

## Sheltering in Place—Painting My Way Through COVID

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The 2020 onset of COVID-19 in the United States brought new restrictions, including the use of masks and social distancing from others. The isolation from family and friends, from community activities, and, for children, school by video, took the biggest tolls. As in other difficult situations, I turned to my painting journal for additional support.

My painting journal approach, a method I developed many years ago, relies on spontaneity. Each page begins without a plan and without words. The paint brush moves as if on a slow meandering path, thus allowing material and imagery from an inner wordless place, be it from the heart, the spirit, or the psyche, to appear on the page. I developed this approach to navigate the obstacles in my life that kept me from moving forward and making positive changes. I was afraid of making mistakes—flexibility felt unsafe.

One important benefit of this journaling process is the self-discovery it engenders. The very risk of making a dot, a line, or a shape outside the confines of perfectionism reveals just what gets in the way of allowing simple play. To paint this freely rubs against the more critical aspects of the self. The ego wants what it wants, protecting and keeping the persona and the familiar and beloved states of self intact. The cultural value put on beauty does not welcome “different.” Painting this way calls for a desire to know oneself. It calls for courage while also offering a place to just be.

After years of engaging with my own inner critics through this process, bringing them into conversation, giving them faces on the page, my adventures are less hampered by a judging mind. As you will see on the following pages, I know what to do should any arise.

As I painted each day during COVID, I found relief in creating imagery that revealed the fear and uncertainty I was carrying. At that time the news was filled with not only ever-changing health protocols and rising COVID death numbers, but also a constant barrage of upheaval on the national political front. Our world was not the same.

I chose the following selection of pages painted during this time because I find they reveal an almost magical quality in which the inner, silent creative partner doesn't just show up but does so with daring, with humor, and with heart.

I took photos of the initial wandering brushstroke for the first two pages I did. I've included them here so you may see a bit of the progression. Start and finish. In this exploratory process, lines and shapes are the basic elements. If a mark suggests a possible image—the next play is to simply make it. This is not about rendering life-like form but about improvisation. If no image is suggested, then play continues with more lines, more colors, more shapes.

March 28, 2020



it was in pain. I too felt pain because the image seemed to disturb the nature and love I felt was in the rest of the picture. But, so be it. Wasn't this just what was happening in real time?

March 30, 2020



This page started with gray paint and I let my brush slowly take a walk around the page, twisting, circling, going up and down, and around. I filled in a few lines that suggested a beak and an eye but went no further with it.

I thought I saw the lines of a torso next—and right away the figure I made reminded me of my niece, so I added her cat in her arms. People are getting such comfort from their animals. Painting her felt good, loving. Out of the lines on the left I made a robin—it was springtime, after all, and the robin sings of hope and the coming season.

At this point I knew that the larger beak and eye I'd started earlier needed to be revealed. As I made the yellow bird's head I felt an old worry arise—"this isn't going to be pretty"—but kept going because to do so meant staying with myself and allowing the innocence of the image to emerge. The finished creature looked to me like some kind of "COVID bird" and

A wandering stroke with black paint. I saw a snake and a footprint shape pretty quickly. I also noted the possibility of a dog in the lower-left corner. "But I don't know how to do a dog," my head says. "Oh well, give it a go. Why not?" The pooch holds a cup of coffee probably because I had one while I was working.

Hint: Everything is fodder for the process. Imagery will often draw from my day—movies, books, a dream, or whatever items lie around me.





holding a section of the broken flagpole. They are playing chess to pass the endless days.

**April 16, 2020**



saddened, kneeling Demeter. Perhaps Demeter will laugh and turn the dry earth green again.

**May 2, 2020**



An “aha” moment arose as I enlarged the snake and put an American flag behind it. I heard the words, “Don’t tread on me.” Without intention, I’d created a visual map of all the anger and fear I’d bottled up in response to the daily onslaught of news.

The paradoxical piece is, I had fun painting the page. I didn’t feel angry at any time. Instead this remarkable process helped me make visible an inner conflict. And of course, I love a visual joke. Note the dog in the lower-right corner is

Red and green shapely strokes led to a figure. I created a woman kneeling. For her, like me, the salon is now taboo, so her long white hair hangs braided over one shoulder. She seems to be holding herself together. Is she on a yoga mat or a magic carpet? I don’t know. Some other little green brush marks looked like fingernails so I added a hand. The hand turned into the skirt of a woman’s dress. I saw this new figure as Baubo, an early bawdy Greek goddess. She is doing a “finger dance” for the

Strong feelings arose during the making of this page. There is story here too and it comes to me as I paint. The yellow creature is trying to protect these sweet little babies from danger, perhaps from death. The creature is itself very frightened, anxiously looking off toward the coming threat. I actually was thinking of all we don’t see off camera—in homes, in hospitals, in funeral parlors. I added the short-repeated strokes I made on his head

and don't know what they are supposed to be, but at the end I found myself hearing the words "a crown of thorns." Who is to be sacrificed? I feel the pain of the creature. I feel pain for the place in which we find ourselves.

## **Beyond Words**

Color, line, and shape have always been my primary means of expression since I was young. However, in my forties, when I began painting from the imagination and from an uncensored place, my visual voice transformed into something rich, personal, and always surprising. Surprising—because that wandering brush reveals what I don't know how to put into words. And so often what I didn't even know I had in me to say. Far from limiting, the practice of keeping a painting journal provides space for reinvention, reflection, and insight because it is always fresh and spontaneous.

## **Biography**

Barbara Barry is an artist, art teacher, and writer who, out of her own process, developed a method of journaling in images rather than words. Her book, *Painting Your Way Out of a Corner: The Art of Getting Unstuck*, guides readers to explore this unique approach. Barbara teaches art classes to adults and children in person in southern Massachusetts where she lives and also offers individualized online lessons. In addition, she has led groups in art projects such as making oversized mandalas using an improvisational process. Correspondence: [babarry49@gmail.com](mailto:babarry49@gmail.com).