

## Sober Play

Sober Play suggestions are a chance to do something creative right now. They're easy, simple, and fun. In Part V, you'll find a recap of the full Sober Play activities list, suggested materials for the artmaking experiences, and ways to take these exercises deeper.

### Writing

- Spend a few minutes with a family photo album and choose a photo of a person whose face intrigues you. It may be of a relative you don't know well or at all, it may be of an old friend, it may be of someone loved and lost. Write a letter from that person to you and a letter back from you (make up any details you need).
- Open a drawer in your bathroom and take out any three objects. Write a conversation between the objects in which they discuss you.
- "When Sally opened the door, a very tiny man stood there holding a very large duck." Write a one-page story that starts with this sentence.

### Artmaking

- Make something ugly! Challenge yourself to make something really UGLY! Choose only the ugliest colors of crayons and draw only the ugliest things. Glue down cut out shapes or collage images that will make it even more hideous. Then ask yourself, "What would make this even uglier?" Have fun with this!
- Make a collage self-portrait by piecing together images that represent different parts of who you were, who you are and who you want to be. It doesn't have to look like a person: it's just a collection of images that represent who you are.
- Make an ink blot critter. Using watercolors or thin tempera paints, dribble several colors of paint on a piece of paper. Before the paint dries, fold the paper in quarters. Then open it up and let it dry flat. Once it's dry, find crazy animals or creatures in the paint, just like you would find characters in the clouds. Use a pen, pencil, or even crayons to outline the animals, flesh out the shapes (real or imaginary), and add details like eyes, fangs, or whiskers.

## **Part II**

### **Creativity and Recovery**

*Out of chaos and uncertainty, the creative person  
concerns himself with making a meaningful life.*

—Pamela K. Metz, **The Creative Tao**

## **1 Creativity as process**

One of the benefits of practicing creative self-expression (aka artmaking in some form) is that it is often a rich and meaningful experience of process. As I write this, my mind and heart are engaged in a number of activities. Choosing the next ideas from among many, choosing the words to express them, organizing them, crafting them. **It's a process I've grown accustomed to as a writer and it is usually invisible to me.**

Similarly when I paint, I make dozens of small decisions in each minute: color, stroke, placement, to smudge or keep sharp, juxtaposition of line and shape. I zoom in and **pan out for different perspectives on the image or the paragraph. It's a complex** process, but when I let go of thinking about the complexity and just do it, my mind is fully engaged, and my anxiety and restlessness and boredom slip away.

## **2 Recovery as process**

Learning to be comfortable in process is a good thing for those of us in recovery. When I drank, I drank to get numb. I wanted to get as far away from the process of living my life as I could because that process felt unbearable. But when we get sober, we have to be in the process all our waking hours. This, I think, is one of the true meanings of **"one day at a time."** **Not only do we not drink or use one day at a time, but we are** asked to be in our lives one day, one minute at a time. We are asked to stay in the process.

**For that's what recovery is—a process, and a complex one. There is no product, no** being done with recovery. We stay in it, and we make choices, both conscious and unconscious. We observe it and we do it. Immersing myself in writing and painting as processes has made recovery easier and richer for me.

My friend Lindy Fox often says that every day in recovery, we have a choice to make. We can choose to be well or we can choose to be sick and crazy. Part of being well for me is choosing to do something creative.

## **3 Grace in the creative process**

Early this week, I had an amazing experience at the studio. I'd been struggling with a cold for a few days and had pretty low energy. But I had left a painting not quite

finished and wanted to complete it. I knew that it wouldn't take too long so down to the studio I went. The building was quiet (my studio is a coop where 22 artists work), and I put on my iPod and settled into reds and pale yellows. In a half-hour, I was finished. It wasn't one of my best but it had some good moments.

I hated to leave. I had at least an hour more that I could be there, but I didn't feel up to starting another big piece. So I cast around for something to do.

In the opening chapter of my first novel, which I finished a few years ago, the main character is watching his best friend orchestrate the weaving of yards of colored silk into a split-rail fence. For the last couple of years, I've wanted to paint something I could use on the cover of the novel if I ever self-published it. But the dozen efforts I'd made so far had been pretty awful. I just couldn't get the fence to look right, let alone weave the colors in.

A few days before I'd found a website for a fence company in North Carolina. The fence and the forest looked a bit more like what I had envisioned, so I downloaded a couple of the photos. Now in the studio, I pulled them out and got some colored pencils and a big scrap of paper and began playing with drawing the fence from the photo. Again, the first effort was unsatisfying. But I didn't feel disheartened. I was in a light mood and happy to just be in process, so I turned the paper over and got out some harder pastels I don't use often and tried again. This time, somehow, I just knew how to draw the fence. It wasn't something I figured out. It was a knowing that descended on me.

And I relaxed into it and I knew I needed to do a third drawing and this time on black paper. So I scrounged around and found the only black thing I had, the backing off a pad of drawing paper, and I redid the drawing in about 10 minutes. It was perfect—just what I had wanted. Being willing to go with and stay in the process manifested a product I couldn't get when I tried for it. I call this grace.

#### **4 The grace of sobriety**

The spiritual experience of grace was not evident to me until I'd been sober a few years. When I first heard the saying "There but for the grace of God..." in meetings, I heard it as gratitude that my drinking life had been no worse than it was. Gratitude that I hadn't killed anybody driving drunk or ruined my health or had children who had suffered from my numbed feelings and bad choices.

It took me a while to understand that my own actions weren't the only thing keeping

me sober. I learned that out of the 20 people in my treatment group, only two of us were still sober at the end of a year, a sad 10% statistic that continues to prove true about those who enter recovery. Knowing this didn't make me feel special or proud of myself. It made me curious.

I know that my intelligence didn't get me sober. I've been blessed with a good amount of smarts and have always been a good student and a quick thinker. But all of that was no match for alcohol, which, as we know, is "cunning, baffling, and powerful." I could not think myself sober any more than I could will myself sober.

I found out years after I "graduated" from the treatment center that the staff there had a pool on me. They'd had college professors come through treatment before and the longest any of them had lasted was a week. The staff were sure I'd follow suit. Professors apparently believed they were smarter than the other patients, smarter than the counselors. **Elitism, snobbery—that's what the staff believed.** But I think it was fear. These other academics had gotten themselves into a place where the intelligence they counted on was of no help. Only courage and willingness were going to be of any use, and my guess is they weren't sure how to call on those.

I stuck out the 28 days. I now know this acceptance, this persistence was grace.

## **5 Courage and willingness are key to both processes**

Courage and willingness are probably the two most important things in the sobriety tool-kit. The courage to change and the willingness to find another way. And to keep finding another way, not just once and for all but one day at a time. Recovery is a long-term apprenticeship. **We don't get recovered.** We are in recovery, continually learning how to create a life that supports sobriety. Process, not product. Progress, not perfection.

Courage and willingness are also essential tools in creative self-expression. The courage to learn about the medium of expression that we've been called to or have chosen. The willingness to show up to the computer screen, to the musical instrument, to the canvas, to the garden, to the potter's wheel, and play. The courage to try new things, to keep expanding our repertoire of skills and possibilities. The willingness to move through periods of discouragement, of boredom, of emotional discomfort, and keep showing up.

A great deal of creative self-expression is showing up to the work. A great deal of

sobriety is showing up for life instead of turning away.

## **6 Full creative self-expression**

When we show up regularly to meetings, to phone calls with our sponsor or sponsees, to daily meditation and prayer, these activities become habits, good habits. Our recovery goes deeper and becomes more solid, something we can count on to sustain us when times get tough.

Similarly, when we show up regularly to our creative practice, when we go to dance group or sit down at that latest short story or spend some time every day at our collage table or drawing board, creating and making become habits, good habits. We honor our need for fun, for meaning, for joy, and that enhances and supports our recovery.

**Full creative self-expression:** The regular and sustained practice of creating and making for personal enrichment, fulfillment, and joy.