Developing Virtue through Painting - Laura Summer

Whether you call it God, or Buddha, or Krishna, or Christ, or something else, there is an activity, a Presence, that is moving humans toward truth, beauty and goodness. We can access this Presence if we turn to it, but what is the practice of turning? It can be prayer, or mindfulness, or meditation, but it can also be creative activity dedicated to this Presence, because creative activity is what this Presence is.

For me this understanding has led to a continuing practice of this kind of creativity activity. This takes different forms at different times, and most recently it has led me to an investigation of "virtue"—an exploration of what virtue is, how I experience different virtues and strive to cultivate them, and an artistic practice to work with these questions.

In order to try to understand virtue as a path to spiritual awakening I did a short investigation of virtue of different traditions. At different times and in many traditions, various virtues have been described.

In the New Testament Galatians (5:22-23) mentions love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *chayil* can be translated as "virtuous," and it is used to refer to strength, force, power, valor, and worthiness (Ruth 3:11,Proverbs 31:10). The ten commandments can be seen as the development of virtues (Exodus 20).

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* we read: The forms of Virtue are justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, wisdom. *Rhetoric 1366b1*

There are a core set of values heavily emphasized in Hindu tradition.: *Ahimsa* (non-violence), mind and sense control, tolerance, hospitality, compassion, protection, respect – for all living beings and for the sanctity of all life.

In Buddhism we can see the virtues in the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration

The Sufi tradition speaks of the virtues of the Prophet of Islam: Sufi virtues encompass qualities like love and devotion to God, sincerity, compassion, humility, patience, discipline, and detachment.

In several Bantu African cultures, the word Ubuntu (often translated as "I am because we are") is a collection of values and practices which highlights virtues centered around interconnectedness and humaneness. Key virtues include respect, compassion, empathy, cooperation, community, responsibility, honesty, integrity, and forgiveness.

I could see from this somewhat cursory online investigation that all of the traditions I looked at had an understanding of the importance of virtue for the development of the human being who is spiritually striving.

In her book, “The Secret Doctrine” (1888), H.P. Blavatsky assigned 12 virtues to the 12 zodiac signs.[1] When Rudolf Steiner was asked about these, he confirmed the relationships and added 12 more, one to each virtue as an “enhancement”.[2]

March 21 for Aries: Devotion, *becomes power of sacrifice*

April 21, for Taurus: Equilibrium, *becomes progress*

May 21, for Gemini: Perseverance, *becomes faithfulness*

June 21, for Cancer: Unselfishness *becomes catharsis*

July 21, for Leo: Compassion, *becomes freedom*

August 21, for Virgo: Courtesy, *becomes steadiness of feeling*

September 21, for Libra: Contentment, *becomes self-composure*

October 21. for Scorpio: Patience, *becomes understanding*

November 21, for Sagittarius, Control of speech and thinking, *becomes a feeling for the truth*

December 21, for Capricorn, Courage, *becomes the power of redemption*

January 21, for Aquarius, Discretion, *becomes the power of meditation*

February 21, for Pisces, Magnanimity, *becomes love*

About two years ago, Lisa Romero, author and meditation teacher, offered a monthly online contemplation[3] on each set of these virtues, and I began to work contemplatively with them. As I worked, I began to realize what strong medicine they hold. At first, I could flippantly think that yes, I was a pretty patient or persevering or compassionate person, but when I began to contemplate the polarities between which each virtue lives, I began to have a new experience of my own shortcomings, and therefore a clear picture of what I needed to work on. I thought I was compassionate, but when I looked, I saw my own disinterest and also my smothering concern. I thought I was patient, but then I noticed my impatience and also my lethargy. I began to work with seeing the two-sided opposites of each virtue. The polarities can be named in a variety of ways but I always found them in myself: they were too much, too loose, to flippant, on one side, and too little, too tight, too rigid, on the other.

I am a painter, and I learn by painting. So, I made myself an exercise to see if by painting the transformation I could affect some change in myself.

During the Holy Nights, 2024/25, I worked with the virtues by trying to see what the polarities were within which the virtue found a center. To me this center seemed like an activity of the Christ.

I painted each of the virtues, starting with the polarities, trying to feel the activity of each one and then transforming the painting into the virtue, and finally into the expansion or enhancement of the virtue. As an example, distraction and rigid allegiance were the polarities of devotion, leading to power of sacrifice.

I worked with one virtue per day during the twelve holy nights, December 25 through January 6, starting in the polarities and transforming the painting into the virtue by layering the colors and collaging paper. In February, I began to offer a weekly online group to explore the virtues and painting. 24 people participated. We were helped in our work by the references given at the end of this article.

One remarkable moment for me was when I was preparing an artistic presentation for a Youth Section conference on the Philosophy of Freedom when I read Witzenmann's Contemplations of the virtues where he says "in reverence for the spirit in us and in all beings, we rise toward ethical individualism" #[4]. This gave me the insight that developing the virtues is a way forward in our troubled and despairing world.

So, I wanted to report on this research and offer the painting exercise. Whether you use these 12 virtues associated with the zodiac or a different set of virtues from another tradition, this painting approach can be used.

Each of the virtues has a slightly different quality, a different flavor, by observing in your feeling realm you can try to identify what is different and also what is the feeling/quality that is there in every one of these virtues. No matter your tradition or what you name this middle space, it has a strong presence.

If you are interested in this work, you can contact me.

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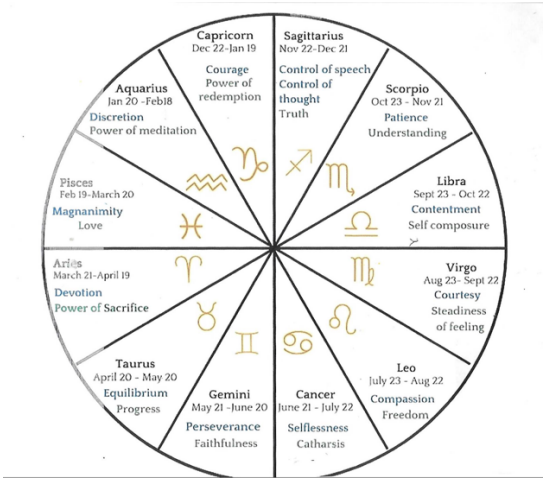
1. Blavatsky, H.P. 1888, *The Secret Doctrine.* The Theosophical Publishing Company, Limited, London.
2. Steiner, Rudolf, 2007,*Guidance in Esoteric Training*. Forest Row, Rudolf Steiner Press.
3. Romero, L, https://www.youtube.com/@AstralArc-
4. Witzenmann, H., 1975, *The Virtues – Contemplations*, Folder Editions,NYC

Artistic Process:

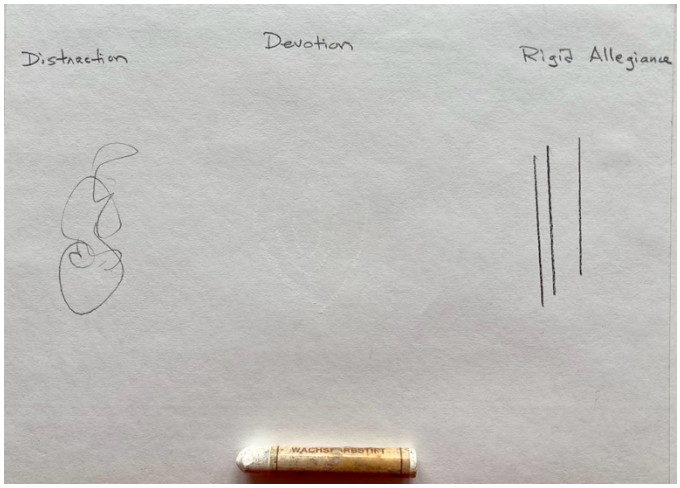
Contemplate the virtue and it's "enhancement", refer to this chart, (courtesy of Lisa Romero).

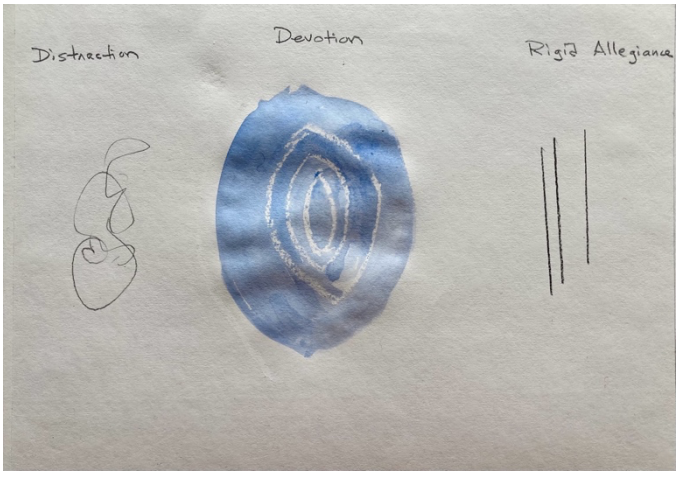


Now think about what the polar opposites are that relate to this virtue. For this example I chose distraction and rigid allegiance as the polarities of devotion, but you might choose something different. Once you have chosen, do a loose scribble sketch to feel what those polarities might look like.

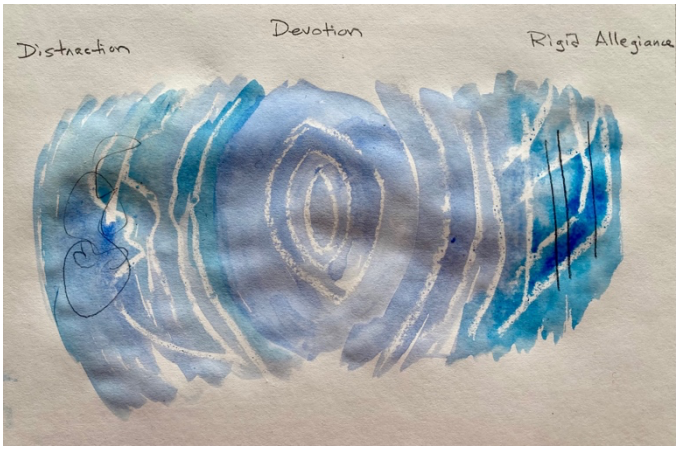
Now put the lines from your scribble investigation on each side of your paper, using a pencil.

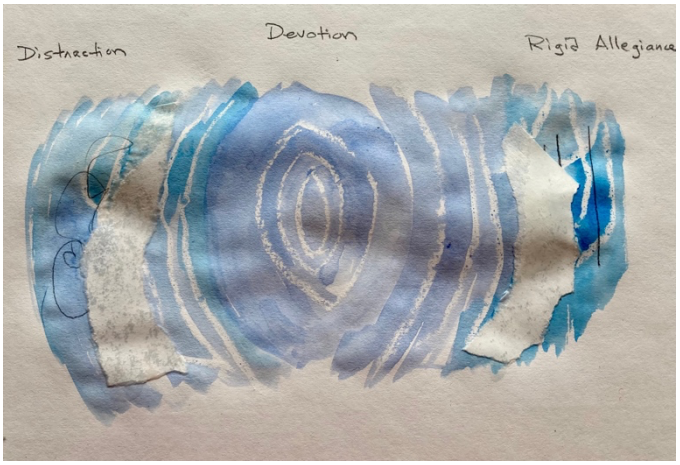
Now in the center, using a white crayon, draw a gesture of the virtue, you will not be able to see it yet, trust your hand to make the gesture.





Now using a layering technique with watercolor, begin to transform these polarities into the virtue. Your virtue gesture will show up when you paint watercolor over it. Ask yourself what color do I use? What shapes? What process? you may add collage and paper. You may obscure what you have already done and let something new arise.





Ask yourself questions while you work: What does this virtue feel like? At what point do I move into the enhancement? How do both the virtue and the enhancement live in my painting?