

# POISONCHANGING

## John Caddy

Many cultures tell stories about and act out the wonderful human phenomenon I call Poisonchanging.

In a Hindu myth, a god drinks a poison distilled from all the evils of the world. Inside his body, he converts the poison into enormous power, and banishes the 10,000 demons who distilled the poison, but is not left unmarked—the use of such power turns him blue.

Shamans of a traditional community in Siberia, in a vision ceremony, eat the poisonous fly agaric mushroom, transform it within their bodies into power and become capable of great knowledge.

Southwestern American Indian holy men of some communities eat the poisonous Jimson weed and transform it within their bodies into the power of flight.

In many traditional stories and ceremonies throughout the world, humans ingest poisonous and/or taboo substances and transform them inside themselves into various sorts of power. Consider the uses of psilocybin mushrooms and peyote.

Consider too Christians' ritual ingestion of the body and blood of Christ to gain Salvation.

Poisonchanging is our amazing human ability to take into ourselves hurtful and poisonous things, and internally process them in ways which not only allow us to survive but transform the poison into some kind of power. When we tell stories, make songs and poems, when we dance and paint, we are transformers of experience.

Poisonchanging is a powerful metaphorical concept that can help us realize our own strength and our power to transform experience. Once we grasp our own strength and power, it is difficult to feel sorry for ourselves. We have great powers, including this ability to transform.

Poisonchanging is one of the root reasons art exists. Artists make art for many reasons, and Poisonchanging is surely one. Many artists of all sorts begin doing their art in an effort to survive their confusion and pain.

Consider the Blues, music originally made out of the pain of slavery. In the Blues, pain is transformed into survival power and beauty. As the Blues evolved, shackles were transformed into song.

Consider any effective art with human suffering as its subject. In dramatic tragedy, Aristotle's "catharsis" surely requires the transformation of communal suffering into a power that heals. Look at the power of Picasso's 'Guernica', his painting of a place

# POISONCHANGING

## John Caddy

ravaged by war. How can the depiction of such horror result in something we can call beautiful? This is the essence of Poisonchanging.

Think of it: Through a willed creative act, humans have the capability to convert ‘poisonous’ experience into something positive—we can do more than simply neutralize the poison, we can turn it into food; we can turn our suffering into learning and nourishment, even beauty. This is an amazing capability. All of us can be Poisonchangers.

If we are to be able to use Poisonchanging, we are required to be open to experience. This is a perilous choice, but it is a choice. We do not, any of us, have to allow a buildup of emotional scar tissue to gradually insulate us from fully experiencing our lives. Closing ourselves off as we mature is not inevitable. But when a person has built up layers of scar tissue, they can be shed, through a variety of processes. One of the most powerful is the making of art. If we do choose to remain or become open, we must feel we can survive our vulnerability. In other words, the ability to transform experience must become a real possibility.

This survival possibility becomes evident to children when we teach them to make art. Children discover quickly that if they make art out of a painful experience, they can feel very good about that, and the experience, while still there and still felt, is shifted positively.

Our great distinction from the other animals is that we can bind time and space—that is, that our brain allows us to imagine the past and future and imagine other physical places. Once we found the ability to imagine our personal deaths, as no other creature could, we had to find ways to live with that new knowledge. Perhaps we developed this survival ability of Poisonchanging in order to live with the results of our mental leap.

So creativity, at heart, is a survival mechanism. Creative process, like ritual, is a transformer of experience.

Poisonchanging is a social act, a communal act. What the artist, like the wise woman and the holy man, can give to the community is public knowledge of ways to survive. (Perhaps artists’ 20th Century alienation from the community is the result of the community’s perception that artists no longer cared to make their special knowledge accessible to the community.)

In the largest possible sense, I learned one night that Poisonchanging was indeed communal, even familial in nature: a deer mouse gave me a lesson in Poisonchanging:

# POISONCHANGING

## John Caddy

### EATING THE STING

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Caught in the snapped circle of light  
on the cookshack oilcloth,  
an upright deermouse holding yellow  
in her fine fingers  
like an ear of black-striped corn,  
a wasp I'd slapped dead earlier.

She stares, belly resonating, round above  
a scatter of brittle wing, bits, a carapace—  
she has already eaten the stinger—  
stares at me, still,  
something thrumming in her eyes

beyond herself, a mouse stung  
onto an edge as far from cartoons  
as the venom she's chewed into food.

She cocks a fawn ear now, trembling poisonchanger,  
caught in the circle of light  
I've thought myself in at times,

but never sure, I ask her softly how  
she does it, if I can learn this turning  
of sting into such food as startles in her eyes,  
learn to suck pain into every sense  
and come up spitting seeds, force poison  
to a tear held fierce between my lips  
and whirl it into tongue which sings, but

## POISONCHANGING

### John Caddy

here I've come too loud: She drops the husk,  
fusses whiskers with her paws, kicks  
a scrap of wing aside, and whispers  
thanks for the corn,

steps backward off the table  
(and so potent she is with wasp)  
flips a circle through light and  
lands running on her leaf-toed feet.

I know the deermouse to be my cousin, and freely admit that she simply ate the poison, and couldn't care less about metaphor. What is important is not what the artist intended, but what she accomplished.

When we make art, the intra-personal communication among the various divisions or aspects of the artist is fundamental. We have long described ourselves as divided beings: we often argue with ourselves, and more often fail to hear our various voices. We describe ourselves as creatures with two brains (right and left hemispheres of the neocortex) and even with three (brainstem or reptile brain—oldest; limbic system or mammal brain—middle-aged; neocortex—bells & whistles new!). We know now from brain research that certain parts of our brains can use language and not others. When I write a poem, I can easily think of that as an act of communication with myself—if I am lucky in the poem, I can give the speechless parts of myself the temporary power of words, which may then enable me to integrate the experience which engendered the poem, and in the process integrate my self, or in other words, to perceive my self as more nearly whole. So part of Poisonchanging has to do with our intuitions of our own mental processes.

Part of Poisonchanging has to do with Others—communication within the community.

In the past century artists have probably taken this notion of the self as the primary audience too much to heart. We have seen many claims that the notion of art as communal has become irrelevant.

The relationship between artist and audience alters when we recognize Poisonchanging to be a communal act. When we share the art we have made, another way the 'poison' is changed comes into play. As I have written elsewhere, "Shared pain shrinks—Shared joy

## POISONCHANGING

### John Caddy

grows.” The simple essential social act of sharing our creations helps us heal ourselves. At that moment of sharing, we re-integrate ourselves into the community (as the deermouse re-integrated me into the larger ecological community.)

To make a dance, a poem, some piece of art, does not require genius. Nor does it require being compelled to the vocation of artist. The past thirty years has seen thousands of artists working in schools and other community settings, helping non-artists to create art. Many non-artist adults have found art-making in workshops to be profoundly engaging. The feminist movement has played a large role here. This proliferation of artmaking by laypersons is regularly mocked by the defenders of Elitist tradition (it comforts me to know that status and hierarchy issues are functions of the old reptile brain).

I am one of the many artists who have long been helping others make art in schools and other places. I’ve taught hundreds of residencies over thirty years. What we artists-in-residence discovered, to our surprised delight, is that kids make real art, not crude imitations of adult geniuses. Similarly, adults workshopping art can also make the real thing.

A primary reason so many kids and adults find art-making worthy, I believe, is that it gives them access to Poisonchanging. (Perhaps artists’ growing acceptance by the community is the result of the community’s perception that artists are once more willing to make their special knowledge accessible to the community.)

In other words, what the artist can give to the community, as the artist always has, is public knowledge of ways to survive.

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