

UNCP 5555 – Mindfulness and Making: A Capstone Course on Seeing the World as an Artist (and how to begin to live as one)



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Course Description:

Most people think of creativity as a hobby, a pastime, or a way to spend your Saturday afternoon. Yet the dictionary tells us that to create means “to cause to come into existence; make; originate”.

Creativity is the act of bringing that which does not exist into existence. It is the art of bringing forward that which has previously never lived. It is the remarkable experience of bringing something out of nothing. In order to bring something new into the world, you must be willing to go into the unknown. Just as the poet might listen inwardly and stay open for the next word and just as the artist might pay attention to the images that arise from within, creativity asks that we have one foot in what is known, or existence, and one foot in what is not-known, or non-existence. This requires an ability to be still, to look both inward and outward, and then to record the result—in art-making or in life.

To be creative, you must be willing to bring together form and formlessness, being and non-being, fullness and emptiness, nothing and everything. We might even say that creativity requires the union of human and divine. In fact, look closely at the world around you - there is a constant motion of things coming into and out of existence. Each day brings new circumstances at work and home, shifting dynamics among friends and family, shifting weather patterns, and more. Every minute of our lives, change continues to occur. For those who look within, change happens too. Thoughts are forever coming and going. Emotions, pleasant and unpleasant, are rising and falling. Sensations and pain in the body appear and disappear. The breath forever enters and leaves the lungs. The ceaseless change of reality points to the energy of creation forever taking place. "For 60 years I have been forgetful every minute, but not for a second has this flowing toward me stopped or slowed," wrote the poet Rumi.

When a thing—whether a cloud, a wave, a breath, a thought, a feeling, or a sensation in the body—comes into existence, it moves from a place of no-thing to something. It moves from emptiness to fullness. This movement from nothing to something, from formlessness to form, from emptiness to

fullness is ceaseless. This motion, this energy is always taking place and to participate in this movement consciously can be a spiritual practice of deep implication.

As Barbara Marx Hubbard, a pioneer in evolutionary spirituality, put it, "The more conscious we become and the more creative we become, the more we become like that which is creating us."

In this course, students will attend to two areas: the meaning of art and mindfulness, and their own history of making (or lack thereof) and how they would like to build artistic sensibility and creation into their lives. I come at this from having been a poet and writer for many decades, as well as someone actively engaged in understanding more deeply the spiritual roots of creativity.

I'm also interested in the ways in which creativity and appreciation of art and art-making can contribute meaningfully to the development of one as a full citizen of the world.

As a Boston College undergraduate, you will have already taken courses in philosophy and theology. You may or may not have taken anything beyond your single Arts core requirement. We will thus spend the first weeks of the course in review and reflection: thinking, discussing and writing about the ways you have been challenged to engage with the world in a spiritual and sensory way, as an artist would—painter, poet, dancer, filmmaker, musician, sculptor.

We'll talk about what you've already witnessed as undergraduates, and earlier, about the ways creativity and spirituality may have informed your choices—from major and career path to relationships, cultural choices (music and film, for instance), and what you might do to challenge yourself to move beyond the familiar and into the unknown.

We'll discuss at length what your own creative strengths may be (and some of you will be more aware of this than others). You DO NOT have to have had any experience as an artist prior to this course. The whole point is to have you consider these questions, the choices you've made, and whether a spiritual answer for you exists in creativity, the act of making.

We'll also read about artists who, despite enormous odds, have managed to create meaning, illuminating some aspect of themselves and the world. We'll especially focus on marginalized artists, particularly women and artists of color who have had to rise above prejudice and sometimes the threat of death to make their voices and artistic lives a reality. Sometimes this has, in fact, led to exile or death. That's how much risk can be involved in self-expression, especially in a society that doesn't or can't honor all voices.

From there we'll engage with a variety of artistic styles and types, encountering not just forms of creativity, but also consider how the artist came to make her or his work, what elements of living and spirituality informed the making. In other words, we're not just going to passively receive, we're also going to interrogate the nature of creativity by learning to think like an artist.

Finally, students will make their own creative projects. This is meant to help you find your own creative voice, to figure out, moving forward beyond Boston College, the ways in which you can contribute meaningfully to your own society and the larger world. To quote Rabbi Michael Lerner, a political activist in Berkeley, CA and editor of the Jewish interfaith magazine *Tikkun*, this process will force you *to separate from familiar paths and prior ways of coping* (operating without "knowing" the outcome), *allow you to experience confusion, fear, and disorientation without jumping into denial or easy resolution*

of conflict (finding what it means to be truly vulnerable in the act of making), heal your wounds through the active act of artistic observation and making that is part of this process, and, hopefully, ending with a firm determination to liberate yourself and the world, from suffering.

It's a tall order, but one that artists of every kind have been engaged in for millenia. My hope is that by the end of this course, not only will you have experienced a new way of seeing the world, but that you will now feel license and permission to become an artist yourself or, at the very least, to employ mindful, spiritual, and creative ways of being in all areas of your life as you move forward.

Required texts:

Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor, by Lynda Barry

Creativity: Where the Divine and Human Meet, by Matthew Fox

Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking, by David Bayles and Ted Orland

Web: The Foundation for the Spiritual Practice of Creativity (www.creationmeditation.com)



Instructor Responsibility:

To challenge, encourage and occasionally cajole, to be honest in my feedback, prompt in returning your work, diligent in following your progress.

To be fair and rigorous in my assessment of your finished work. I do not negotiate grades but am always glad to discuss your work at length.

Student Responsibility:

To show up for all classes and meetings, to participate fully in class discussions. To do assigned readings as indicated on the syllabus and to be ready to offer cogent observations.

To produce the work required, in the time required. Extensions are rare and only granted for extreme extenuating circumstances.

To provide honest, thoughtful feedback to your peers on their projects and progress.

Attendance: mandatory. We meet for 2.5 hours a week and your absence will greatly affect the class dynamic.

Quizzes:

You will be quizzed periodically on the assigned readings. We'll use these as the starting place for our conversations.

Essays:

You will write three reflective essays. The first will be a response to an assigned text, Lawrence Weschler's essay "Vermeer in Bosnia" as a way of interrogating your own way(s) of seeing and what you've acquired as skills since you began as a BC student four years ago; the second a reflective essay that considers the way(s) in which your experience of creativity has been expressed before coming to BC, what changed during your education here, and what aspects of the creative life you envision going forward (from becoming a patron of the arts to a performer or maker). The third essay will be a response to an artist of your choosing—painter, poet, novelist, dancer, musician, filmmaker—where you will investigate the choices the artist made and your experience of the work, how it broadens and deepens your own life.

Artist's Journal:

Starting on the first day of class you will be expected to produce a journal tracking your experience of the course, especially those areas of discussion you find most difficult and vulnerable-making.

I recommend you get a notebook that is portable enough that you can carry it with you. This will be a regular exercise. Part of learning to observe and experience the world as an artist is to understand the need for discipline. Keeping a journal gives you discipline and a place to start, to access your unconscious, to get into the habit of doing something until it is second nature. Most artists struggle with anxiety and procrastination. Regular, even daily, writing is a way for you to plow through those resistances.

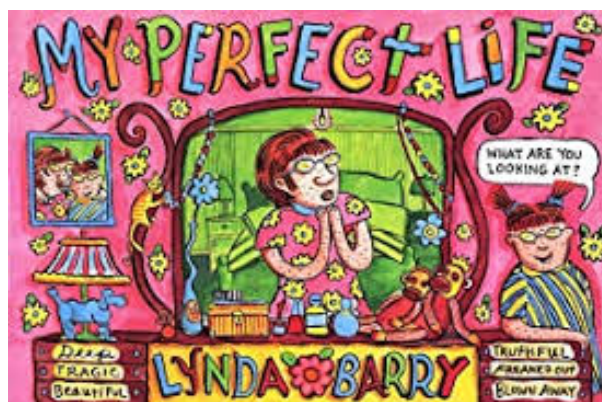
While I will not read your journals (some things are meant to be entirely private), I will have you come during scheduled conferences with your notebooks to show me that you've been keeping them, and to talk about what you're learning about yourself from doing the weekly prompts.

The "Syllabus":

This is a separate notebook that will be based on the design of Lynda Barry's book and that will allow you to capture in words and images the journey of your education at Boston College. Not just what classes you took and teachers you worked with, but the high points of your development as a thinker and scholar. What you are proud of, where you wish you could go back and try differently. What art courses did you take? Music? Other humanities courses? Classes in other parts of the university? What were you involved in activities-wise? This is a semester-long project, involving our in-class discussions and readings, but throughout you should be interrogating what these last four years have meant for you in your development as a student, scholar, and person. You will have an addendum that presents your goals for living according to BC's motto: Men and Women for Others. How will you use this education to live in the world as a citizen, worker, partner/spouse, parent?

Presentations:

Each week two students will present to the class an example of a work of art that moves them. This could be a song, a novel excerpt, a group of poems, a scene from a film, or a representation of a photograph or painting. You'll discuss the provenance (history) of the work, and what makes it a mentor work for you, something you might try to emulate yourself and why



Meditation and the “One Day at a Time” Concept:

Perhaps the most challenging thing about looking at the world as an artist—unlocking your creative potential—is becoming comfortable with silence, especially in our device-laden and connected world. So many distractions, so little ability to be quiet and reflective. We will thus begin the class with a brief meditation, and you will be strongly encouraged to take up this practice, perhaps as part of your journal work.

One Day at a Time is exactly what it says. It is a philosophy, a way of being in the world without living continually in the past or future (which is where most of us tend to wander). To begin to slow down enough to appreciate the artist’s way, you have to keep things manageable and the best way is by staying in the current day, the only day you have. This is tied to meditation and mindfulness and we will be both reading about and practicing these strategies.

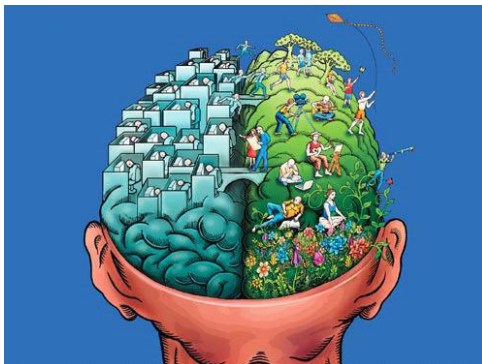
We’ll consider ways you have avoided silence and reflection, and situations where you have engaged in this way, either by choice or as part of prior coursework. What have been and are the benefits of living this way? Of creating a practice of mindfulness and reflection? How is this a useful way of being, not just for yourself, but for the larger society, especially in these fraught times?

Creative Projects:

While you’ll be working toward a single major project (i.e., a short film, a chapbook of poems, a collection of drawings, a group of songs, a single painting, or a mixed media project) you will be experimenting in a variety of forms and formats to figure out what you’re either interested in or good at. Most of this will occur during class as time allows. I’ll provide prompts and supplies. You should plan to set aside time each week on these assignments and I will make space for you to engage in collaborative art-making as well.

Grading:

Class presentations, attendance and participation:	1/4
Three essays	1/4
Journal work & “Syllabus”	1/4
Final project	1/4



Course Schedule:

Week One: Where have I been? Where am I going?

Reading: (in class): John Berger, “La Tour and Humanism”; introductions and a writing prompt using art cards (provided by instructor); ways to keep a journal of your progress (examples from writers and artists who have done so); using [Lynda Barry \(bring the book to class\)](#); discussing your journey thus far.

Week Two: What Gives Me Joy? *interrogating with insight*

Reading: [Lynda Barry, *Syllabus*, to page 39](#); Matthew Fox, *Creativity*, preface and first chapter, “Creative Spirit, Holy Spirit” and “Who Are We as a Species?”; Bayles and Orlando, *Art and Fear*, to page 36, “The Nature of the Problem” and “Fears About Yourself”. Take notes on what arises for you in the readings: what do you identify with? How so? In what way(s) does fear operate in your life, especially when it comes to creativity?

We will discuss in peer groups.

JOURNAL PROMPT for the coming week: *I remember...* (from Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*)

Also: starting the “syllabus” of your time at BC: print out your course audit. First, get a small notebook (this is separate from your artist’s journal but can be about the same size). Then, using Barry’s *Syllabus*, begin to craft a course plan that depicts your university education. It should indicate a) what was required of you (and what you fulfilled), b) your most outstanding, gratifying, rewarding assignments, c) missed opportunities--what you didn’t take that you wish you had. Be rigorous, be creative. You can use illustration and photos to make this. I’ll explain more about this in the first week, but you should have started it by this week.

Week Three: What Kind of Artist Might I Be? *do I dare and do I dare...?*

Reading: [Barry, to page 61](#); Fox, chapters two and three, “Creativity, Our True Nature” and “Where Does Creativity Come From?”; Bayles and Orlando, pages 37-64, “Fears About Others” and “Finding Your Work”; videos from creationmeditation.com: “Components of the Practice” and “What You Need to Know About Yourself”. **Reflection questions** while reading (use your journal for this): --Am I satisfied with how I spend my days? --When do I feel most alive? What am I longing to create? Where do I settle for less because I’m afraid I can’t have what I want? What brings meaning to my life? What gives me pleasure on a daily basis? Where do meaning and pleasure overlap for me?

First two presentations of a mentor text

CONFERENCES WITH INSTRUCTOR

Week Four: The Early Schematics *where does it live and how do I get there?*

Reading: [Barry, to page 84](#); Fox, chapter five, “Adam and Prometheus, Creativity and the Christ: Is Original Sin the Refusal to Create, and Is Redemption the Liberation of Creativity?” Videos from creationmeditation.com: “Essence of the Practice” and “Express Yourself to Cultivate You”

FIRST PAPER DUE AT CLASS TIME: A response to Weschler’s “Vermeer in Bosnia”

(assignment on Canvas)

Presentations of two mentor texts

Journal prompt: --What inspires my imagination? What areas of my life suffer from a lack of inspired vision? How do I use my imagination in daily life? What criticisms do I direct at myself to stifle my imagination? How does negative thinking protect me from the failure I fear is coming?

[How has working with Lynda Barry’s book given me insight into these areas of my life? How am I making sense of the choices I’ve made so far?](#)

Week Five: How Do They Do That? *following the flame...*

Reading: [Barry, to page 107](#); Fox, chapter six, “Revisioning Easter and Pentecost: Rolling Away the Obstacles to Creativity So That the Spirit of Creativity Can Resurrect”; Bayles and Orlando, pages 65-78, “The Outside World”; videos from creationmediation.com: “Dangers of the Practice” and “Guidelines for Your Creative Expression”

Journal prompt: --What did I love as a child? How might I infuse those passions into my life today? What gives my body energy? What ideas, situations, and circumstances draw me inexplicably? What moments in my life stand out as peak experiences? What do I wish to communicate to others as a result of those experiences? What ideas, feelings, or images seem to revisit me again and again even though I keep turning away from them?

QUIZ

Presentations of two mentor texts

CONFERENCES WITH INSTRUCTOR

Week Six: The Blank Page (or What I Have to Fill In) *aim, set, ready...*

Reading: [Barry, to page 126](#); Fox, chapter seven, “Tapping into the Creative Spirit: Finding, Honoring, and Practicing Creativity”; Bayles and Orlando, pages 79-92, “The Academic World”; videos from creationmeditation.com: “Who This Practice is For”

Journal Prompt: --In what areas of my life do I have difficulty finding courage? In what ways do I hold myself back because the opinions or actions of others cause me to doubt myself? What would I do differently if I felt sufficient courage? In what situations do I cast blame instead of taking responsibility? What payoffs have I gotten from thinking like a victim? What do I tell myself when I encounter criticism? How can I learn to find the truth in criticism so I can grow? [How have I answered these questions in the design of my syllabus?](#)

Presentations of two mentor texts

Week Seven: Diving Into the Wreck or, *not making sense and loving it*

Reading: [Barry, to page 148](#); Fox, chapter eight, “Where Do We Go From Here? Putting Creativity to Work in Culture and Everyday Life”; Bayles and Orlando, pages 93-112, “Conceptual Worlds”; videos from creationmeditation.com: “How to Turn Creative Expression into a Spiritual Practice”

Journal prompt: --What failures have made me stronger? What helps me find the inner strength to keep going? What helps me find the strength to keep going?

SECOND PAPER DUE AT CLASS TIME

Presentation of two mentor texts

Week Eight: A Plan Begins to Coalesce (*do I dare and do I dare?* redux...)

Reading: [Barry, to page 165](#); Fox, chapter eight, “Where Do We Go from Here? Putting Creativity to Work in Culture and Everyday Life”; Bayles and Orlando, pages 113-122, “The Human Voice”; video from creationmeditation.com: “Tools to Build a Steady Practice”

Journal prompt: --As I recall an experience of mystery that led me to feel connected to something beyond myself, what sensations or feelings are present? How might I communicate those feelings/thoughts? What keeps me connected to mystery? (Quiet contemplation, listening to birdsong, reading, watching a sunset, something else?) How do these experiences nourish me and nourish my creative life? How might I give myself these experiences more often?

QUIZ

Presentation of two mentor texts

CONFERENCES WITH INSTRUCTOR

Week Nine: Going Deeper...and Finding the Light

Reading: [finish Barry's Syllabus](#); Fox, conclusion, “The Coming Dawn: The Hope That Creativity Brings”; video: Elizabeth Gilbert, “Your Elusive Creative Genius” (on Canvas/Modules)

Journal prompt: --What did I sacrifice to have the life I have now? In what ways am I still clinging to false hope for a life or conditions that can never be? How does holding on to the past keep me from embracing new opportunity? What lessons have loss and sadness taught me? What capacities have I gained through suffering? How might I be diminishing myself by avoiding emotional pain? What losses or disappointments might I still need to grieve? How might the creative process lead me to locate shards of light in my darkest moments?

Presentation of two mentor texts

[SUBMIT YOUR SYLLABUS NOTEBOOK, due at class time](#)

Week Ten: Art and Social Conscience: A Case Study--Kara Walker and Claudia Rankine

Reading (all links on Canvas under Modules): karawalkerstudio.com, reviews of Sugar Baby (NY Times, video links); Claudia Rankine and John Lucas “Situation Videos” (links and analysis)

Journal prompt: --What is my experience of witness in viewing the assignments for this week? In what way(s) do I see Rankine, Lucas and Walker speaking truth to power? How are they making the personal political, and vice versa? What risks are they taking, and what does any artist speaking truth to power risk in bold vision that may create disturbance?

Further: What is *my* responsibility as a person and a creative soul toward the rest of the world? To whom do I feel indebted? In what way(s) am I challenged in becoming aware of social issues that dominate our discourse? How do I respond, especially creatively? What habitual assumptions do I make about myself and others (family, peers, the “stranger on the bus”)? [How have these realizations deepened by keeping the artist's notebook work and designing my syllabus?](#) What do I feel called to bring to the world now?

QUIZ

Presentation of two mentor texts

CONFERENCES WITH INSTRUCTOR

Week Eleven: *I Have Begun Listening to the Teachings My Blood Whispers to Me* (Herman Hesse)

Reading (all links on Canvas under Modules): Lawrence Weschler, from *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, “Echoes at Ground Zero”, and from *Vermeer in Bosnia: Selected Writings*, “Henry V at Srebrenica”; video: Russell Brand and Julia Cameron, “On Creativity and Play” (on Canvas/Modules)

Journal prompt: --How does knowledge that arises from instinct differ from knowledge that arises from a rational process? How do I connect with each kind of knowledge (examples)? How can I distinguish between the pull of my personal agenda and the subtle resonance of intuition? Am I ready to know the truth (of myself, my art, my choices, my spiritual path, my life)? What scares me about stepping into my power? What is right in front of me that I am unwilling to see? What would I create if I had clarity right now? What keeps me from doing so? What else do I need to know before I can move forward?

Presentation of two mentor texts

FINAL WEEKS: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? (Mary Oliver)*

Individual presentations of art projects

FINAL ESSAY DUE at class time Week Twelve

