

Cheselyn Amato – Statement
February 19, 2012

I live my life as an artist and as a person as if every day is a sanctuary itself. I make art to create sanctity and sanctuary for myself, and as prayer, and as offering of sanctity and sanctuary for others. I feel compelled – both within ordinary and extraordinary time, that is, both in everyday time and sacred ritual time – to create a meeting place between the two – to bring the ordinary and the extraordinary, the everyday and the special together and to allow all of life to be sanctified and resonant in all its dimensions.

I am moved to embody my experience because of and in honor of awe, sublimity and delight. I love surprise and spectacle; I love light, color, pattern, rhythm, geometry, gesture, symmetry and asymmetry, movement and sound, mystical harkening and synchronistic presentments, and the unyielding experience, how wonderfully so, of meaning and its amplification in the most mundane to the most heightened contexts, from the familiar, comprehended and predictable to the unexpected, inexplicable, ridiculous, and absurd to the odd, haunting, ominous, and even terrifying to the marvelous, mysterious and miraculous. These phenomena occur in the course of life and nature as givens, a cornucopia of beautiful and enchanting experience, perception and sensation. And, there is double joy because these effects are caused as well as by human acts of design, all that we conceive and construct.

With sheer awareness, engagement, savoring, gratitude, celebration and service at the core of my impulse, inspiration and aspiration, I, as the artist, use whatever materials appear imbued to me to carry my intentions. Anything at all can turn out to be resonant or to be a vessel, channel, conduit or system to carry or ferry resonance. Making art is one of my responses to the passionate and compelling need I feel to represent and present the resonant meetings of phenomenal and numinous presence – what can be seen and what cannot be seen, but which equally exist.

For the last 7 or 8 years, I have been working with a color radiant mirror film that reflects and projects colored light phenomena just by being illuminated by a light source. The frequencies of color are revealed as shapes and choreographies of color on surfaces that catch the projecting rays produced either by being reflected up and against a surface above or by passing through the material and projecting against a surface below. What is most important to me about the material is that it is ephemeral, that what I make out of it hardly exists materially, and yet is a material effect. As a matter of fact, there is so much effect, it is hard to quite understand where it is coming from and what it is, but there is no trickery, no complex behind the scenes mechanics, nothing is hidden, the means are absolutely overt and apparent, just this thin flexible film and a bit of light, and voila! Still though that gorgeous gift we call suspension of disbelief happens, and what is there more exciting and delighting than that experience. Believing something because we choose to suspend what we know intentionally to allow powerful mythic energies to be unleashed. How lovely to be human for this.

Within a Jewish perspective/frame of reference, my work is similar in form to the mystical way of reading Torah and to the structure of the Jewish mystical Tree of Life.

The Torah is read on four levels, PaRDeS, which means garden in Hebrew: P for Peshat, the plain or literal reading; R for Remez, the allegorical reading given as hints and allusions in the text; D for Derash, the metaphorical and homiletic reading, interpretive and authoritative commentary regarding truths and principles given within the text; and S for Sod, the secret and hidden mystical meaning embedded and encoded in the text.

The Tree of Life of Jewish mysticism – Kabbalah – exists on four levels or in four worlds: Atzilut, World of Emanation and Nearness (Chayah, Nothingness, Spirit, Fire); Beriah, World of Creation (Neshamah, Something from Nothing, Thought, Intellect, Mind, Air); Yetzirah, World of Formation, (Ruach, Something from Something, Emotion, Feeling, Sensation, Speech, Heart, Water); and Assiyah, World of Action and Body (Nefesh, Completion, earth, matter and energy). This is a love affair between Adonai, the masculine aspect of G-d, standing outside of time and Shekinah, the Presence that Dwells Amongst Us, standing close inside of time. Baruch Hu and Baruch Hee. Blessed is the Union of the Masculine and the Feminine in Time as Sanctity, Sanctification and Sanctuary. How wonderful the water, mem, mayim, mother, womb that loves us always and unconditionally, and the fire, esh, aysh, ayin shin, ner tamid, unwavering flame, beacon of light, kindled and burning, always and forever.

Because I myself experience so much that is and happens on multiple levels at the same time most of the time –affirmed and exacerbated by codified systems that exist in collective experience (i.e. four levels of Torah reading and the four worlds of Kabbalah) – I have found that my art work is yet another expression of synchronistic simultaneity, so delicious, so enchanting, that I am swept up by a kind of necessity to re-iterate and re-present in art, as a light-worker, as a spiritual care provider, as a college teacher, as an administrator in an academic institution, the joy and the ecstasy of being alive, of living. Paying very close attention to living leads to the discovery of one’s place in the cosmos and on the planet, and thus to contributing to the greater whole which is a good thing and a goal to have. Living fully takes us on a journey “home”, to knowing ourselves intimately that is necessary for a deep sense of belonging and for feelings of inclusion in the collective – from global to local to personal – the value of which is the generation of love, that makes the world go ‘round! Living in a whole and full way teaches us how to incorporate the dying that we are ultimately doing at the same time. Living and dying are intimately bonded, and the more we choose to mindfully and consciously and receptively encounter and engage with the bond, the more amazing life gets, and in the easy AND hard times. Hallelujah and Omen.

About multi-layeredness, my spiritual profile is a layered one, I love my inherited Jewish identity – I am an impassioned mystical Jewish practitioner and artist committed to tikkun olam (healing of the world) through synergistic interdependence of diverse humanity around the globe. I have traveled deeply into its extensive varied expression; I have chosen to learn about many spiritual traditions and practices with deep curiosity, respect and appreciation about many spiritual traditions, and to directly experience some of them to different degrees. I am a secular humanist. I am a sensualist and aesthete and intellectual and poet and dreamer and a reflective analyst, and sometimes a fear monger and sometimes one brave cat. I can be squeamish, but I can also look dead toward the unknown with relish.

The bulk of my shepherding and ferrying – for over 25 years – has been as a teacher and advisor of many, many young people and adult learners in college across treacherous parts of that river. In the last year, my dying beloved father and I, my brother and mother did his dying together, and it was a good dying, and everything that I had been wanting and needing and anticipating and longing to know and feel about death became revealed. It was a sublime and life-changing experience. I also recognized that I had found what I am to do next, a welcomed awareness after being in a process of reinvention as a earning worker in the world – from a no longer viable career teaching art in college to what I must feel called to what I do for a living. For me career, job, professionalism, earning are all wrapped up together. After his stroke, he breathed unassisted and with a minimum of fluid for a month, until he was ready to go. Although he never could open his eyes, and he could not show his consciousness, he could kiss us. He left when he felt that everyone was able to comfortably stand as ushering witnesses to his departure.

That dying has continuity and contiguity with living was first shown/revealed to me when I was in my second year of college in 1977:

First, let me speak about death. I learned what remains as the most revealing demonstration of what death is, and in this moment, I can also say, I saw what the end of being-toward-death looks like. I found it in the dying of a pigeon that I happened upon one day, nearly 40 years ago. Walking along, I saw a pigeon wobbling about, more or less in a circular pattern. I didn't feel comfortable trying to pick it up to take it somewhere, so I decided to remain as witness to the event. I simply remained there, and some hours passed. It wasn't about that kind of time. It was about being there with this being. My being-ness was disclosed and uncovered in the presence of the being of the pigeon in the pigeon's being-ness.

Eventually, something changed. The pigeon tipped over, and then something timeless happened; something became a nothing whose infinitude as eternal quantum energy became visible. The wings of the bird folded perfectly into one another and enclosed the body of the bird such that the whole became a perfect egg-form. I "saw" the endless eternity of the something of "Nothingness" in the dissipation of temporality; the wings closed over the bird in slow motion and fast-forward at the same time. I "saw" transcendence as a process of release, not so much of a soul exiting a body, but I saw in some way this bird's time between birth and death being counted along lines in all directions all at once away and toward the body of the bird. In the moment of the death of the bird was all the time of its being. Its clock longevity was folded without beginning or end into the Timeless Being of time-ness being, of the time of its being from beginning to end. Its Being There was specified. The indefiniteness had been made definite by its definite finitude of being in time. In that moment, Being was revealed.

Being had never been more uncovered than at that moment. I saw that the bird was the appearance of the bird; I saw that the bird was not only the appearance of the bird; I saw that the life-time of the bird was liberated or freed or released in some way; I saw that time and transcendence might be the same thing; I saw in the dying to death of the bird that its Being and its being were inseparable.

The fundamental experience of my father dying, and the amazing medical and spiritual care process that supported us at Saint Barnabas hospital in NJ was a sublime and life-changing

experience. I recognized that I had found what I am to do next, a welcomed awareness after being in a process of reinvention as a earning worker in the world – from a no longer viable career teaching art in college to what – for a bit of a while. It had not been an easy journey finding myself needing to make a significant shift in mid-life. I remain an artist, but have had to find a different earning job from the art teaching and advising I had done my whole career to date. To move forward authentically and well, truly successfully, I must feel called to what I do for a living. For me meaning, purpose, efficacy, qualification, career, job, professionalism, and earning are all wrapped up together. I feel quite sure that spiritual care service is an authentic, natural and realistic extension and continuation, transformation evolution addition of my expertise as an artist, teacher, and advisor and my devotion to spiritual life and interreligious, interfaith activism.

My life/spirit journey since that time has been enthralling and enchanting and terribly treacherous too. I have become from time to time mired on spurs here and there on the way. I have lived quite a few lives during the thirty years spanning the dying of the pigeon and the dying of my father. The dying of my father gave me the human aspect of what I had learned from the animal's dying. In the last few months – on December 25th with many of her beloveds around her – a second most dear person to me, my most treasured spiritual kinswoman and mentor, passed. I am certainly not as seasoned as some, but I know that I have been initiated and tested, and I am grateful for receiving the opportunity to I am an interfaith and interreligious worker for healing, peace and love; I am an activist for expanding our awareness about and interconnectedness of living and dying. By actively and proactively making awareness of dying and death a part of our living, we have a chance at lives wildly worth living and dying. If we notice and allow it, we die who knows how many deaths within a lifetime, and if we are paying attention, those dyings truly can lay the ground for our own active participation in the death of our bodies when that time is present.

Research on caring for those who are sick, dying, grieving, mourning and re-entering the ordinary world again that has taken me to hospice volunteer training, to the field of clinical pastoral service, chaplaincy and pastoral/ministerial ordination. I am aided in overcoming the last significant barriers in myself to embracing living and dying with equanimity, especially in the light of the passing of beloveds, Dad and Blanca. My life has been dedicated to the wild mystery of human being. I have spent my life deeply enmeshed in living and dying. I have done that mostly as a visual artist, thinker, poet, teacher, advisor, family member, friend and world citizen with passionate, tireless, and tenacious zest and zeal. I am ready with all my might and all my soul to embark on the next part of my journey which is to become an adept spiritual care provider in the healthcare, hospital, hospice setting.