



PAINTING CHINESE



A LIFELONG TEACHER GAINS
THE WISDOM OF YOUTH



HERBERT KOHL

AUTHOR OF *36 CHILDREN*

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B L O O M S B U R Y

Author's note: Some of the names, locations, and details of events in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of persons involved.

Some Chinese names and terms are spelled using the old Wade-Giles transliteration system, others using the Pinyin system, depending on the source material to which the author referred.

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*Trust your heart,
And your brush will be inspired.
Writing and painting have the same intent,
The revelation of innate goodness.
Here are two companions,
An aged tree and a tall bamboo,
Transformed by his brush,
Finished in an instant.
The embodiment of a moment
Is the treasure of hundreds of years,
And one feels, unrolling it, recognition,
As if seeing the man himself.*

—T'ANG HOU (ACTIVE FOURTEENTH CENTURY)

My journey into painting Chinese was unanticipated. It began with discovering that I was becoming an old man. About four years ago, my wife, Judy, and I were in a local market buying food for dinner. As usual, I wandered off to the little section where they sold cheap toys and games and chose a bag of small plastic fire-fighters and policemen billed as a “9/11 Heroes” kit to add to my

collection of painted Dungeons & Dragons figurines, nativity scenes, action figures, and other miscellaneous tchotchkes. At the checkout counter, the cashier rang up the food and the figures and asked, in a very pleasant voice, if the playthings were for my grandchildren. I was surprised.

Those days I was feeling young and creative, very much the middle-aged guy who was trying to preserve the child in himself. However, she saw me as a grandfather. I had never seen myself that way, and her casual comment troubled me.

I never experienced anxiety when I passed thirty-five, never had a middle-age crisis in my forties or fifties. I just kept on working on external things: working with children, writing, and advocating for social justice. The work I did was a source of energy and strength, and I always felt I could continue doing it at the same level and with the same intensity as long as I desired. But as I was approaching seventy, there were times when I felt old, tired, and vulnerable. After a twelve-hour day, my hip hurt and I limped. I can trace that back to an auto injury when I was twenty-seven, though I'd been pain-free for over thirty years. It was not just the pain and fatigue that led me to feel old. My wife and I had lost our parents when in our sixties and had witnessed their aging and dying. That witness was painful, and as we inherit the role of family elders, we now both see ourselves moving along the same slow path.

Recently, aging has come closer to center stage as a number of old friends have become very ill, a few have died, and a few are tenuously but stubbornly holding on to life. I see myself in them and on occasion am overwhelmed by the sense of my finitude. Sometimes I find myself surveying my toys and books and plants and wonder

what will happen when I'm no longer around to care for them. The possibility that the whole fabric of my life, memories, friendships, and the working environment I have shaped so carefully over the past fifty years can dissolve in a moment is distressing.

My own children joke about my concerns about aging and, I believe, see me as I was when they were younger, just as I still see them as they were as children even though they are in their mid- and late thirties.

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For the five years before I turned seventy, I created and directed a teacher education program at the University of San Francisco based on the idea of integrating issues of social justice throughout the curriculum, hoping to bring young idealistic people into public school teaching and to fortify them with the skills and stamina to make their dreams practical realities. I succeeded in recruiting thirty students to the program each year, most of them students of color, and had a wonderful time with them. We created the curriculum together, studied issues of social justice as they applied to the classroom, and experimented with specific ways of teaching and learning through the arts, music, dance, and literature. The program ended bitterly in the fourth year when the university cut it after the funding I had raised ran out. I had put an enormous energy into developing and teaching in the program and during my last year there felt worn down physically and emotionally, not from the teaching, but from constant harassment by the administration.

During the last year of the program, I took to walking randomly around the neighborhoods near the university: wandering into stores, listening to conversations in restaurants, seeking some

new focus or adventure, looking for something to seize my heart and inspire me.

I gravitated toward Clement Street, a predominantly Chinese commercial street in western San Francisco. The Clement neighborhood is home to working- and middle-class people, mostly Mainland and Taiwanese Chinese and Koreans with a mix of Asian Americans and a small number of white people who are moving in as the neighborhood begins to gentrify.

Clement is not a tourist destination, but a vibrant community with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean restaurants; vegetable, fish, poultry, and meat markets; pastry shops; teahouses; kitchenware and hardware stores; and the occasional Middle East market. There are a number of tea and coffee bars where older Chinese men play cards, dominoes, and Chinese chess throughout the day. There's even an Irish pub, a wonderful new- and used-book store, and several rock clubs, as well as the usual commerce of an American street: cell phone and computer stores and small markets (*marquetas*) that sell everything from newspapers and candy to cans of soup and lottery tickets.

I struck up a casual friendship with the owner of one of the *marquetas* I frequented. During one of our brief conversations, a policeman came into the store, looked around, and left. As soon as he was out of sight, the owner said that the cop wasn't "real Chinese." I asked him what was "real Chinese," and he said with pride that it was someone who had come from the Mainland. The others in the neighborhood were just Taiwanese. So much for my image of a peaceful diverse community; old scars had been transported across the Pacific.

I had developed the habit of going to lunch one day at Taiwan Restaurant, and then the next day I went to a restaurant diagonally across the street called China First. I didn't really understand until this conversation that every other day I crossed the Strait of Formosa from China to Taiwan and back.

I loved being a stranger on Clement.

On one of my random walks, I encountered a storefront with the sign JOSEPH FINE ARTS SCHOOL. There was a poster in the window that stated that classes in painting, drawing, calligraphy, and sculpture were available. Also on display were samples of students' work and small Chinese sculptured stone figures and painted glass bottles that were for sale. I wondered who Joseph Fine was and decided to go in and look around. For years, I had played around with painting when I was bored, in need of some physical form of meditation. My work was a combination of action painting, abstract expressionism, finger painting—all with no training, grace, or talent. Stumbling upon that school on Clement reminded me of the times I'd promised myself to take painting lessons one day. I decided to enroll in a class whatever the school was like and turn casual painting into an integral part of my new life. It would also bind me in a specific way to the Clement world I was beginning to create as a way of providing some transition to my indefinite future. And it was a way to jump into an arena where I could once more encounter the freshness and excitement of learning things I knew nothing about. It would be new, not a renewal, a childlike pleasure. My current journey's goal was not to regain energy to enter the same old frustrating struggles with renewed energy, but to find a new way to grow and be useful without bringing along

the old baggage. I was beginning to admit to myself that many of my theories about educating children were neither relevant nor effective anymore.

I walked into the studio and asked to talk to Joseph Fine. A charming, soft-spoken Chinese couple in their mid-forties came out of the back room to talk to me. They were laughing—there was no Joseph Fine, it was the **Joseph Fine Arts School**, and the man introduced himself as Joseph Yan. The studio and school were run by him and his wife, Janny. They said they would be honored to have me as a student.

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part
of the day,
Or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.*

—WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

The Joseph Fine Arts School is located in a storefront squeezed between a small Chinese market and a Vietnamese restaurant. It runs from Clement Street all the way through to a backyard sculpture garden and fountain. The front room is for sales of art supplies and some imported Chinese art. There are three other rooms along an open corridor leading to the small sculpture garden at the back. The second room is for intermediate and advanced calligraphy and advanced painting. It is also serves as Janny's working

place. The third room is for sketching and beginning painting. The last room is for sculpture and other forms of clay modeling. Altogether, about 120 students attend the school during a week.

In the two painting rooms there are tables, some long and some short. At each of the tables there are painting positions set up. A painting station consists of an easel pushed toward the back of the table, an armature to hold brushes, a folded napkin, several plates and small saucers for mixing colors and for ink, and a large rectangular piece of flannel placed on the table.

There were no students present when I wandered into the school, and the setup of the painting positions puzzled me. The easel was pushed so far away from the chair that it would be difficult to reach. And the flannel and tidily folded napkin made no sense to me. I was intrigued and decided that this might be the new and challenging place I was seeking at this stage in my life.

The small ceramic and sculpture studio at the back, leading to an elaborate concrete fountain sculpted and designed by Joseph, also has a kiln and several small potting wheels.

In the inner painting room is a corner set up for pencil drawing. There is a stand for an object, a lamp to light it, and a small easel.

There are Chinese paintings on all of the walls throughout the school. Most of them are Joseph's and Janny's, though some are the works of present and past students.

The entire place is a miracle of packaging. There is no wasted space, yet at the same time it doesn't feel crowded. It was clear to me that someone with a sophisticated spatial sense had designed the school. The source of that aesthetic and spatial intelligence

turned out to be Joseph and Janny. They transformed an empty storefront into an elegant, gracious learning environment that projected order, calm, serious work, and playfulness. Usually I enter new places cautiously and with a healthy dose of skepticism probably born out of some of my experiences growing up in the Bronx. But here I immediately felt at home—there was a fairy-tale feeling about my entering Joseph and Janny’s world, as if they were waiting for me to take my place in the story. Of course, they weren’t, and I wonder what they felt about this older white man walking into their school.

I am certainly not an expert on Chinese painting, but I have been intrigued by it for years. I have looked at Chinese paintings in museums without knowing anything about their history, their relation to one another, the provinces they were painted in, their historical contexts, and/or styles, techniques, and genres. I am literate about much of Western and modern painting and sculpture and feel familiar with their history and character. My tastes are rather broad, and I love seeing one style morph into another over time and to see individual artists transform the traditions they inherit through their own genius. But I knew none of this about Chinese painting. When I entered Joseph’s, I could not name one Chinese painter, could not articulate any variations in style or period in the paintings I had viewed in museums and art books, or speculate on the deeper content of the works I saw. Because I couldn’t read the poems that are calligraphed directly onto the paintings and whose content is integral to the meaning of the work, many dimensions of the art were inaccessible to me. My knowledge was episodic, and the pleasure I took from the paintings had as much to

do with my fantasies about what they meant as with what was actually on the silk or rice paper surfaces. To me they were de-contextualized, authorless, generic works much like the African and Oceanic art I still enjoy looking at in museums.

The most puzzling and moving thing to me about Chinese landscape painting was the scale of nature to human life. The people are so small, so modestly placed in overwhelming natural environments, that the latter seem to have more life in them than the people. And the proportion and light are so different from those in Western painting. The air is so clear, the light so diffuse, and the sense of distance so molded by color that perspective and viewpoint, as I understood them in Western painting, are confounded. This is all my personal impression, of course. There is Chinese portrait painting, paintings of birds and flowers and trees, festive and ceremonial people-centered work, and so on. Chinese painting is every bit as varied and complex as Western art, but for me Chinese painting had always meant landscape painting. However, I didn't think much about Chinese paintings when I wasn't passing through a room of them at a museum or skimming through an art book. So when I decided to take lessons at Joseph's, it wasn't particularly for the sake of learning Chinese painting, but for some compelling need I felt to learn in Joseph and Janny's school. My intuition told me to take them on as teachers. Being a student at their school might satisfy my need to escape from everyday worries about my program and metaphysical worries about aging. It would certainly provide a new adventure, which was just what I longed for.

During hard times, I often feel the compelling need for new

growth. For me, learning has always been a form of healing as well as an incentive to growth. To accomplish this, I have always sought new teachers to help me learn in different ways, since the old ways have obviously stopped working. Choosing the right teacher is as important as choosing the right therapist or minister. Joseph and Janny seemed right as teachers, though I had no specific reason to believe it. It was simply a matter of intuition. I like to take chances, and in this case, I had nothing to lose. Their school was so disorienting and attractive that I signed up right away. However, I stayed away from taking a class in Chinese painting—it was just too far out of my experience, and I was afraid to embrace it without some preparation. So I took the conservative path and chose to take pencil drawing for a semester.

For my first drawing lesson, Joseph set up and lit a vase and asked me to draw it. As simple as that. No formal lesson, no manual of technique, no preliminaries. I sat staring at the vase, semiparalyzed, not having the slightest idea how to begin. I sat without putting a mark on my paper.

After a while, Joseph noticed me, came over, and simply said, “I’ll show you how to begin.” He picked up a pencil and drew the outline of one side of the vase and told me to look at the way it was shaded and to begin shading it. His manner was so encouraging and supportive that I reached out and began drawing. I improved quite a lot and relaxed under Joseph’s gentle tutelage. My line became a bit more graceful, and my drawings began to take on volume and weight. The objects I drew became more complex as the semester went on, and it was clear that I was making progress. But I was bored with drawing. Painting was more excit-

ing and seductive. It was the landscapes that attracted me most because they echoed the beauty of the landscapes I live within in Point Arena. At the end of the semester, I decided to ask Joseph if I could take a beginning landscape painting class. He said yes.

My study in Point Arena, California, is surrounded by redwood trees and rock roses, a South African plant that is deer resistant and requires no care other than a few friendly words and a little clipping every few years. I planted the rock roses about twenty years ago. There were two of them about ten inches high, each of which could fit into a medium-size flowerpot. Now they are about four and a half feet high, and the two plants, having run together, create a bush about fifteen feet long. Behind the study is a pond with goldfish and some bottom-feeders. The pond is surrounded by redwoods, fir, alders, pines, madrone, ferns, bracken, and wild shrubs and bushes. I have lived within that landscape since 1977, though I have never painted, filmed, or photographed it. And, sadly, Judy and I have hardly had any time to live at home for about fifteen years, commuting as we have to New York first and then, at the time I began my lessons, to San Francisco.

For a Bronx boy, it's been strange living in the country for over twenty-five years, surrounded by redwoods, a few miles from dairy farms and wild and beautiful beaches. The nearest town has a population of under five hundred. Perhaps there was some subliminal thought, when I decided upon learning to do Chinese landscapes, to painting my way home.

When I showed up for my first lesson, Joseph indicated that I would be in the beginners' class and gave me the tools needed for this new adventure—four animal-hair bamboo brushes, two

small, one medium, and one large; rice paper; a bottle of Chinese black ink; and a box of Chinese watercolors, which are made of minerals and organic pigments and don't represent the same color spectrum of Western paintings. There are more earth colors, browns, reds, and vermilions, a yellow, three blues, and white, and one green. Each color has its particular application, and I have still not used them all.

I realized at this ceremonial moment that I would be giving up thoughts of oils and canvas. I would not be working directly from nature, like Cézanne, van Gogh, Poussin, and Turner. Instead I would be giving myself to something thoroughly unknown to me—painting Chinese. Having accepted Joseph as a teacher, I was thus obligated to be a willing and voluntary student, to follow wherever he guided me.

After paying for the brushes and other tools for painting, I followed Joseph to the back painting room, where he settled me at a painting station. I unwrapped my brushes and set them in an armature to my right. Then I opened the box of paints and put them on my left with the bottle of ink. Joseph told me to unroll one sheet of rice paper and place it on the flannel that was in front of me on the table. The flannel would absorb any paint or water that bled through the paper. Then Joseph brought me two coffee cups half filled with water and a folded paper napkin and placed them near the brushes. The easel remained empty, and for the first time I realized that the easel was not for painting. I would be working on the flat surface of the table, painting downward rather than in an upright position as I was accustomed to do when I dabbled with painting at home.

This prepainting ritual—unwrapping the brushes, setting up the painting station, getting water, folding a napkin, placing paper on the flannel mat, and preparing to paint—has become second nature to me. I find it calming, a moment when I move from the pressure of the day to the serene and complex world of Chinese landscape painting.

For that first class, I anticipated meeting a number of Chinese people who could teach me how to play Chinese chess (I love games from all over the world) and introduce me to some aspects of Chinese culture in San Francisco that I had no access to. I took the seat Joseph assigned to me. He had carefully thought out the seating arrangement. There were six painting places and six students (some of my subsequent classes were smaller). There were two desks to my left and three across from me at another table that faced toward the sculpture studio.

The other students began to arrive. The first two went right to their places and prepared to work. The other three, who were first-time students like me, waited for Joseph to help them.

The students were all Chinese or Chinese American. Two of them were five years old, two seven, and one six. Four of them were girls. In terms of skill, I was placed in the right class, but it was a shock. When Joseph said “beginning,” he meant it. Education is not age specific for him. Two of the children had taken a prior beginners’ class, and they were familiar with the rituals and routines of the work. The experienced painters took out their set of brushes and put them into the armature. They opened their boxes of colors and placed them on the table alongside their bottle of ink; each went to the sink and got two cups of water, and then