality? After all, we commonly make value judgments about good art and bad art. The answer to this question isn't really that difficult for most of us to answer. If we go back to the concepts of low consciousness and monocentricity then most of us would agree that bad spirituality involves both. When Germans gas Jews, when radical Muslims consider it their duty to kill Christian converts, when a sexual partner hides the fact that they have AIDS and whenever betrayal is used for self-gratification then there's an implicit devaluing of others. Over the course of human history, organized religion has often disguised collective narcissism in the virtue of spirituality. "We're the chosen people" (we're superior to everyone else). "We'll be saved while all others are going to Hell." "We show our loyalty to the Sun God by giving him the heart of the heathen." The list goes on. Bad art! Good art in the realm of spirituality requires heterocentricity and balance. Self-transcendent values are necessary instead of collective ego.

Choice Requires Courage

Before we choose our spiritual values there's a preliminary choice that's potentially one of the most important we'll ever make: Who do we choose as the author of our spiritual meaning? This question is profound and it's not just psychobabble. Many of us go through life valuing what we "should." We'll contemplate doing "**the** right thing" as if there's an exterior judge who knows how life "**should**" be run. "Doing the right thing" and thinking in absolute "shoulds" are frequently signs that people are afraid of choosing their own values. They want a prefab kit instead. Organized religions are ready to meet this need with well-organized dogma.

The alternative to seeking external authority is to shoulder the burden of becoming our own spiritual author. Notice that there's a burden involved and be forewarned. It's heavy! It's so heavy that many of us shy away from even realizing that we have a choice. It's easier to project that there's an external voice that can tell us what to do. When we seek external authorship of our spirituality it momentarily reduces our anxiety and uncertainty. It's comfortable to see the world in black and white, right and

wrong, shoulds and should-nots. But the cost of this kind of certainty is that we lose our creativity. We start worrying about how we're going to be judged by this external authority. If there's a right way of doing things then we have to get it right on target. We have to be perfect in our approach so we won't be wrong. In this way, externalizing the authorship of life's meaning can inject us with another anxiety. We've traded existential anxiety for the anxiety of self-evaluation. There's our dilemma. We have a choice. Which do we prefer: the anxiety of having to create meaning as an art form or the anxiety of our being evaluated against an externalized frame? We don't get to avoid anxiety. We either pay the price or we pay the price for not paying the price.

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If we choose to imbue our lives with artistic spirituality then we need to tolerate the anxiety of uncertainty. We get to wonder about all that we don't know. If spiritual values aren't written in the external world then it's a bit daunting that it may all be up to us. It requires a special type of faith that all of our lives will contribute toward something worthwhile. Faith with uncertainty is an unusual combination that requires courage.

Experiments With Perspective

There's a little exercise that I sometimes ask patients to try. It's a bit morbid but it has a lot of benefit. You might find it interesting to try it. First ask yourself how long you expect to live. How old do you think you'll be when you die? 70? 80? 90? 100? Whatever you imagine, get it clear that your life will end at that time. Now imagine what it might be like that last few days before you die. You might be in an assisted living facility or a nursing home. Sepsis may be starting as your immune system is gradually overwhelmed in your deteriorated condition. Tubes are connected. Attendants are very polite and talk to you softly with compassion. You're aware that you're not going to leave that room alive. Let the scene become clear because it's realistic. It's likely that you'll someday get the chance to look back on your life from this vantage point. That is unless you stroke out or have a heart attack first.

As you lie there in your death bed, look back on your life and begin to wonder. What if a miracle occurred and the aliens came down to give you a time capsule. Suppose you could take that time capsule back in time then how would you live your life differently? Knowing that it all ends like this, would you make different choices about how to spend your time? What would you prioritize that you didn't value enough the first time around? Would you want to work harder to build a more successful career. Would you want to pursue a better portfolio, buy a bigger house, invest in more pride? The advantage of this morbid perspective is that it blows away a lot of your reliance on others to define what's valuable. Most of those other people will be dead or they'll be in their own nursing homes. This admittedly morbid perspective helps you to assume the responsibility for your life choices. When you give up the illusion that life is infinite then

your responsibility to use time creatively will smack you squarely in the face. The art of spiritual living becomes more attractive. Look at your reactions to this exercise and observe your subtle fears about living creatively. Have you been choosing the safer path of pursuing what others value or have you been courageous by putting your spiritual meaning into action?

Let's try another exercise. Imagine that you've already died. On your grave site your gravestone bears your name and the following sentence: "He/she was true to her core values." Printed below that statement is a list of words that represent the core values to which you dedicated your life. You had been faithful to the core by prioritizing these values over pride, comfort and appearances. These values had been your colors. What were they? This exercise is another one to get us thinking outside the box. By clearly seeing life's transience, it encourages us to appreciate values that transcend mere self interest.

In working with many patients over the years, I've heard them discuss many core values. Some of the more frequent have been:

Truth
Responsibility
Service
Contribution
Honor
Duty
Creation
Charity
Faith
Integrity
Involvement
Compassion
Loyalty

The value of truth is interesting in that it has two dimensions. There's external truth as with observable facts that can be tested. The sun rises in the East. Water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen. Jack Kennedy was assassinated. Internal truths are a different matter. They're not testable and require experiential knowledge. Do you really like to kiss Aunt Mable? Do you really want to spend the holidays with your spouse's parents? Did you really like the specially knitted sweater that someone gave you for Christmas? Do you always feel love for your spouse, even when you're criticized? Do you always try to do what's best or do you sometimes run from the challenge because you're afraid of failure. Do you always feel that you're enough? These questions demonstrate that we do know that there's an internal truth that we sometimes deny. It's easy to misrepresent internal truths because we're the only ones who can validate them. However there's a terrible cost when we do that. When that happens we actually erode our spiritual frame and weaken it. Alternatively, we have the opportunity to strengthen

our spirituality when we're loyal to our internal truths. You might say we can burn it in and make it stronger.