

## A Conversation with Lily Yeh: Art for Social Transformation by Richard Whittaker

Checking my email one morning I found a note from Nipun Mehta: We've lined up an incredible guest for the July 5th Awakin Call, artist Lily Yeh, and we were wondering if you were available to interview?

I quickly Googled Lily Yeh and yes, I would be available.

I've done a few other Awakin Calls and, thanks to the remarkable guests, each one has been inspiring. Awakin Calls are one of ServiceSpace's several avenues for spreading social nourishment, and the guests are always well chosen. Writing now, some months after the conversation with Lily, I find myself struggling for a description that will capture my own experience of it. The language one turns to for expressing matters of the heart has mostly lost its efficacy. Maybe that's why recently, I found myself admiring the neologism, "upworthy." The space it makes available feels open and relatively free from the tarnish that affects superlatives in general, and so much of our language of high regard.

So how does one describe the kind of experience that such words once served to convey? In this case, I'll just say that I feel grateful to have met, if only via a conference call, this remarkable artist and human being.

Unfortunately, only part of our conversation was recorded. Part of what is missing is Lily's response to my asking for her thoughts about the artworld. My question, I explained, had to do with the tendency I see in the artworld towards intellectualism and the fostering of an idea of expertise that separates the credentialed from those without credentials—the rest of us. Lily, I thought, would have something to say about that. She had both credentials and success in the artworld.

For thirty years Yeh was a professor of painting and art history at Philadelphia's University of the Arts. And in my online research, I found the following quote, "I am grateful that my life up until now has been sweet and good. I have been blessed with a loving family, supportive friends, a fine job and opportunities to create. But I felt that I was missing something, which I could not even name. Without it, somehow my life did not feel authentic."

This is the crux of it, it seems to me. What is it that's missing?

To my question about the artworld, she just laughed and said, "The artworld doesn't need me."

I'd say that's an open question.

Here's how ServiceSpace introduced our conversation: "Our guest speaker, Lily Yeh, took on an initiative that transformed an abandoned lot in inner-city north Philadelphia into an art park. The park blossomed into the Village of Arts and Humanities—an organization that has built many more art parks and gardens, renovated abandoned homes, and created educational programs, art workshops, after-school programs, a youth theater, and joyful community celebrations. Lily's new organization, Barefoot Artists Inc., now teaches residents and artists how to replicate the Village model in devastated communities around the world."

The recorded portion begins here...

Lily Yeh: Our society, in a way, puts artists on a pedestal; they are the ones who have the gift to create. I want to be an artist who lights up other people's pilot lights so that we shine together. I believe that everyone has that creativity. It's a gift to us as human beings. But a lot of the time we leave it dormant; a lot of the time we disempower ourselves by saying, "I'm not an artist. I can't do that." I want people to realize that innate light and creativity. So my work is to awaken other people's creativity.

And that creativity is of the same quality. It's like sunlight. It flows into big spaces and into small spaces. It has that same magical quality. It has life. It's full of energy. That's what I feel is maybe the way to the future, that we all move towards the light, awaken our creativity, guided by compassion. Maybe in that lies the hope for the future.

Richard Whittaker: That's really something. You've had this very interesting, incredibly adventurous life. You've crossed so many boundaries, and it sounds like you've found there's something universal in the hearts of people no matter what cultures you've worked in.

Lily: No matter. No matter. Right. I always joke (maybe it's not a joke) [laughing], I just kind of trick everybody because I want to do art; I want to bring color. I want to do big scale, like with broken lands, broken villages—big scale—but I can't do it by myself. So first I entice children. They always like color, and children will participate, make something nice. I get them to paint and I honor their art by making some of it public art. Then the adults get interested.

This happened in the Rwanda genocide survivors' village in Rugerero. Then adults came and they started to participate. So we turned their village into colors from a very stark and gray and solemn hopeless place. And after we left, they continued to paint. They painted their dreams; they painted goats, a jeep, a motorcycle, computers, a helicopter, and whatever.

Before we can do anything else, like growing food or flowers or bringing skills—that all takes time—we can start making art, bringing colors, creating patterns and working together. That brings action into the village. In a way, art is so immediate. It brings people joy, it provides them opportunities to work together, and it builds community. Art speaks

in a different language. My interest is really in making art. I want to create. I want to make new things. I want people to help me. And I bring colors so people can join in and have fun.

In art there is no failure if we are sincere in our intention. What comes out is always good. So it's a wonderful healing tool in wounded places and for wounded people and for bringing hope and joy in any place.

I guess I don't feel alienation because when I go to a place I don't really have anything that I want. I just want people to come together and play and have fun in making something beautiful. [laughing] I guess that cuts through a lot of our apprehension and prejudices, and the borders of race and class and gender and whatever. Let that all go! Let's have an open space. Let's all come in and have fun making art! [laughing] Like that!

Richard: That's wonderful. I've read that in the process of your bringing art to others, you've said, "I am helped." Would you say something about how you've been helped?

Lily: Yes. To begin with, I could not have found my path if I was not provided the opportunity to work in the broken landscape of North Philadelphia. I would not have understood the depth of endurance and compassion, the human ability not only to survive but to remake oneself and to turn from destruction to construction, if I had not met people like Jojo and Big Man. Big Man's real name is James Maxton. He's six foot eight. He sold drugs and for twenty years destroyed himself and helped destroy the neighborhood. He thought he was going to die on the street in the gutter somewhere. He had no place to go. He came to Jojo who was helping me—another person in the neighborhood who really didn't have a job. But they stepped in to help me create this art. And then, at the end because Big Man's descent was so low, so deep, when he found art, when he heard positive feedback, when he saw beauty and he saw hope, then he started to dedicate his life to making mosaics and putting his life together. And because he had suffered so much, he had such immense understanding and sympathy for other people who were struggling or who were in the dark. That's when I understood about compassion.

We all want happiness, but I think with happiness, we need to understand passion—you know, the passion of Christ, the suffering of Christ. Compassion in Chinese Buddhist translation is "great sorrow and then great compassion, great love."

On the surface, people see this Chinese woman coming to North Philadelphia and getting everybody working, children working and making people happy and transforming an abandoned lot into a beautiful park. She is doing something good.

It's not like that.

I felt, through the process, I probably received more than anybody in understanding the

meaning of life and understanding what is real. Once one experiences authenticity, that really helps one to discern and to be discreet with what is important and what is not important.

Richard: Beautifully said. Thank you. Maybe we could open this up to some questions from listeners.

Lizzie: Lily, could you share something about how to get started in a broken place near them. There are so many broken places and people eager to serve.

Lily: What a great question. There are many broken places in the world, but I only go to a few, to the place that beckons to me. There needs to be some kind of relationship. You don't go to a place cold, because it takes too long to create the relationship. So I think you need to pay attention first to your heart. Sometimes you see something and your heart is moved. You must pay attention to that moment.

The second thing is you need someone who is there and who can be there for you. For example, at the beginning when I went to North Philadelphia, I didn't know people. I had no idea about how to go about it. But I had an invitation. Then I was told to find Jojo. Jojo lived in an abandoned home. He didn't have a job. I had to convince him that making a park was possible. He joined in.

It doesn't matter who, but this person needs to be rooted in the community and to be there for you. For example, when I went to Rwanda, I knew nobody, but I'd met someone at a conference. Then he was there for me. So somebody needs to be there for you so that you can begin to work with the community.

The next thing is that you start with something small. Don't go for something big. The whole process is an organic process. So you plant a seed when you are moved. It's like an idea that is fertilized. And you look for an opportunity. When a community invites you in, then that's an opening, the wind is blowing that way. When somebody is there and willing to work with you then there is a little bit of good soil. The seed can be planted in that soil. Then you have to nurture it by a program, like creating activities. You have to find a way for people to come and participate on their own. The easiest way is to work with children. When children get happy, that's like breaking loose the hard soil.

But very important is that a program is not enough. You have to display the accomplishments. For example, if the children create something, you have to turn it into public art. And Lizzie, I know your work and you are a master yourself. You have worked with children and made beautiful things. And that is good. A park is made, a book is made, but if we talk about a community, it takes continuity, it takes further nourishment. So that's why a lot of my projects take five to ten years. Not that I stay there all that time, but I go there and I launch another level of a project so people are excited and there's

new energy coming in, new resources and so forth. Then I would structure something so that some activities run almost all year round. That's where your partner is very important. And then, when your work starts to show results, that's when you start to get funding. And as your success builds, your funding builds. From my experience, that's how community projects become successful.

Deven: I looked at the Barefoot Artists website. It's pretty inspiring. One thing you mention is that you start with something small. When you went to Rwanda, how did it go for you initially?

Lily: Rwanda is very interesting. This was in 2004. I was on my way to Kenya for a project there. I had been invited to an international conference in Barcelona, and that was when I heard Jean Bosco Musana, who became my long-term partner. He was a Red Cross representative. He talked about the suffering of his people, and I was very moved. I just felt my heart click.

Rwanda wasn't on my agenda, but I felt somehow I had to manage to go there. So I convinced him to wait for me at the airport. That's how I went. I took a risk. I had no idea anything would come out of it, no plan, no money, no nothing. But I felt life was calling me. So I just flew there.

He took me to see the genocide mass grave, and then the survivors' village. It was very stark and solemn and depressing. So I came back to the U.S. I felt I was too small, that my capacity was too small. So I invited three volunteers to go with me, and then the second year I went back there. There was a team of four of us. Then we had more strength.

So when we went there, I mean, how could you articulate it in words? There was just too huge a gap. I saw that the cement houses were identical and very roughly made. People were not thinking of them as their homes. They were transitory shelters. There was no community because people were randomly placed there, widows and orphans and the elderly. The government just put the most needy people in the village. Residents didn't know their neighbors, so they didn't share their sorrow. They grieved in solitude. So that was the situation. And there were so many children born after the genocide.

So I asked, how do we make connections? Even though Rwanda is bright and beautiful and the village has a lot of green, it was like a winter's night, so bleak and oppressive. I thought, well, the houses looked all the same, all these gray walls. Why didn't we just go and get some paints? We found a few colors—black, white, blue, green and brown—and we came and created simple patterns with geometric designs. We started painting. That got children excited. There was some action and people working together, and when they saw their walls transformed into pattern, rhythm—wow! So that's how we broke the ice. Then an art teacher, Fabrice, volunteered and we started to run children's art workshops. I really liked their little cows, buses and trees of life, whatever, and I started to put their work up and enlarge it. So it became public art. And that got parents interested. That's how we got the motor started, by painting.

You don't have to be an artist. Anybody can do it.

Marie: I know your work through Lizzie. Since there are so many broken and wounded places in the world, I'm wondering how we can ignite and spread this method on a larger scale.

Lily: In a way, it is my most earnest desire for people to take the methodology and run

with it. But the challenge is how to make the project organic. You cannot find a cookie-cutter model and impose it on others. There are many examples with great intentions, but they often fail to take root in the community. This is why I used a method of awakening creativity in each individual as a starting point.

I always say, I am not very powerful. I don't have a lot of resources. I don't have all the know-how, but I felt the call of life. I want authenticity. I want my life to have meaning. That's all. When I went to North Philadelphia, I had no clue how to do anything. And yes, there are so many broken places. So I want to tell everybody that this kind of work is not just about artists. It needs all of us, all of us who are willing to try to make something happen in broken places.

In the end it is the individuals who do something, who benefit the most. We can transform the world through personal transformation. I am full of joy, full of gratitude to have the opportunity to do community-building work. But it is hard, hard, hard. It really takes commitment and it's a commitment that is, in a way, like your life depends on it. Then you have that drive and that determination, and cannot help but pursue it. That means personal awakening, personal transformation. And that's what makes it hard, the organic process, because it's not just about improving other people's lives, but basically it's changing ourselves. I think that is inward thinking, wanting meaning, wanting the real thing in our lives. Then we are connected with the life force. Then nothing can stop us. It's like that.

Pavi: Thank you, Lily. Gems are just tumbling out of you, as always. You talk of those broken places, whether it's ruins or inner cities or jails or refugee camps, or just our own broken places.

Lily: Yes. In us, in us.

Pavi: One of the things I have a question about is those jagged edges and working with that. The process can be painful, it can be hard to hold in a healthy way. Often there's a hook into your own broken places. So how do you work with the world in a way that strengthens you also?

Lily: That's a good question. The world is so wounded and that's why we have the healing everywhere, therapists and everything. There's a documentary film called *The Barefoot Artist*. It's by Glenn Holsten, who I knew for 25 years documenting the work I began in North Philadelphia, and also by my son, Daniel Traub who has documented my work in Rwanda, Palestine, China, and India. In this documentary, I felt I kind of offered myself because there's a lot in it about my personal life, the broken and the dark places in my personal life. I took part in the film almost as an offering that we have to go into both the personal and the external broken places to get real healing.

None of us want to experience pain or suffering. We want happiness. But from my understanding, if we keep on running away from pain, we never get healing. But we go to it when we have the strength. We need to be aware of the suffering both externally and internally, and aware of the pain and the shame within ourselves. But we don't just go directly to it. We need to hold it and pay attention within ourselves, and be gentle with ourselves. Because we are human, we do make mistakes. Sometimes we make shameful mistakes. But then we need to have a patient understanding and compassion towards that, our own weaknesses, our own darkness. We try not to condemn that in ourselves, and that's when we begin to be understanding and compassionate toward others. When we don't judge ourselves, when we understand the shortfall of being human, then maybe

that's the beginning of the cultivation of compassion. There's such immense suffering in the world and sometimes we cannot solve all the problems. But we certainly can be aware and tender and pay attention until we find the way and the strength to address that.

Always be aware of the darkness and the failure and the pain, but then when we can, we step forward and address it in any way we can. We don't have to save the world, we just have to start with step one, with small things—start with small things, but with big love—Mother Teresa, yes.

Richard: It's inspiring listening to you, Lily. Would you say something about where your thoughts are today?

Lily: There is so much violence and suffering in the world. I pray for guidance and strength to respond to life's calling and to continue my journey for meaning and deep fulfillment.

My role as an artist is to share with people my experience of how creating together can change our surroundings and ourselves. I often term my work "urban alchemy," transforming chaos and abandonment into order and deep connection. It began with the personal quest for authenticity and centeredness and it continues to surprise me that my work would have impact on others. Some people call it changing the world from inside out. Black Elk said it so well, "There can never be peace between nations until there is first known that true peace which is within the souls of men." At this stage of my life, time is limited and ever more precious. Each morning I get up breathing and seeing the sunlight, my heart is filled with gratitude.