

## **Painting Supervision: Thoughts from Visual Composition in Plein Air Landscape Painting**

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What metaphor most closely points to supervision at its best for you?

Many metaphors can describe the art of supervision in the realm of spiritual care. Some supervisors use sports metaphors: sailing or baseball. Others find that gardening or making music are the best analogous activities for their supervisory practice. For me, it is painting. Every color, every stroke, every one of the innumerable decisions in painting is innately, profoundly, and essentially relational. No part can stand in isolation.

In this essay, I'm playing with the parallels between my experience with impressionistic plein air landscape painting and with supervision. I want to deepen the colors and heighten the contrast of how we think about our shared work. With the use of metaphors, like painting, we are invited to keep learning, growing, and expanding our awareness of the fullness we have and can bring to bear on each fleeting but eternal moment.

Beginning with the centrality of relationship to both endeavors, I move to the parallels in the beginning, middle, and end of supervision. These parallels between two disparate fields begin the conversation with a few parallels in supervision with core visual composition constructs. I don't capture all the complexity of supervision, nor am I using the metaphors consistently. This exploration is more like impressionism than realism.

### IT BEGINS WITH LOVE

If I have any chance of having a canvas communicate love for a landscape, I have to fall in love and to stay in love through difficulty. I invest the time, energy, and emotion to produce a representation of the beauty I experience. I'm closer every time I paint. By some yearning, I'm called to keep trying to communicate the profound love of the beauty I experience. Learning color mixing and color theory, gathering materials, fighting bugs and cold, and tolerating the many

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failures—these are done because being outside and paying close attention comes out of a deep love. Such love has feelings shaping action over a long period of time.

Love, of course, is complex. In the realm of spiritual care education, I grapple with how I can appropriately, justly, and accurately bring love into my relationships with supervisees. How do I embody, practice, and teach love? How do I teach the art of loving, through deep listening, generous investment, and authentic presence, as the core of spiritual care?

Painters use the wisdom from composition theory to capture and communicate the beauty and their love of the expansive three-dimensional outdoors on a two-dimensional canvas. Composition theory is all about getting and keeping the attention of the viewer in the frame of the painting, giving them the chance to fall in love and stay in love. Painters are listening, deeply, to the experience in order to woo others to see more deeply. These composition “rules” assist painters because they represent how the eye, mind, and body works.

In supervision, I work for the well-being of both the supervisee and all those they are serving and will serve. I seek to improve their ability to paint relationships and be of service to others in complex relationships. As the supervisor, I do not define the subject or do the spiritual care for the supervisee, just as the painter does not see through the eyes of the viewer. Rather, as a supervisor I draw out, or woo forth, more awareness of the complexity of how to see and to understand more deeply. I help the supervisee to find their own voice, their own unique way of representing all the wisdom beyond and between words that they have, and that the client has. Like painting outside, this is done in the context of the winds and cold and elements. In supervision we have forces such as power differential, bias, racial and cultural awareness, and all of our inevitable human wounds.

At the heart of spiritual care and counseling, I paint relationships that help others to paint more beautiful relationships of health and wholeness. Organically, physically, and spiritually, I build relationship with and through that which is “more than”—sometimes labeled God or gods or nature. Relationships are expressive and emerging and can never be captured in words; together we are embodied and embedded in larger contexts. We cannot survive without others, though we can live in the illusion of perfect autonomy for long periods of time. We live most abundantly in warm and caring relationships. In such relationships, we are wooed and invited to live within and express more fully our highest Self, which is again sometimes labeled God’s image within us. In these relationships, we see expressions of the beauty that is beyond all knowing, almost like a two-dimensional canvas of the three-dimensional landscape.

How, then, do we love one another? When we shape relationships towards love, there is beauty. The shape of beauty is inherently personal and communal, relational and complex and dynamic

#### RELATIONSHIPS AND STORY

Every color, every stroke in a landscape painting is innately, profoundly, and essentially relational. To represent the parts of the whole, I had to learn to notice the relationship between the shapes. Is this line of the trees higher or lower than the horizon? Is this color darker or lighter, warmer or cooler, than the one next to it? In learning to paint, I seek to capture the love of the beauty I experience, in all the complexity and wonder, on a tiny canvas.

The first movement, before I start a painting, is to notice something beautiful, to immerse myself in it and then go back to find, define, and confine the story. The story is the impetus, the core thrill of what pulled me to this part of this scene. Without awareness of the story, the intent, I often lose motivation. To create a painting, I have to put precious time into this particular part of this overwhelming scene, amongst the many parts of the scene. I have to know what in the landscape moved me, perhaps some light-to-dark pattern, some shape that stopped me in my tracks and called out, "*Paint me!*"

As I begin in supervision, I must first notice, explore, and understand the reasons for this person to be here now as well as the stories that make up this person. I have to fall a little in love. It is in the quality of my listening, my caring attention, that the supervisee begins to experience the art of spiritual care. The reasons and the stories that bring them may include images of God, of suffering, of sin, or of abundant life, often in metaphors, as these images inevitably arise in the narrative. More than ever, through my work with trauma-informed expressive arts, I slow the engagement down to ground us in the body and the present moment, to allow a deep wisdom to emerge. As we relate together, I assess for the intersections where our shared work needs to focus.

As a painter, I want to communicate to the viewer of a small flat surface the beauty that I experience in the complexity of the outside world. As a supervisor, I want to communicate the beauty of the people and communities in the midst of



the complexity of life. Yet this is a difficult process, not all yellow flowers and green mountains.

In learning to paint the landscape, the more I see, the more I know, and the more I know, the more I see. At first, when I tried to paint mountains in the distance, to represent them on canvas, they looked odd, flat, uninteresting, and wrong. I did not know I was making assumptions and creating distortions. Over time, I learned the effects of changing light and of atmosphere. I became aware that I was imposing my expectations on the subject. When I expected to see yellow flowers in the distance because I knew they were there, I made up yellow. Yellow is the first color to drop away from our visual field over a distance. Those mountains I thought had to be green were more of a hazy blue, and their outlines were subtle, muted. The more I knew the distortions, the more I could see the effects of atmosphere that were always there.

In my care for supervisees and their care of clients, what we see is shaped by what we know and what we think we know and all that we do not know about

our own attention and perception. Supervision is about attention and perception, about seeing (feeling, awareness) beyond our assumptions and distortions.

In supervision I am guiding the direction of the attention, consciously or unconsciously and for better or worse. I select certain small pieces on a larger whole on which to focus, to the exclusion of others. How I direct attention is key to every painting and mentoring relationship—the focus on the dark or the light, on the distractions, the distortion, the positive or negative shapes. I’ve learned that to pay close attention requires energy and experience.

Relationships in painting and supervision are full of assumptions. I can project my assumptions, my history, my culture, my fears, even my gifts, on others. As I learned more about myself and integrated more parts of what it means to be human, I had a clearer vision, often softer, more gentle, more tender. Supervision creates a space, gives information, and models relationships with a goal that the supervisee will become more effective in healing and authentic to their own unique character. We are both on a journey to be more accurate, more emotionally available, more real. Supervision, like painting, leans into encouraging the person to be more fully themselves within the boundaries of lifegiving professional practice.

The central tool I use in supervision and counseling is my ability to deepen, understand, and explore relationship. This ability is related to the authentic examined self: my history, personality, belief system, failures, emotions, fantasies, imagination, theoretical understanding, spiritual identity, and extensive work to understand the nature of human nature. Being fully alive, living abundantly, is crucially important in my understanding of wholeness and health.

Theology, personality theory, and other constructions function as different languages to speak about the same reality, like different windows into a house that see into the same space. Impressionism, folk art, and realism reference the same landscape, yet they show different aspects of the scene.

Life is filled with opposites, with messy paradoxical splits waiting to be integrated and lived within. To learn to paint, I explore both what draws me to an experience of the image and what draws me away. I had to learn the amplifiers of and diversions from beauty, the hindrances and interferences. When there are distracting lines that point to a corner in a painting, the viewer’s eyes escape quickly.<sup>2</sup> I want to accompany the viewer into the two-dimensional space yet

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## NOTES

<sup>2</sup> In painting, there are leading lines or types of shapes, like arrows, that can lead the viewer’s eyes away from the center of interest and become distracting. For example, put a telephone pole in the middle of a scene, and it leads the viewer off the top of the page. The viewer may not realize what made them look away, what line was distracting, just as a client may not be able to name what prevented them from sharing more deeply.

evoke a larger experience. Spiritual care is also accompaniment towards the “more than,” towards the mysterious spiritual dimension of creation. At the heart of the work is authentic engagement with mystery, with the unknown, and with chaos through awe, mourning, and surrender. It is through these that we find a more solid, reliable experience of self, other, and God. When we go deeply with accompaniment into our sorrow, most often we learn that the bottom of the abyss is solid ground. These postures of curiosity over criticism and exploration over explanation are essential to both my painting and my understanding of supervision of spiritual care.

### THE BEGINNING

Kevin Macpherson says of painting that “the first color note you put down must be accurate, because all subsequent colors are related to it.”<sup>3</sup> Like a painting, the first notes of the supervisory relationship are crucial, particularly the initial selection of the supervisee. In painting, as the supervisor I have to know my materials and my context. Knowing how the surface and the materials interact in painting is essential. Although it might seem fine for a time, you cannot put acrylic paint on top of oil; eventually, the oil paint will peel off the canvas. Moreover, you cannot put watercolor on either of these, and you cannot put oil on unprepared watercolor paper. A Level 1 trauma center holds different demands than a home-based counseling program. The consequences of a mismatch between the one seeking to learn spiritual care and those entrusted into my care are much greater than a ruined canvas.

As a supervisor, above all, I must do all I can to protect current and future clients (patients, families, staff, congregational members) who are vulnerable. I, in community with many others, have to make careful selections of supervisees based on the substrate and the materials, the clinical rhombus. A robust interview process with more than one experienced supervisor is essential to admissions. Caretaking and enabling are not helpful at this stage. I discern whether the setting and the group are good fits for the potential supervisee and whether our group includes the appropriate supervisors. Part of the interview process is the informed consent, which means getting to know the applicant and disclosing the demands of the setting. I have my own limitations, brokenness, and failures. I can only use my scars, not my open wounds, on behalf of the healing of others.

### *Toned Underpainting*

Many beautiful paintings are started on a foundation of an underpainting—a toned layer of color that influences the painting, giving it warmth or coolness. Every supervisory interaction has underpaintings, the residue of

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin D. Macpherson, *Fill Your Oil Paintings with Light and Color* (Cincinnati: North Light Books, 1997), 39.

historical relationships that influence how we see one another, which is one way to describe transference and countertransference. Once I've chosen and honed in on the story of a painting, I set the tone of the background on the canvas. This is often a warm color in muted tones to give me a place to begin. This parallels my work in supervision, where the initial background tone is to hold a hopeful expectation and give a thorough orientation. I provide more of the structure at the beginning level of supervision based on my essential initial assessments of the supervisee.

I tend to be warm, attentive, affirming, and self-defined. I seek to model stage-appropriate vulnerability, transparency, and immediacy in the service of enlarging self and other awareness. These attributes are like having a range of values in a painting, and they are different from and sometimes at odds with the usual societal expectations for interaction. All are balanced by their opposites. I am aware that supervisees often begin with clients in ways that represent their own experience of beginning, either in my program or in some key setting.

#### *Thumbnail Sketch*

In visual arts, I have learned the value of thumbnail sketches—small preliminary sketches that are quickly drawn to work out the obvious problems before I get started on the actual canvas. These sketches help me to think about where the light and dark places will be, help me to feel the mood of the painting and to define my center of interest. In this diagram or sketch, I find the largest shapes and the location of the center of interest. I can decide where the shapes will fit together and how the composition will work. I don't paint exactly what is in front of me; instead, I'm looking for underlying potential.

The learning covenant is the preliminary thumbnail sketch that we develop for painting the supervisee's spiritual competence. Because of the complexity of the helping relationship, each person brings unique learning goals and personal challenges to the point of beginning, which change over the course of the relationship in response to the unexpected opportunities, challenges, and revelations. The center of interest of our relationship is the supervisee's use of self to provide a helping relationship with clients. We remain open to inspiration so that the relational painting can let us know what is embedded in the subject that we could not initially know, understand, or perceive. In supervision there are unexpected, unanticipated curriculum events that always surprise us; these are usually the most pivotal in the journey.

#### *Simplification of Major Shapes and Values*

On top of the warmth of the underpainting, I want to have an interesting placement of shapes, colors, and values as a place to begin. In painting, I achieve

this goal with my initial strokes and multiple revisitations to those initial strokes, referencing the story, the design.

In supervision, this is parallel to the goals of the learning that intersect with the goals of the program or setting. “Why are you here, now?” This is not an interrogation or confrontation; this is about guiding towards a deeper use of self, grounded in self-knowledge and in theory. I attend to the body, the words, the emotions, the gestures, and the metaphors. I expand these and slow the process to allow deeper integrations between the known and the unknown self. With just enough safety and just enough challenge, supervisees grow.

In these early interactions on canvas and with people, I work within a community to understand more deeply the uniqueness of this person in context, to see beyond the details into the depth. Within this warm, barely emerging structure, we are playing with the materials and deciding about the all-important center of interest.

#### *Center of Interest and Rule of Thirds*

In placing the center of interest, the painter is directing the attention of the viewer. Beginner painters often put the subject in the middle, perhaps pressured by the left brain’s preference for order and symmetry. Yet, in terms of sustaining someone’s attention over time, I have learned that humans are more intrigued by that which is not centered and by that which has more variety and intrigue than a story that has less complexity. We are attracted to that which is surprising in the landscape.

I’ve learned that the placement of that which is most important and is more pleasing to the eye/mind/body often follows the “rule of thirds.” The rule of thirds is a grid that informs the placement of the center of interest to lure the viewer into remaining engaged with the painting. There are other patterns that also work, and none of them place the center of interest smack in the middle. This is one of many principles that offers a better chance of giving sustainable joy to the viewer.

I know and believe and want to place my subject more consciously at the intersection that is more in alignment with the rule of thirds. I have to guard against my initial impulses to impose order. The subject of the painting, though my plan is otherwise, demands to migrate to the middle.

The parallels to supervision are many. I use the rhombus, self-supervision, and external consultation to remember my center of interest is teaching love. The clients and the other supervisees are the best supervisors. I use all the tools I have, such as leading lines and placement, to highlight their teaching as an essential part of the rhombus, often as the main event. Without self-supervision and consultation, I lose focus on what is important, putting the wrong things at the center of my attention. I can inadvertently focus on the parts of the experience that confirm previous learning or beliefs. I reduce new information to something

familiar and selectively notice the information that confirms my preconceived ideas. Beyond my awareness, I distort what I think I am doing and justify my behavior in various ways. I may hold fast to the theories I use and justify them by only noticing data that confirms them. I lose my center of interest.

### *Receptivity and Awareness*

The work of Manfred Zimmerman of Germany's Heidelberg University demonstrates that only a woeful fifty bits of information per second make their way into the conscious brain, while an estimated eleven million bits of data flow from the senses every second. . . . It's as if each person's senses generated enough data to run a 3D Omnimax movie with surround sound—only to funnel it through an antediluvian modem, one better suited to Morse code.<sup>4</sup>

So, we are always working to expand our awareness and perceive the complexity.

Painting a landscape outside is like this; we are surrounded with information far beyond what can be captured on even the largest canvas. We hear the sounds of birds and the breeze and feel the warmth of the sun and the cool of the air. The light shifts dramatically across our field of vision. How do we even begin to decide what to paint?

Just as the rendering of the major shapes in a painting is based on many variables, in developing a spiritual relationship we use the wisdom from many sources. We are guided by tradition, experience, reason, texts, theology, neurology, behavioral science, spirituality, philosophy, and poetry. Yet at the core we are called to develop ourselves as instruments, as rich mysterious resources, bringing to bear upon the narratives the fullness of what we have become without imposing our own beliefs, conclusions, and pathology on supervisees. In the face of suffering, disease, and meaning making, we are called to serve as reliable witnesses, not purveyors of advice or direction. We make assessments and pass judgments, and we alternate judgment with suspending our disbelief, delaying our compulsion to impose order and sacrificing our own comfort. We are constantly expanding our capacity to discern what color or shape or space within ourselves would be most redemptive at this particular juncture with this particular person at this time.

As supervisees engage their clients, I invite them towards listening for story, for body sensation, and for metaphor. Our understanding of and relationship with what some call God is reflected in our way of understanding people as more than bodies or minds. How we understand "spirit" in a human body will inform our perspective on experiences like suffering, meaning, joy, and sin. I ask, "And that's like what?"—and then use their exact words to deepen the metaphor. When people express emotion in word and gesture, I attend, deepen,

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Baker, *Final Jeopardy: Man vs. Machine and the Quest to Know Everything* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 47.

expand their expressions, gestures, and, most importantly, their metaphors. Metaphors, like dreams and free association, are a royal road to the right side of the brain.

Within the process of an educational program, the images of God, self, and other are always evolving—changing, growing, or stagnating. There is so much more going on than I can know consciously. In order to be more fully present, I expand my awareness to pay attention.

### *Novelty, Variety, Unity, and Harmony*

The potential to learn is available through novel experiences, particularly when I am willing to take the time to acknowledge the experiences and deepen them through reflection. In painting, I balance novelty and variety with harmony to create some sense of unity. Likewise, in the supervisory alliance, I seek to balance continuity and safety for the supervisee to launch into an unknown experience with the challenge and variety necessary for growth. Like plants, we grow just at the apex, at the edge of the unknown, through our exposure to differences in the similarities.

When I move too quickly or deeply into differences, (novelty, variety), I can overwhelm and shut down the supervisee. If I remain too long in the similarities (harmony, unity), our relationship becomes stagnant and immobile. Experience does not teach; intelligent immersive reflection on experience can teach, though not always. My work is to remain and to assist learners to remain, tenaciously, at the edge of the unknown and unknowable, seeking just that next awareness, insight, and integration towards a broader way of representing reality.

There are many ways to get the same result when painting. I can use a brush or a scraping tool or my finger to get a texture. In supervision, much more often now I use body-based interventions and less direction. I use grounding and rounding<sup>5</sup> and some playfulness.

## THE MESSY MIDDLE

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<sup>5</sup> I am grounded when I am in the present moment, in my body and connected to others, often in tune with a calm, centered, solid, regulated experience. Trauma-informed care has expanded the awareness of the need to and how to assist one another to move towards this emotional, sensory experience. There are numerous resources on grounding. Two of my current favorites are *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press), 155–59; Deb Dana, *Polyvagal Exercises for Safety and Connection: 50 Client-Centered Practices* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020). I begin seminars and supervision groups with short grounding exercises. The curriculum in a year of residency includes a reading seminar on *My Grandmother's Hands*. Rounding is co-visitation in clinical units with chaplain residents.

When painting, I draw, then stain the canvas with the large shapes, and then redraw to remember where I was going in the first place. I then paint, and I revise. Painting uses both logic and imagination, and the journey is not a systematic, controllable, or completely conscious activity. Even when I have carefully chosen a subject, defined my center of interest, and thought carefully through the compositional elements, there is an essential and inevitable element of risk, and surprise, and failure.

The middle phase is where I have lost those initial shapes and forgotten the story. I paint over my lines and my colors get muddy. I am forced to search for a new version of the story and find whether that story is sustainable for the rest of the journey. From then on, in painting, I get lost and found, again and again. The middle phase of painting is sometimes more grueling and more difficult than the beginning phase. During this phase with a painting, I want to quit, to throw the



canvas away, or to begin again.

The stages of creation are something like this:  
This is *awesome*.

This is shit.  
 I am shit.  
 Keep going.  
 This is pretty awesome.

The messy middle is a well-established stage in the creative painting process. The colors are all wrong, the piece looks flat, and the perspective is off. I'm tempted to give up. The painting seems irretrievable.

Gradually, with much external support, experience, and practice, I remember that these feelings and impressions are not always accurate representations of reality. I have learned to maintain my hope and keep moving without coming to a complete stop, most of the time.

In supervision, I've had similar frustration and discouragement. As the supervisor and with the help of the larger community, I am the one to hold the hope during the middle phase. Often, and in uncanny ways, the difficulty is that we—the supervisee, the clients, and I—are working on the same issues or problems. In other words, there are parallel issues in the larger systems that confuse and derail us. To the extent that the supervisee and/or I resolve the problems in one of several planes, we will be able to both help the patient or client to resolve the problem and enlarge the scope of our attention to other dynamics. My work is to acknowledge and explore where the problem has reference points in me and in the larger system and to do my own work in other settings. I am the one to hold the hope that there are beautiful colors beyond the mud.

### *Negative Space and Negative Capability*

Sometimes, the best way to see and paint an object when I am lost is to focus on the spaces surrounding the object, the negative spaces. This confuses the part of the brain that compounds mistakes in drawing. This is an exercise in humility. So, too, with supervision. I hold back from bringing premature coherence or closure. I listen for what is not present in the narrative, such as anger or weakness or tears, as well as the resonance in my body and in apparently random associations. I've learned to remain in the unknown, in the curiosity and the confusion, in the uncertainty and mystery, for longer than I could tolerate when I was beginning spiritual care. *The larger truths and the compelling landscape are found beyond facts and reason.*

In painting and in supervision, if I can stay in the messiness and uncertainty, more color, more beauty, and more genuine clarity emerge. In

painting, our brains automatically play tricks in order to decrease our sensory overload (remember those eleven million bits of information funneled into fifty). We acclimate and then underestimate. Due to this distortion, I will see dull, predictable colors and edit my first initial impression. If I attend to a tree trunk without preconceptions, there so much more than brown! There is purple and dark blue and hints of red. To fight this degrading, I look away; I look at the colors and shapes and movement around the subject. I recall what I know about the subtle color shift or the angle in the landscape. By looking at a third space, glancing at the sky or background, I discover something more. There are hidden pieces, deeper truths, intricately woven into the landscape, just as there are in the supervisee's identity, their motivations and their experiences. This is particularly true when there is tension or disagreement. At those times, I focus on a third thing. I go back to the learning covenant, back to rounding with the supervisee where they can see me visit or see my work. I look for what may be hidden or forgotten in our shared work. I may add more vulnerability, more doubt about my assumptions, or try taking a walk rather than sitting for supervision. As the supervisee deepens their awareness and builds their capacity to pay attention, their spiritual care improves.

#### THE ENDING PHASE: DETAIL STROKES AND A FRAME

A painting is often completed or destroyed in those last important detail strokes, the last branches at the tops of the trees, the wash of color at the center of interest, or the frame placed around the outside. Often paintings are ruined by overworking. These ending acts become the way the entire painting is remembered.

The ending of a relationship is often the view through which the relationship is remembered. Intentional closure and termination in supervision is important. This is true of relationships that did not end as anticipated. In closing, we acknowledge that the relationship was "good enough," that is, not all good or all bad. My supervisees and I celebrate what was good, and we reframe and acknowledge the less than ideal. Putting nebulous experience into the symbolism of language, with a dose of generosity, helps us to get perspective on what happened over the course of the relationship. We come to deeper understandings, and we practice bringing closure to other relationships. As we review the learning and the relationship, we have the consolidation of gains. We have been on a journey together. At the end, we continue to work towards the goal of representing

the beauty of loving one another in our own messy and meandering ways, walking each other home in the dark.

