



Images of Self: Painting the Tree

Active Participation in the Processes of Growing and Becoming through Dynamic Watercolor Painting

Phoebe Alexander

Dynamic watercolor painting is a therapeutic modality using the wet-on-wet method of bringing liquid color onto moistened paper. Its purpose is to create an experience of—and to (re-)establish an inner resonance with—the fluid, *formative* processes associated with life and development. We share these processes with the rest of the natural world. These developmental processes of life are most visible in the *metamorphoses* and *transformations* of plants, and in animal embryonic development. They are manifestations of our *etheric*, or *life body*.

Color and music may both be seen as nonverbal languages with correspondences to our feelings, emotions, and moods, and to the moods of nature. They are languages of the *soul* (or *psyche* or *astral body*). They “speak” to us—we feel “moved” by them. The resonance between our inner world of feeling and the moods of outer nature is universal to human experience. Color as mood even appears as idiom in our various languages; feeling blue, seeing red, seeing things in a rosy light, and so on. Further, the seasons of the year, the time of day, the phases of life, all share resonance with one another as color-mood qualities of developmental processes. We can see these relationships broadly sketched as follows:

Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
Sunrise	Midday	Sunset	Night
Awakening	Active	Tired	Sleeping
Unfolding	Open	Closing	Dormant
Sprouting	Growing	Fruit-bearing	Seed Dispersal
Birth	Youth	Adulthood	Death
Warming	Hot	Cooling	Cold
Light	Bright	Dimming	Dark
New Potential	Fullness of Being	Fulfilled	Future Impulses

Bringing these archetypal qualitative relationships into conscious alignment in the imagination through brief discussion before a painting session strengthens the exercise and makes the resulting images more potent.

The term *dynamic* implies energy, activity, movement (both inner and outer)—it denotes an activating principle. Through this therapeutic painting method, healthy developmental life processes (such as, in this case, the growth of a tree) are recreated on the paper through movement of color and form, activating the resonance between inner and outer, and mirroring (or imprinting) the healthy process within.

Dynamic watercolor painting is based on the premise that healthy images and processes that are taken up into the soul life through an individual's own active participation—*willed* activity—work in a corrective/self-corrective manner, gradually

replacing the unhealthy or damaged process with a healthy one.

This painting method engages individuals in rhythmic and harmonious experiences that strengthen their etheric/formative forces and make them aware of their inner connection to the world. The process can be seen as a reeducation of the inner life of the individual through a form of guided imagery.

With the image of the tree we experience not only a profound connection to its threefold nature—its roots firmly anchored and seeking sustenance in the darkness and depths, the strength and verticality of its trunk, and the outward-reaching, sheltering limbs that interface and breathe with the environment—we also feel an equally deep connection to the developmental processes that give the tree its life and form and that will continue to be the source of its unfolding potential into the future.

Since the root of much of our somatic illness is the psyche, dynamic painting of the tree, an image of how we perceive ourselves as living, developing beings in the world, serves as a psychosomatic therapy.

Guiding the Process

A developmental process takes place in *time* between past and future; it is a *metamorphic* process, that is, the *idea* or goal of the process is already embodied in the starting point of the impulse, as the idea of the oak is already in the acorn. In dynamic watercolor painting of the tree, we know *what* we are going to paint before we begin. *How* we get there, the *process*, is the developmental journey of our painting exercise.

In our lives, just as with the tree, there are periodic winters and springs, periods of dormancy and of new growth leading toward an eventual fulfillment of *purpose*; the sprouting acorn becomes a magnificent tree, the fetus becomes an infant, and the infant becomes an adult, fulfilling the purpose of the species. And in the human, that purpose is fulfilled in the development of *individuality*.

As humans, we have become increasingly individualized beings with a purpose distinct from the purely biological goals of our genes—and we need to seek this purpose within our own individual *biographies* (the *human* developmental process) in order to experience a true sense of self, and the connectedness of that self to other selves within human society. The idea that the life of each individual is not only purposeful but *uniquely* purposeful, and, as with the image of the tree, will develop and unfold over time, is both life-affirming and self-affirming.

Yet unlike the tree in nature, we as ego-beings need to unfold the seeds of our individual strivings with increasing *intentionality*. That means becoming active participants in our own development and in our own healing. The image of the living, growing, solitary tree is therefore offered as a kind of modeling clay into which we project ourselves quite visibly, and in which we can then effect change through our willed activity according to our own individual capacity to see “what is wrong with this picture.”

My role in the therapeutic process is that of a guide charting the way through unknown terrain, but never directing the individual journey or commenting on the significance of its outcome. I encourage individuals to look at their trees by asking questions, and I let it be known that help—therapeutic as well as technical—is available should it be needed. I note the difficulties and struggles of each individual during the painting session and use those as my guide for further therapeutic work.

Life and the Element of Water

Water is often called the substance of life. Everything that lives is composed mostly of water. Its qualities are associated with aliveness—mobility, mutability, fluidity, moistness, freshness. It changes form constantly, conforming to any vessel, moving with ease between vapor, crystal, and fluid. Things float on it, are carried by it, dissolve in it. It is the medium of life's ongoing transformative processes. The developing fetus floats in the fluids of the womb in the process of becoming. Water is an enabler, a facilitator of flow, movement, change, and growth—and of infinite possibility. The qualities of water are antithetical to rigidity, isolation, and death.

Dynamic watercolor painting is thus oriented to *process* rather

than to finished *product*. Colors flow and change before one's eyes, and forms evolve out of color. Everything remains mobile as the painting comes into being. That the paintings are also beautiful is testimony to a truthful process. Although producing beautiful paintings is a desired outcome that instills confidence and reinforces a desire to pursue the activity further, it is never a primary objective. I always clarify for newcomers that *they are not attending a painting class*.

Step 1 of the Painting Exercise: Wetting the Paper—Watering the Earth

Although it is bright white, our painting paper is really a little bit of the *earthly* element—the non-living mineral substance of the world—though of organic origin, just like the earth. Wetting the paper, or *watering the earth*, is our first step in preparing to work with the life-process of a developing tree on that paper. By moistening the paper we make it receptive to the flowing colors and forms we are about to bring to it, and in faithfulness to our metaphor we moisten the paper from above downward, as rain would fall to the earth.

Nothing that we do from beginning to end of this painting exercise is arbitrary, and the predominant mood is one of *attention* and *intention*.

Atmosphere, Breath, and the Element of Air

We all breathe the same air. In fact, we breathe one another's air. What one exhales, the other inhales. The physical breathing process—a rhythmic receiving (of oxygen) and giving back (of carbon dioxide)—is our primal mode of interaction with the world. At birth we take our first breath of air, and it is now known that the fetus in utero *breathes* amniotic fluid with its lungs. The smells and tastes of our world come to us both physically and metaphorically through our capacity to receive them *into* ourselves. In this way we breathe in the *moods* of the world and of others, and we are likewise *perceived* and *received*—breathed in by the world. *Conversation* can be seen as a kind of breathing process between two individuals. All *social* interaction in fact, can be seen as a breathing process between individuals.

It is also our atmosphere, diffusing and scattering sunlight, that gives us our blue daytime sky, the brightness of our day, the rainbow, and the changing colored moods of sunrise and sunset.

A tree does not extend its limbs into a void. It reaches out to *receive* the atmosphere of the garden and to give something back. Without being able to breathe physically, all living beings die. Without being able to breathe in our soul lives, we become ill and die inwardly. Without being able to breathe socially, we languish in isolation. We need others to breathe us in—to see us, hear us, validate us.





"Which color is cold darkness?' I've always loved this strong and stout tree on the left, by a very petite lady in her 80s—petite, but not to be messed with! The tree at right is a tad more elegant, by a young adult female. I don't speak of age or temperament in the article..."

Step 2 of the Painting Exercise: Creating the Atmosphere—Seasonal Mood and Inner Mood

Seasonal mood and daily weather determine *what* colors are offered—each season has its own palette of color and hue. Our *inner mood or weather*, affected by our physical and mental health, emotional state, as well as individual temperament, will determine *how* we use those colors—in what proportion and intensity. Given a warm summer palette, it is entirely possible for an individual to produce a very wintry looking scene. But the elderly, who find themselves in the *winter years* of their lives, and who often take particular pleasure in painting winter scenes, are not particularly prone to *winterizing* a summer scene. Interestingly, chronological age seems to have little effect when it comes to inner mood-states. A winteriness would need to have penetrated into the soul, not just the physical body, for this to occur. In fact, many elderly people experience themselves as quite youthful; and all of us have known periods of inner bleakness. A winter mood can also embody deep peace and serenity. Each season of the year, and every conceivable manifestation of weather, finds its reflection in the human soul.

While the colors are being handed out and before we begin painting, we have a brief discussion of the *qualities* of the current season and weather. In an effort to bring the colors before us into a living relationship with the quality of mood we are about to paint, I will ask, "Which color is warm sunlight? Which color is cold darkness?" and so on, so that as much as possible we will be painting with *mood qualities* rather than paints. (*Illustrations above*.) I then give descriptive pictures, such as "the sky is stormy and dark," or "bright warm sunlight shines onto the cold spring earth." It is rare for someone not to know what color I am referring to or what to do with it. The color in our cups is now no longer only the blue or yellow of our *subjective* meaning, but embraces an *objective universality* as well—we get a picture of *the mood that's in the air*.

When we paint the atmosphere, our papers are quite wet. This makes it possible for the colors to flow into one another and to be moved easily across the paper without becoming fixed. Working this way from out of an archetypal image (bright, warm sunlight) rather than out of an intellectual concept (yellow), painting is a pure expression of our *feeling*

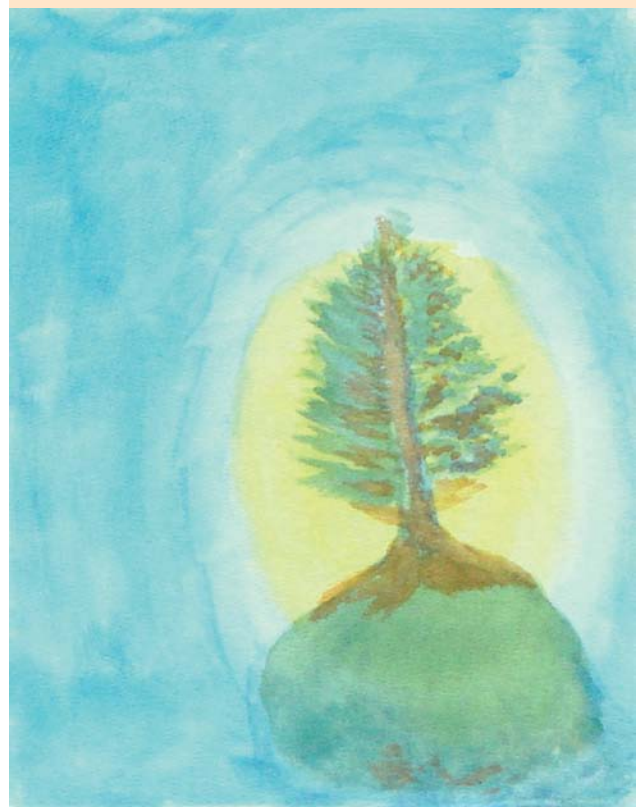
and *breathing* (of our heart and lung regions). Painting at this stage is very free, mobile, and airy, and we have the least control over the fluid element.

With dementia, stroke, mental retardation, and other conditions in which a cognitive or physical deficit impairs an individual's ability to control the application and intensity of color, pre-diluted color is offered. I always test the strength of the colors in relation to one another ahead of time to insure a pleasing, positive aesthetic experience for those who would otherwise experience frustration and ineptness—both very counterproductive reactions. This intervention reduces the likelihood of ugly and unsatisfying results. We want people to enjoy the activity, look forward to future sessions with anticipation, and reap real therapeutic value from the ongoing process.

Nourishment, Sustenance, and the Garden

A tree is always in a landscape. While trees generally grow in forests where the *group* has dominance over the *individual*, the solitary individual tree—the *individualized* tree with which we identify—always stands

A tree painting made after suffering a stroke.



alone (or in a small family group) on cleared or cultivated land. Many of these trees have been planted for shelter, food, or beauty. The landscape, the garden in which the tree grows, has been tended by human hands and is the chief source of sustenance for the solitary tree. The tree can achieve its full potential only when there is a garden to nourish it—when it is rooted in a sustaining substrate. The image of the tree, then, cannot be separated from the image of the garden. It is *our* garden, our inner resources—our capacity (as adults) to self-nurture—that feeds or starves our developing selves.

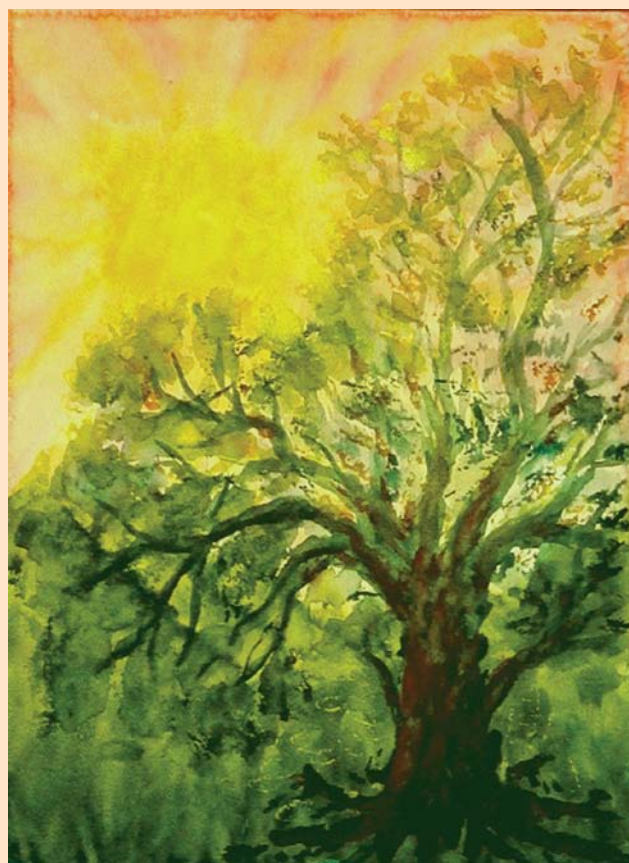
Step 3 of the Painting Exercise: Establishing Terra Firma: Creating the Garden

Once the atmosphere of the garden has been established, we are ready to create the landscape. *We prepare the garden to re-*

ceive the tree. The portraits we are about to make of our trees will be a window on a moment suspended in time. We recognize our tree portraits season after season, as we recognize the reflection of our own changing image in a mirror. Observation has shown that each individual paints a specific tree that reappears with almost no deviation in form from season to season (*illustrations below and next page center*). The trees (as well as painting styles) are so individual as to be identifiable with a specific person, much as one's handwriting is. And each individual develops a kinship with his or her tree—an intimacy and fondness that is only strengthened by repeated seasonal visits. We look forward to these periodic visits, to seeing how our trees are doing.

Despite our greatest efforts, the trees we paint are often not everything we would wish them to be. And even when they

Trees by the same artist: Spring, Summer, and (next page) Fall. "Each individual paints a specific tree that reappears..."



ceive the tree. Each individual is encouraged to create a personal garden. It is the solid, physical ground on which we stand, and it contains the plants, rocks, and other features we choose to place there. It can be a lush paradise or a barren, rocky hillside.

By this time our paintings have dried somewhat and can now receive more (or stronger) color. Though still moveable, our colors now flow and spread minimally. The placement and blending of colors is now more controlled and intentional, and the mood in the room has become noticeably inward and meditative.

The Tree and the Gardener

Now we arrive at the central theme of this exercise: growing the tree—placing the projected image of ourselves into the

grow beyond our expectations in strength, grace, and beauty, we are somehow still aware of structural anomalies, areas of fragility, parts that are broken, disconnected, or congested (*three illustrations next page, at right*). Our trees are as perfect and imperfect as we are.

Usually, the healthy part of us feels called upon to heal that which we perceive as ailing in our trees. The awareness of weakness and the response to heal sets a relationship of caring attentiveness in motion. The trees are ours (even when not consciously perceived as being *us*). We want them to do well.

Preceding or following a major event such as stroke (*illustration previous page, bottom right*), onset or lifting of depression, certain changes in medication (*illustrations at bottom of page*

30), and before (natural) death (*illustrations at top of page 31*), some individuals will paint completely different trees. They are usually surprised by the unexpected new picture and in awe of the process that led to its expression contrary to their intention or accustomed skill.

Those who see anomalies in their painted tree images and express the wish to correct or repair them, or ask for help in doing so, are already capable of a certain level of objective awareness and are encouraged to proceed with this self-corrective activity. This suggests that they are capable of effecting positive change in their own lives—strengthening their internal locus of control. This is a major objective of this therapeutic painting process. Through self-initiated, intentional corrective activity based on a relationship of attentiveness (caring) for our projected trees, we become their gardeners, actively participating in our own healing and development.

Trees can be distinguished by *type* into two broad categories: the deciduous trees that change visibly with the seasons, go through a winter dormancy period, and have the characteristically branched crowns that most of us envision when we

...with almost no deviation in form from season to season."



think of a tree; and the conifers, the needle-leaved evergreens (the Christmas trees) with their more typically upright form.

As noted, plants take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen: the mirror image of our breathing process. The plants that form the earth's green mantle can be seen as its breathing organs, especially the trees of its great forests. The deciduous trees in particular, with their open branching pattern and broad leaves, are mirror images of the branching *bronchia* and air sacs of our own

lungs. It is also in the sheltering crowns of the deciduous trees that most birds and other animals make their homes, and under which we seek shelter from rain and summer sun. These trees are also major food producers.

The conifers, by contrast, have no crowns. Their fine branches jut rhythmically from a stout, central, vertical shaft. Conifers remain fully cloaked year round, frequently down to the ground, keeping their forms well hidden. Their gestures are less gracious than those of deciduous trees, they are home to fewer creatures, provide less to humanity, and are less individualized. The bare conifer form is evocative of the *spine and nerves*, our sensory system, rather than of the lungs. This can alert us to possible nervous system involvement when it is presented (*illustration page 27, bottom right*). In addition, the solitary conifer densely cloaked to the ground in deep green presents an isolated and impenetrable presence—closed, secretive, unwelcoming, and unsocial—when it is not specifically a Christmas tree.



"Despite our efforts, the trees are often not everything we would wish them to be....parts are broken, disconnected, or congested."





"Three trees, left, are transparent, empty, not really trees at all....rather scary images from ordinary college students! Right, merging with the environment, by a very old woman fast approaching a non-form state, and living more into just the color...beautiful and ethereal."

Step 4 of the Painting Exercise: Growing the Tree

Where time and endurance allow, we pause in our painting session between the creation of the garden and the placement of the tree. This pause has a twofold purpose: it gives us a chance to talk about the nature of the tree, our own personal connection to specific trees in our lives, and to explore why we feel a resonance with the solitary tree. The discussion strengthens the living image of the tree in our consciousness, helping us to paint a living, growing entity that is intimately connected with its environment. This pause also gives our paintings time to dry out sufficiently so that our painted trees can maintain integrity of form.

All living beings have a "skin" that contains them and separates them from the world. In addition to this physical boundary that defines our form, our egos define us from one another as *individuals*—as separate selves. In our paintings, we want our trees to have both *integrity of form* and *inner substance*. We do not want them to bleed out or merge into the environment (*illustration above, right*), or to be transparent or empty (*three illustrations above, left*). To accomplish this we have to gain a certain amount of control over the fluid element through our will—this translates into increased capacity to control the etheric-for-

mative processes of our development. This activity of the ego strengthens our sense of self and our capacity for self-control. When the ego is weak, such aberrant images can emerge.

Our paintings are now damp but no longer wet, and we paint our trees slowly, carefully, and consciously, with less fluid on the brush, exerting as much control as we are able while forming our emerging trees. We grow them from the ground upward and outward, in the direction of the flow of sap. They are drawn toward the light and air, the way a tree would grow in nature. The healthy tree will be rooted in the earth of the garden, grow upright with outward reaching branches, and stand well-defined against the sky.

With elderly or weak individuals, where each task can be slow and laborious, the tree-painting exercise is spread over two sessions, with the first devoted to the establishment of the atmosphere and the garden. We then re-moisten our paintings in the second session, and re-establish the continuity of the exercise as well as the relationship between the garden and the tree, by "working in the garden a bit" before planting our trees there. This activity of *recollection* and *recapitulation* bridges the gap between sessions, eases us back into the process, and makes it possible for our painted trees to be fully united with the landscape.

"Four paintings by one woman experiencing bipolar disorder and medication changes; both affected her paintings in striking ways."



The full form of the tree is now visible, including its size, type, placement, proportions, rootedness, uprightness, solidity, integrity, gesture, the branching pattern of its crown, and its relationship to its environment. The archetypal tree image is essentially complete at this point. We are now ready to bring the optional seasonal elements of foliage (green or autumnal), flowers, and fruit into our paintings.

Foliage, Flowers, and Fruit

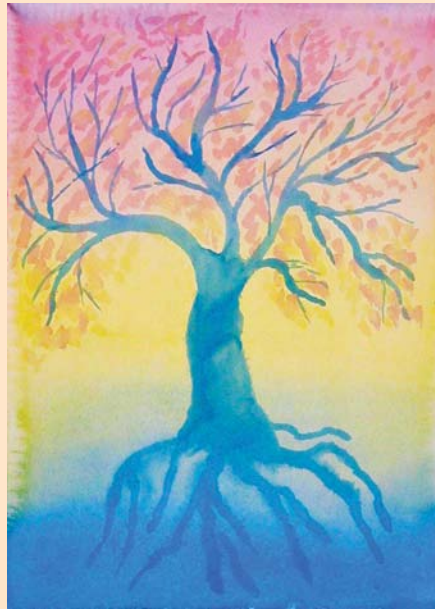
I designate these as optional, because it has been my experience that many individuals feel satisfaction and completion after the intense labor of bringing the full tree-form into their paintings, and either have no wish or no energy to go further. For these individuals, then, as well as for those who do wish to continue, we pause briefly at this point in order to look with wonder and admiration at one another's trees.

Everyone is left free, no one feels pressured. Those who are finished will sign their paintings and either leave or stay to watch.

The *formed* elements in the painting, the garden and the tree, are initially painted in blue. Blue is the color that is closest to darkness. Matter, physical substance, is impenetrable to light to varying degrees, and so we use blue, the color of darkness, to give things initial form. Therefore when sunlight (yellow) shines onto the earth (blue), *plant* life (green) naturally appears. Likewise, when our trees (blue) are warmed by the sun (orange-red), they become brown, as does the warmed earth that is visible to us. In the same way, the foliage growing from the branches of our summer tree (blue) into the surrounding heat and brilliance (warm yellow) of a summer day, becomes at once a rich green canopy. As in nature, the branches in summer become clothed with a mantle of green, and the tree's form is no longer clearly visible. And, just as the real tree does not bypass making branches to produce foliage, it is from the branches of our trees that the foliage grows. Not only are we being true to a natural process in painting our trees this way, but we get to see their underlying form regardless of the season.

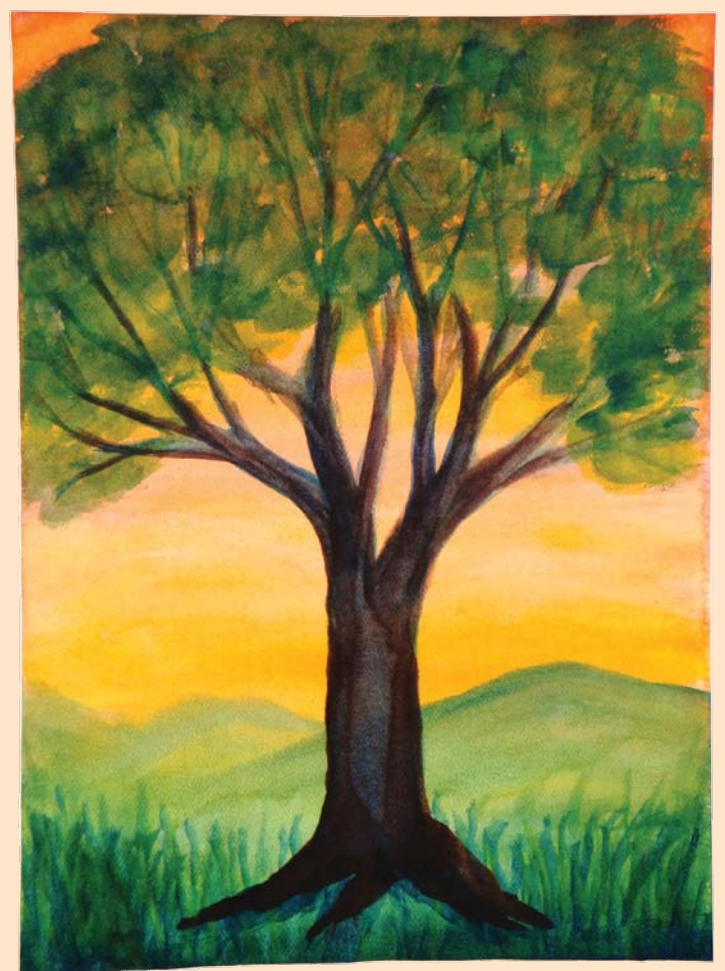
In autumn we condense and trap the sunset colors of the sky (visible through the branches of the tree) into the rich, warm, and often fiery foliage of the crown. Our autumn tree glows against a background that echoes its mood. In spring, we likewise condense the soft, pastel tints of wafting fragrance or of sunrise (visible through the branches of the tree) into a blossoming crown of varying delicate hues.

Although fruit is mentioned in our seasonal, pre-painting discussions, I have never specifically requested it. Fruit often appears spontaneously in the paintings of some individuals, and men as well as women will ask if they may also add fruit to their trees. While the appearance of fruit may sometimes represent one's offspring, *bearing fruit* in one's life can also be seen as the fertile culmination of a particular period of struggle and



"These were both painted shortly before a woman's death from cancer; they show an increased letting go. The second painting (right) shows the tree in a "weeping" version."

growth for an individual, and at the same time the beginning of new impulses toward the future: fruits contain seeds. One of my most enthusiastic painters was ninety-nine years old. He developed a zest for life he claimed was lacking in his younger years. His spirit seemed ageless.



Closing Comment

The therapeutic approach described here developed into its current form through my work with a group of elderly members and mildly developmentally delayed young adults at the Rudolf Steiner Fellowship Community in Chestnut Ridge, New York; with adults attending the self-development seasonal tree painting workshops I offered at the New York Branch of the Anthroposophical Society; and from workshops offered at therapeutic recreation conferences. Much more can be said about the therapeutic value of this work, just as more can be read from the content and mood of the paintings, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

About the Author: *Phoebe Alexander received her diploma in anthroposophical art therapy from "De Wervel," Academie voor Kunstzinnig Therapie, The Netherlands; training in Waldorf pedagogy/remedial pedagogy from Emerson College in England; certificates in gardening and horticulture from the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, NY; and her MEd in therapeutic recreation education from Lehman College, CUNY. She maintained a weekly therapeutic painting group at the Fellowship Community for about 15 years, and has offered courses and workshops on this and other areas of anthroposophical art therapy at the New York Branch of the Anthroposophical Society, at conferences, and other venues. Anyone seeking further information on the topic of this article or on other aspects of anthroposophical art therapy should feel free to contact her directly at 212-744-0257 or phoebe@artopathy.com. For more information about anthroposophical art therapy in North America, go to www.aaatna.org.*

