
THE LIVING CIRCLE - ANNE'S STORY

By Mercedes Grandin

INTRODUCTION

"Native peoples used circles, spirals and labyrinths as means of coming to an understanding of the Universe and themselves, because Nature itself was perceived as working in circles, cycles and spirals, and the Life Force itself moved in a similar way. When humans come into balance with Nature we come into harmony and rhythm, vibration and pulsation of Life itself with the result that we become, joyful and harmonious beings."

Shamanic Spirit by Kenneth Meadows

Preface from Anne

Often I wonder why I am writing my story. It is about a calling and a message that I have been asked to spread to the world that all people must respect one another and exist peacefully in the living circle that contains all life. What I went through with my injury and surgeries was a humbling experience; it brought me to a low point where I evaluated my life and the meaning of my work. I realized that I was only one being and others like me existed out there. During the years of the surgeries and pain, I asked God for help and bit by bit I gained strength and painted with a passion. That drive helped me understand how lucky and blessed I am. I needed to help others who were not so fortunate. I was painting circles and didn't even realize what I was doing and then, like in a dream, all of it came to me. The circle was the Native American faith circle, or living circle, and within it everything existed in harmony, people respected one another and nations learned to live together. Human beings protected the land and preserved it for future generations. All of a sudden, that tap on the shoulder became a bolt of lightning and I knew I had to share my story. My mission is to spread the concept of The Living Circle to all corners of this Earth and pray all humans will learn to exist in the circle, love one another and preserve our beautiful lands.

PART 2 - THE BEGINNING / THE PATH

Can you talk about your journey and path as an artist?

I painted when I was young, but I wasn't encouraged because art wasn't considered a viable career path for a woman. I went to Bennett Junior College to see if I had talent. I graduated Magna Cum Laude, winning both the sculpture and painting awards. The school had a terrific arts department and I often went back there as a lecturing artist. My teacher wanted me to go to the Arts Student League in New York but that was not encouraged, so I went to Moore College of Art and studied to be a teacher.

It was when I was getting my master's degree and I had a professor who said to me, "You're never going to be an artist, women just aren't artists so don't even try." He said it really to me because I think at that point I was probably a bit more advanced, I was there as an art educator but my work was pretty good for someone in the art education program. I think having everyone say "you don't have the ability" made me want to paint.

Because it has taken me so long to get where I am, I have learned what it means to be an artist. It is not the piece, but the emotion, the soul, the heart, the message the artist puts into a painting. The artist must give of himself or herself totally if they are to succeed. The artist has to enter into a private world to create. Few people realize what it takes for an artist to produce a painting. We live in a very isolated world. This world is lonely, as we must focus on our work. The images that occupy the mind and heart swirl around in the head and it takes great energy to process it all. Even though I can stop painting and enter into the world of every day life, the images remain in the head and heart. I can go to sleep and they are still there. Often I can create entire paintings in my sleep. In the morning, I know just what to do with the piece I am working on. Sometimes people think I am "aloof" or "out there" or just in a different world. The artist goes in and out of both worlds at the same time. Sometimes there is a period of transitioning from one world to another and that is difficult for friends to understand what is happening.

Can you talk about the evolution of your work and how you've incorporated the mediums of sculpture and painting?

When I was young and I painted 3-D boxes that were sculptural forms with abstract shapes. When I got to Boston University, I painted in heavy glazes like the old masters especially Rembrandt working in the chiaroscuro technique. All of us students had to learn to paint still lives working in brown tones and carefully adding glazes to make the painting as realistic as possible. These paintings were often somber. As a result, for many years my work was heavy and the colors were very dark. I would overwork the piece and there was no life or emotion in the painting. I was never really happy with the final product. It took years for me to find my own vision and style. I spent a summer at The Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and created large boxes that were painted on the outside. One was 8 feet high. I loved the idea of walking around the piece and seeing how the painting moved from one side to another. Even after that experience I've always been interested in sculpture and created organic ceramic pieces that were two and three feet high. Recently I built boxes out of wood and painted the surfaces. I enjoy how painting can be sculpture and how one side can undulate to another.

I really didn't get into this kind of organic, shape-driven style that I'm doing today until I met an interesting graffiti artist who said to me, "Why are you doing this stuff? Why are you doing those stiff landscapes and painting of flowers?" and I said "I don't know." He had an image and a vision in his head and his work was phenomenal. I've lost track of him but I owe my return to the organic work I was doing years before, to him. Then he told me to "jump over the edge" (which means go for it) take some risks and see what happens. So my paintings went back to where they were many years ago to my present style. My first series was after 9/11, I did abstract paintings about worlds emerging and worlds apart. I felt the need to reflect the conditions of our country and make a statement about mankind living together in peace. How could we kill other humans? Life is precious, why destroy it? So I painted my peace series and my vision came into place.

Now my work is sometimes 3 dimensional and sometimes flat. One shape leads into another shape. The land moves into the sky and everything becomes connected as all elements of life move and flow together. I try to make my colors exciting and rich like the earth or the deep blue of the sky. I use glazes and layers of paint to get depth. It takes time for all the experiences and visions to take form. Part of art is being stimulated, being able to use all the senses. It's learning about color, the lines, the shapes, edges and composition. For example, my color has gone from very bland to very strong. People look at my work and my use of color excites them. My work keeps evolving, changing as my life and experiences change. This is what an artist must do to grow and develop. It is important for an artist to keep stimulating the senses, to keep searching, feeling and always looking for the unknown.

Is there anything that holds you back at this point?

Physical pain, time and trying to balance life and family sometimes holds me back. It is difficult to be totally involved in one's work and then change focus and cook dinner. It is similar to when you are working out and are in a "zone", a place where the body is moving and you could keep going for a long time but all of a sudden you are jerked from that state into reality. It takes a second or so to adjust. I used to paint all day and then break for dinner only to go back and work for several more hours. I realized I was not able to focus on my family and I had to change my schedule so I could be a better mother and wife. This has been a challenge but all of us have a hard time balancing life! I also deal with the shoulder pain and I try to think I am not held back, but the reality is I am. Sometimes after working for a long period of time, I cannot lift a coffee cup, other times it is hard for me to cook so I mentally deal with it. If someone asks me "how much pain do I have" I do not know as I have learned not to think about it and just cope.

PART 3 - THE CALLING

It was really when I had my injury that I became driven and realized I was called, that I had a message to spread to others. I knew I was being called, that there was a journey that I needed to go on. Weird things happened, but I just didn't listen or want to acknowledge all that was happening around me. This is how God comes to people, often we just don't want to admit he is there and try to block him out. One of the questions I've been doing a lot of thinking about is: why am I doing this? Painting such long hours and in so much pain. Many times I have wanted to give up. However, I believe I have been called. If you are called you have to fulfill your calling. If I can inspire someone to rise above pain and hurt, then I've helped somebody.

"The Sacred Hoop is the circle of all life- the Four Directions, the Earth, and everything that lives on the Earth. It includes not only the two-leggeds, but also the four-leggeds, the wingeds, those who live in the waters, those who crawl on the earth, even the plant life. Everything is part of the Sacred Hoop and everything is related. Our existence is so intertwined that our survival depends upon maintaining a balanced relationship with everything in the Sacred Hoop."

*The Wind Is My Mother.
The Life and Teachings of a Native American Shaman.
Bear Heart*

How has Native American spirituality and the concept of the circle influenced you and your work?

When I was young, my mother and I used to go out every day and walk the freshly plowed fields at our farm in Maryland. We would collect artifacts, screen the soil and she would draw Native American spear points and meticulously diagram the chips of stone that would be flaked off the point. These illustrations were for the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. She had an incredible collection. Because of all the time I spent walking the fields and discovering how Native Americans created their artifacts, I learned about their culture and view of the world.

When I was getting my Master of Fine Arts degree from Boston University, I had to do a thesis and was struggling with what I wanted to do. I started to communicate with a man from the Akwesasne Iroquois Nation in upstate New York named Kohannes. We were writing back and forth when I realized I was being called by the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit could be God or a higher being, but for the first time I knew who was calling me. I started drawing circles. I was connecting all life forms and placing images inside circles. I really did not know what I was doing until I read a few books on Native American spirituality. It was then it all became clear. I knew that my vision was forming and I realized I had a message to tell others.

I have a spiritual mentor who saw my work during the time I was discovering my vision and he said "Anne do you know what you're doing? You are making circles because circles have no beginning and no end." He said that Native Americans believe in the faith circle or living circle, and that all life exists within the circle in harmony and balance. Within the circle, all people respect one another. I began to do more reading and realized that I was encompassing the spirituality and philosophy of Native Americans in my work without really knowing about it.

How has your shoulder injury affected your work and your mission as an artist?

It was really when my injury and the 6 surgeries that followed occurred that I knew I was being called and it all came together. For four years, I had one surgery after another and each time my range of motion got worse. I was in unbearable pain, but I never gave up. I started to paint with my left hand. I remember two weeks after surgery painting a huge picture of sailboats on paper, I sat on the floor with my shoulder strapped and worked. I learned to pray. Often I would be in tears working. I never told anyone. I wanted to know the answer why I wasn't getting better, but no one told me. Years later, I learned the truth from a doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital who I called the "miracle worker". The first surgery affected the cartilage in my shoulder and overtime lost all the cartilage in my shoulder.

It has been a struggle to work long hours especially after all the operations. My technique was very poor at first and often it would take hours to complete a piece. Because I am continually stretching and exercising the shoulder, I now paint much better. I sand the surface so the paint looks smooth. It is very important to me that the technique is as perfect as it can be. I have a hard time painting vertical paintings because I cannot reach the top of the painting and must turn the canvas upside down to finish it. Sometimes I can barely move my arm over to the palette to put paint on my brush. Whenever I do these paintings I pray to get through them. So painting is not something that's easy to do, it's a physically difficult thing to do. Eventually, I may need a shoulder

replacement as all the cartilage in my shoulder is gone. I have been in physical therapy off and on for 11 years so I can move my arm. I have had a personal trainer because my entire right side is tight and stiff.

The time taken away from my work has been difficult and trying to stay positive is hard. I have hit the wall a couple of times over the years and just had to pray that I could go on. But, I have also realized that I am so blessed to have all that I have. If it wasn't for my surgery, I would not have heard the voice from above. Sometimes we need to be humbled to begin again. I am a different person than I was several years ago. Now I want to serve and help others. I wish to spread my message about all people existing in the Living Circle in peace and harmony to as many people as will listen.

I'm not sure I've overcome the obstacles, there's a lot that's gone on – six operations in four years and sometimes two operations within a month. The only thing I could do about it was to try to be positive and keep working on getting better because if I sat and complained, I was not going to get anywhere, I spent many hours thinking about the unfairness of it all and realizing that the only way I could get better was knowing that I had a mission. I asked God for help. It was a strange feeling that the hurt and despair I felt was being replaced by a calling I was scared to acknowledge.

I went to my rector and asked about what was God asking me to do and why am I driven to paint when I physically can't do it? He said "God has called you to do this work – God has asked you to get out here and do something that will help mankind. This is not something you have a choice about," and I think that's probably true. So from the lowest depths, I slowly began to climb up the ladder. One rung at a time, I moved up. I got help and prayed. I didn't talk about any of this but I was totally at peace with myself knowing where I was going and the journey I had to follow. I had to forgive people who hurt me and move on.

We all must be advocates for ourselves, ask the questions, get second opinions be tough and ask why. Women must be strong and stand up for themselves. I have learned many lessons about life and about not giving up. No one is perfect, apologies are important to maintain balance and harmony. No one is better than someone else. We are all humans just trying to fulfill our dreams, live a good life, love others and preserve this world for generations to come.

PART 4 - THE LIVING CIRCLE

What motivated you to go to Uganda and work with the Beacon of Hope students? How has that experience shaped your art and your concept of the Living Circle?

I dreamed about going to Africa. When my mother passed, I had these visions about Africa and going there to spread my concept of the Living Circle. Part of my vision and all of it coming together has been 'you've got to spread it to all parts of the world.'

When the Church of The Redeemer Mission Trip came up, I knew I had to go. I was asked by my church to go to a boarding school called The Beacon of Hope College. They wanted an artist to come over and work with the students in color, because they had never experienced color or mixed paints. The school wanted me to do a mural so many young people could participate. We brought all the supplies needed for the project including aprons the Copley Society in Boston gave us. Everyone who went over brought a quart of paint in his or her suitcase because that's the only way we could get it into Uganda. When we arrived at the school, we tried to put the canvas up outside on a building, but they didn't have a nail or hammer. They didn't have pencils. I brought 24 pencils and three pads of paper. We were breaking the pencils and sharpening them with knives, they had absolutely nothing. Many of the students were taken from government displacement camps because they were orphaned by tribal wars in the area, and placed in the school run by Pilgrim Uganda, the umbrella organization.

Can you talk about the process of making the mural?

We had four days and the first day 100 students came to participate in the painting. The canvas we brought from Boston and the students from The Church of The Redeemer wrote messages to the students in Uganda. When the 18foot canvas was opened, it was filled with wonderful drawings and sayings to be shared with The Beacon of Hope students. The Beacon of Hope students did drawings of what around the school was important to them. We taped these drawings on the canvas and then talked. I asked, 'How many of these drawings were of the school? How many were of the tree you sit under for your church services?' So we started clumping the drawings with similar subjects and then choosing the topics that were the most meaningful to the students. Then, I picked three students to become the student leaders. These leaders were great and they organized all the students. One of the leaders mixed the acrylic paint for those who were working on the mural. She had never seen colors change when mixed together. She saw how it was possible to make green by putting yellow paint into blue. The Beacon of Hope students' drawings were brought back to our church in Boston and shared with the students here and thus the circle connecting Boston with Uganda was made.

Everyone worked together and finally the miracle happened. There was one student who painted his teacher on the right side – it was huge. Jesus was in the middle of the mural, and the teacher from the Beacon of Hope College, who was named Moses, kept getting bigger and bigger. Moses had been away for three days in Kampala. I didn't know what to do about his face because it was so large and I didn't want to hurt the students who painted it as a testimony to their teacher.

So the last day the mural was almost all done and we went back to the hotel for lunch. For some reason I left all the paints out that day. When I returned to the school 45 minutes later all the students were around the mural and paint was all over the place. It was a mess. They had painted Moses out and in his place was the Bible. The students had gone to Moses, the teacher, and talked it all out and in his place was the Bible. They had taken complete ownership of their painting. They knew that it was odd to have their teacher bigger than Jesus. When we finished up that day, the rector, Dorsey, came with the other missionaries and was overwhelmed.

When we arrived on that Sunday we went to the church service under a huge fig tree and there were four hundred students sitting outside and the music was incredible. Their electronic piano was keeping a wonderful beat and students were dancing, singing and clapping their hands with the joy of God in their heart. We got out of the van and there were seats in front of the entire school for the 18 of us who went to Uganda. Each of us was introduced and then, Dorsey our rector gave a sermon. I will never forget what he said and how he said it. He talked to the young women first and then to the young men. To the women he said something like, "sisters don't let those men use you, stand up be proud you are a special person and feel good about yourself." Those words were so meaningful to many of us. We women, students, teachers and missionaries could identify with that. I

remembered all that I had gone through with my shoulder and friends who had stories about how they had been hurt as well. In that moment, everyone sitting under the tree was one. If we all could love one another in The Living Circle and connect our lives in harmony and balance, our earth would be a much better place.

Can you talk your next project, The Living Circle, and what the significance of that project is?

The show is called is the Living Circle. The meaning of the Living Circle is why I am doing this project. The theme and overall concept is that all animals, all people exist in the living circle and if we don't learn to exist together as a people and live in harmony with the world around us, we won't survive and the Earth will decay.

It is an honor for me to be showing at The Copley Society in Boston, My work is organic and somewhat different so I'm thankful for the opportunity to have this exhibit. The display will consist of 14 paintings and will be held May 19th until July 2nd. It is an installation in a small room called the Red Room. The walls will be covered with canvas painted to coordinate with my work. The paintings will be mounted on the canvas. The illusion of stretching the canvas around the room, over the windows is to create a circle. The shapes of each painting will connect to the next piece. As you go around the room, the paintings will connect to make a circle. It will be a circle around the world showing sunrise to sunset moving from Boston to Uganda to Italy and home again to Massachusetts. There will actually be three circles: you have the paintings around the room that are connected by their shapes, people and animals that are part of the circle, and there will be a 24 hour day period which is the circle of a full day.

Each of us has our own circle. The paintings for The Copley Society represent my circle of the places I have been to around the world. This is my journey that I am sharing with you, the audience, as part of my calling. All our circles connect and float in the larger circle representing all life. It is important that all our personal circles and the circles of all animals and life work together in harmony within the bigger circle. This is what will keep all life, nature and living things in balance and harmony.

Recently I got an email from one of my students in Uganda. It was wonderful hearing from him. I wonder how he was able to find a computer, travel to Seroti and have the time to send me an email. The circle was happening again, we were far away from one another but we were in the circle of life and existing in harmony with one another. This is what it is all about: reaching out to others, listening to the voice from above and respecting all people and the land we live on. Without harmony, we will destroy ourselves and the world around us. So this exhibit is very special to me. Maybe it will make an impact on others, give people hope, help people stand up and be proud! And above all we need peace in our land. We must all be one, sisters and brothers of all colors and from all countries. We are all humans and we must live in peace to protect this wonderful planet, earth!

"Last night I had the strangest dream I ever had before-
I dreamed the world had all agreed to put an end to war.
I dreamed there was a mighty room and the room was filled with men
And the paper they were signing said they'd never fight again.

And when the paper was signed
And a million copies made
They all joined hands and circled 'round
And grateful prayers were made.

And the people on the streets below
Were dancing 'round and 'round
With swords and guns and uniforms
All scattered on the ground.

Last night I had the strangest dream.
I ever had before.
I dreamed the world had all agreed
To put an end to war

Written by Ed McCurdy in 1950 and recorded by Joan Baez.
