

Pamela Sukhum & The Beautiful Project by Anne Veh

Pamela Sukham's warmth and openheartedness invites us all to find the artist within and to experience life and all its infinite possibilities on a path for beauty and truth. In this Awakin call conversation, hosted by Bela, Pamela shares her journey from one captivating story to the next, beginning with a life changing realization that she needed to leave a stable career to trust an inspiration... to paint. It was a joy to moderate this call, being introduced to Pamela through the kindness of Pavi a year earlier. The two artists share the same title for their work, Infinite Vision!

Pamela trusts her heart, from moment to moment, inspiration to inspiration, connection to connection. Each project unfolds organically. As an example, an email exchange about art techniques with a Vietnam Veteran inspired Pamela to bring art and healing through her "Beautiful Project" to a VA Medical Center. On the road for her national gallery shows, Pamela creates opportunities in each venue to share her "Beautiful Project" with the community, engaging audiences of all ages. It's organic in the sense that it is planned in the moment. For Pamela, it's recognizing a call to action and acting upon it. She is grateful to use art as a vehicle for inner transformation.

I always had a desire to give all of myself away

Pamela's journey is illuminated by a selfless desire to serve. In each of her projects, she creates a safe container for creative expression. Her love and warmth speak to the heart, where there is no right or wrong, and a freedom to allow anything and everything to arise. "Being" is creative, she reminds us. "We are all artists and art gives us permission to play." Using very simple tools, pencil and paper, paints and brushes, she invites an engagement that manifests much more than a physical work of art. One's inner life is made visible, and the storytelling becomes as healing as the art making process itself.

What would I try if I wasn't afraid of anything?

About ten years ago, while Pamela was pursuing a career in cardiovascular research, she found herself lost in the typical pursuits of life...of making a good career, of being successful in the medical field as well as in her physical surroundings. At this time, any sense of spiritual life or self-inquiry was deeply buried. "When I asked myself this question, it was out of absolute desperation. There was a part of me that was crying out. It was terrifying and it came out of the blue. It was so out of left field, I trusted it. The moment the brush touched the canvas, something opened in me, awakened. I connected to some part of myself that I recognized, it just had been completely neglected for years."

Art became a gateway, a homecoming to her inner self. Pamela reminds us that we are all artists and it is our nature to be creative, loving and generous.

I felt a stirring in my heart

In sharing with us how the “Beautiful Project” came about, Pamela relived a profound moment with a young boy in rural Tibet. “About 7 years ago, while trekking in Tibet, a group of us arrived in a small rural village. There were a number of precocious kids there, and everyone in our group was having a great time with them. I noticed there was a boy sitting by himself. And, being the last one in the group to leave; it was just me who had seen him. I noticed that his face was badly deformed, as if it had been melted in a fire. In the first moment, my initial reaction was to turn away; I was uncomfortable. Then I felt this stirring in my heart and my heart began to pound. I knew I had to turn back, I wasn’t sure why or what I had to do, I just felt the call to turn back. I thought, ‘Do I have anything to give him?’ Many of the children panhandle. I had no money; nothing to offer, or so it seemed. I felt drawn to be with him, and as I got closer to him, I noticed his eyelids had been deformed in the accident. His eyelashes were folded under so his eyes were constantly tearing. He looked as though he was in constant physical pain, and the pain of isolation. In that moment, what my heart believed he wanted was to be seen and noticed, as all the other kids. We spent time together; we didn’t share a verbal language. We were able to hold hands with one another and to look into each other’s eyes. In those moments, the entire world disappeared. We were able to connect in a way I could never have thought possible, just sitting and being with one another. I was forever changed...

Six months later, I was back in the studio painting. For most of my paintings, I have no idea what they are or what they are about, until they unfold before my eyes. While I was putting down some brushstrokes on this painting, I started to remember my experiences with this boy; these experiences had broken my heart open. As I sat at the canvas crying and painting, I realized this boy had reflected back my own wound. What he wore on his face was what I carried within myself. My initial desire to turn away from him was my initial desire to turn away from myself. This boy was a gift; he was able to reflect back, through his own pain and suffering, the pain and suffering I felt on the inside, and the pain and suffering the world carries (which is not shown externally). I will forever be grateful to him. He expanded my concept of what beauty means, and what is beautiful, and what it means to have a beautiful experience. This is one of the most beautiful experiences I have ever felt in my life and it has informed so much of what I do.

The painting was named after him, “Beautiful.” We brought it to New York City for a show and, most importantly, to tell his story. The “Beautiful Project” -- founded upon the belief that art and creative expression can be a healing and transformative force in people’s lives -- is named after him. His gift continues to ripple out in profound and unexpected ways...”

Living life from a place of trust Pamela shares, “When painting, I could take risks and listen to what was next. As time went on, what I was doing on the canvas became a practice for life. Art needed to expand into my life as a whole. Life is your art form however that may look. I paint every day; this is my practice and devotion. When it becomes familiar I realize it’s time for me to open to something new. I live my life month to month. With the “Beautiful Project,” it’s about listening and responding.

Baring Witness

On one of her trips to Darfur (with the “Beautiful Project”), Pamela experienced what it means to bare witness to the organic unfolding of a profound healing process. She explained after working with the kids in a refugee camp on trust exercises for a few weeks, her team decided to give the children simple tools, paper and pencil...with an

invitation to draw... anything... thoughts, feelings, experiences.

"There was a boy in the back of the room," Pamela begins. "And he asked through one of the translators if they could draw about the war. We said, 'Of course, you can draw about anything you want, including your experiences in the war.' As soon as we said this, all their heads went down, and they were drawing furiously for the next hour. The energy in the room was palpable. In that moment, we asked ourselves, what should we do next? How can we honor this space? We offered (none of our exercises are ever mandatory, they are always an offering) to the children if they would like to tell the story of their picture or experience, they were welcome to one by one. It was amazing! All of the children, and there were eighty of them, queued up in line, and for the next several hours, we sat there, and one by one, each child described their picture and told their story. These pictures were filled with imagery of villages being burned, bombers flying from above, limbs being cut off, people being shot. These were images coming from children five to eighteen years of age. It was something we could never have imagined, and here they were expressing it, their memories of it. We realized in that moment, our job was not to teach anything, but merely to be there to listen, to be witnesses, to let them be the teachers. Each of them asked, 'Would we tell their story? Would we pass this on?' They wanted so much to be heard and to be seen. The same was for the boy in Tibet. Many of them wanted us to take their artwork and their stories back to the United States. We had a show in New York City where their artwork was shown right along side mine. We were able to raise additional funds to send back to their camp in Darfur. The lesson was for us was to be present and listen."

Coming home

Starting in Africa, Pamela's projects brought her home, in unexpected ways. After falling in love a few years ago, she married and moved in with her husband (from one of the most exclusive areas in Minneapolis) to a neighborhood that was considered one of the worst in the city. At first, they considered this a temporary arrangement. The area, low income and resource poor, was wild in the sense that police sirens and swat teams were commonplace. Initially, they thought they would move, but the neighborhood began to grow on Pamela. She states, "Communities that are resource poor are incredibly rich. This type of environment keeps me closer to my humanity. I am always grateful and it reminds me always to keep my heart open." Together, they started community projects, working with the youth primarily, using art as a means to foster self-empowerment. Working with the teens, they found the workshops helped the kids express their anger and

hopelessness, and through the art making process, reveal their gifts. As Pamela shares, "No matter what experiences we bring to the canvas, our joy, our gratitude, our anger, our dark night of the soul, there is an incredible alchemy that occurs in the art form; this gift is offered to the world. Out of the rubble and ashes of my life, I do have a gift to offer."

Today, her husband will start a canvas in the studio and ask Pamela to finish it, with the invitation, "Tell me what you see in this painting and go with it?" Pamela recalled one particular black canvas with swirls and a colorful blob in the middle. "I looked at it, and I had no idea what to do with it. It kept calling back to me. I started putting strokes in and letting go of any judgment, and it began to reveal itself as this beautiful ornate turtle shell! The swirls were these incredible waves around the sea turtle. Initially, I had written it off. It was such a surprise piece." The sea turtle has a very special place in Pamela's heart. While swimming with the sea turtles in Kauai years ago, she was

deeply moved by the wisdom in their eyes and their majestic presence. In gratitude, she began painting a new series, "Honu," Hawaiian for "protective spirits." Though she felt very attached to this painting, she knew intuitively that there was more work for this piece to do in the world. She posted it on Facebook to sell, and with all paintings in this series, the proceeds benefit the Sea Turtle Conservancy and Oceanic Preservation Society (with the hope that each painting will find it's right home). "The moment I posted it, I knew it would go immediately. Within minutes we had two buyers. The one who purchased the piece had recently swam with sea turtles in Maui months earlier."

Art as a Gift

Pamela's personal belief is that we are here to offer our gifts. "I believe each part of the process is a gift and an offering, from start to finish. In many ways, the paintings were never really mine. I am being called to what I do, and I need to let it go. Many times I don't know where my paintings end up. Self-doubt at the end of the day is a holding back of a potential gift for the world. I need to take the risk, of feeling rejected or unwanted and put myself and my work out there."

In a traditional gallery setting, art is commonly viewed as a commodity that is bought and sold. The environment does not always feel welcoming and open to the spirit of the gift. What Pamela so beautifully orchestrates is a relationship. By inviting galleries to participate and collaborate in the "Beautiful Project" and her video projects, she is able to connect collectors to projects and the individuals who created the art in meaningful ways that benefit all. "Art opens us to a deeper conversation," Pamela says. "It allows me to reflect how I show up in the world; I come with an offering and a gift."