



GREAT RETREATS

An Inn Where the Guests Come Third

And the best workshop is to play

EDITOR'S NOTE: *My wife, Mary, and I recently had a retreat on the Mendocino Coast at an eco-resort called the Stanford Inn. The inn is run by a remarkable couple, Jeff and Joan Stanford, and Jeff is not joking when he lists the priorities of the inn: animals first, staff second, and guests third. That means the resort grounds and gardens are certified organic, the dining is entirely vegan, the staff are passionate about what they do, and if you want milk for your coffee, bring it! A lifelong paddler, I spent hours in the boathouse on the river with the boatman learning the fine points of their redwood outrigger canoes—arguably the best couples canoeing experience one is going to find. I also asked Joan about the heart of the resort, and she took me to her play shop. She wrote this explanation, which really does get to the heart of the retreat.*

THERE IS A SAYING that we teach what we most need to learn. Here at our Inn, I offer play shops inviting often overstressed adults to reclaim their child-self, who delights in playful exploration. I am sharing what I discovered years ago, when I stepped out of my stressed life and definitely out of my comfort zone: the transformative power of expressive art making and play. Like most lessons, once learned, repeated practice is needed—so I created the play shop.

Connecting to creativity is essential to our health, and it is life-enhancing and empowering, yet many of us, while vigilant about diet, exercise, and mindfulness, omit any creative practice. The coloring-book phenomenon suggests an unmet need. Coloring within lines is relaxing, but the power lies in creating, in discovering and expressing inner imagery. My approach is more about a spiritual connection to the inner self through imagery.

Although I am a registered board-certified art therapist who has witnessed dramatic therapeutic benefits, I avoid

the word *therapy* and instead emphasize the idea of play and its vital role in our life. Asking someone to create art can be intimidating, while inviting someone to play with art materials sounds like fun. And playing arouses the child spirit necessary to silence the inner critic. Playing is about process, not product. Playing feels lighthearted.

I start each session with a warm-up exercise to elicit intuition. I ask my participant to select three objects from a table covered with hundreds of items chosen to evoke random associations; for example, a miniature rocking chair, a seashell, a feather, a clenched fist, a key, a stop-watch, a small teddy bear missing an arm, a lion. I encourage the person to quickly survey the objects and then spontaneously pick up whatever attracts without trying to determine why. I follow along, and then we write a short piece beginning, “I am. . .” for each of the three items. I want the writing to be free from judgment and focused on the object’s qualities or whatever the object suggests. After writing the three “I am. . .” pieces, we do another that synthesizes all three. Sometimes I suggest a fairytale approach, “Once upon a time, a wounded teddy bear found a dappled feather with magical powers. . .”

My guiding principle is that there are no rules: no right, no wrong. I want people to feel completely free to explore, and I provide no other directive than “explore-write.” If the participant is resistant to the writing, I have been ready to suggest an alternative warm-up, but after several years this

has never been necessary. In fact, most people are surprised by how effortless it is to start writing. They are surprised that their writing reveals something about their own lives and find themselves excited to explore more.

The rest of the time in the play shop is tailored to whatever the person wants to do.

The environment invites the imagination to come alive and tempts even a timid first-timer. Stimulated by an array of

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A Connoisseur Inspects the Latest “Daub” by the Outsider Artist, Nathaniel Kitten, 1876
DD McInnes/The Litus Gallery

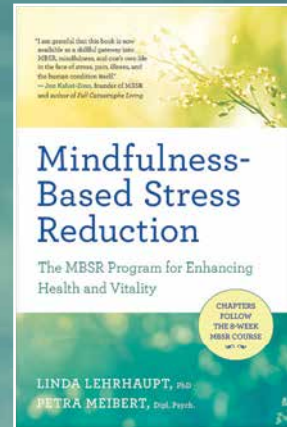
materials set out—paints; papers of all textures, colors, and designs; markers; feathers; jewels; colored pencils; ribbons; found objects; and trinkets—the child-self awakens and jumps in. The person can make anything: a mask, a shield, a nest, a collage, a painting, a creature, or a doll from these many options. I encourage following whatever arises without concern for the outcome; to play as a child does for the joy of discovery. I offer complete permission to do whatever—a liberating experience in itself. This is about the pleasure of creating, but what emerges often carries meaning or healing that can become apparent later with reflection.

Most spiritual practices are intended to increase awareness and compassion for the self and for others, to allow receptivity to what life presents rather than resistance and resentment. I grappled with the basic existential questions: How do I learn

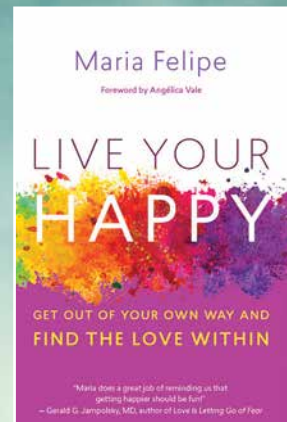
to love this life I am given, the life I am living, with an open and grateful heart? How do I create meaning and make peace with my internal conflicts, with my vulnerability and the mystery of life itself, with loss and change as givens? Expressive art making became my practice, and the process served as metaphor. I learned to surrender to the materials, to work with mistakes, to abandon perfectionism. I was rule maker and rule breaker; I was empowered and active. I discovered perspective, balance, and value, and saw wholeness made up of parts. My curiosity about “what if. . .” led to wonder, excitement, engagement—allowing me to greet each day with the openness I so desired. And playing was pleasurable and joyful. Each collage held a message but, like a whisper one has to strain to hear, required my quiet attention, my focused reflection, to receive.

—JOAN STANFORD
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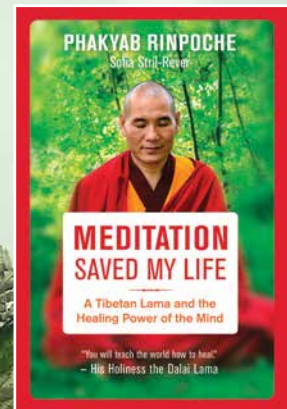
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