

Max Shertz, Master Zen Artist

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“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

—Albert Schweitzer

When I met Max Shertz in Los Angeles during the summer of 1984, I immediately realized that I had encountered an indomitable force of nature. At the time, however, I didn't know that over the decade to come he would alter the course of my life in wondrous ways—in a direction and purpose that I would never have anticipated for myself.

JUST DESSERTS

One evening, Max invited a few friends and me for after dinner dessert at his house in Encino. I had known Max for a week. We sat around engaged in lively talk on a large u-shaped booth that Max had somehow salvaged from the old Brown Derby restaurant in LA. Suddenly, Max's blue eyes and piercing black pupils had me in their crosshairs. He said to me, “You know I'm an artist?” Silence descended over the room, as the other guests froze. Forks with morsels of cake stopped midair.

There was no mistaking it. I knew that I was now on the hot seat in the king's court. “Yes, of course, I know, Max,” I said, feeling stupid. I knew nothing about art.

“I was wondering if you knew since you've said nothing about my art during the few times you've visited here with me,” Max said, eyeing the walls resplendent with his

paintings, cigarette in hand, a vice he would later give up. Max grilled me pretty hard that evening in front of the other guests. Somehow, I had survived the intensity of his brilliant mind and repartee. In the end, he shook his head in the affirmative. I had passed a test.

PALM ON THE PROPHET

During the days to come when I watched Max paint in his studio, my eyes opened to a new way of looking at the world. I grasped that magic was somehow pouring out in each unpremeditated and seemingly effortless brushstroke. This was my first lesson in how fine art was born from the master's hand. Max liked painting to music, and it soon became my job to provide the D.J. mix, which was mostly jazz, blues, and rock. Max's oral presentation skills and writing were no less visceral or powerful than his visual art. He wrote a biographical sketch titled *One Upon A Brooklyn Boy*—a riveting, painful, and sometimes-humorous account of his early years. Max was a creator whose intuitive gift elevated anything he touched.

Now and then, as he was painting, he would say, "Come here and put your palm on my shoulder." I did, and the intuitive heat running down his arm was palpable and powerful. This was the life force and energy of art flowing through the master artist.

ZEN MASTER

As circumstances unfolded, I became Max's student of writing. Although I had no thoughts or aspirations about being an artist then, I still wanted to know what he knew—from art and culture to understanding men and women, which he did like no other. Like all great Zen teachers, he mirrored truth with unfailing clarity free from distortion for those around him willing to shed their ego. Max chose not to indulge in lengthy discourse when it came to his paintings or lessons because it involved enlisting the intellect, which is easily susceptible to muddying the purity of art.

Like it or not, Max was direct. When his gaze found you, you felt transparent, as if he were peering right through you. He would challenge your beliefs, and, if there were any flaws in your logic, you would soon find yourself cornered in your own mind—which was a great gift if you were game to understanding the process. How did I end

up painting myself into a corner of my own head? This self-imposed question focused on a weakness, which had great liberating power if you were prepared to confront and correct it.

You also knew where you stood with Max. When he spoke, there was little chance of misinterpreting his meaning; he was precise and thoughtful, even if you didn't like what he said. He didn't have ulterior motives, hidden agendas, nor was he interested in the indirect and underhanded technique of manipulating others. Overt control over a person, which is above board, was another matter. Max had a good heart; he was generous; but he was not a gentle soul.

Max taught without teaching in the Zen tradition of spontaneous intuitive knowing and comprehension that freed the mind from cumbersome cognitive foreplay and the insidious traps of mindless dogma. Although Max never referred to himself as a Zen practitioner, his actions followed a similar path of awareness, the importance of the present moment, and the value of firsthand experience over hearsay.

When we first established our relationship—he was the master and I was the apprentice to the sorcerer—Max did give me one caveat: “Take all that is good from me, and disregard the rest.” This was more easily said than done. Still, I held his advice close to my vest, and in the years to come, it would help me discern the art from the irrelevant.

I was constantly under Max's scrutiny; he would point out this or that shortcoming on the spot no matter where we were or who was present to help me develop a higher level of awareness; this demanded much from him, as nothing was overlooked; it also left no wiggle room for error on my part, whatever the situation. If I didn't get his course correction the first time, he would come down on me, as the toughest Marine drill sergeant you might imagine. I didn't like those instances, but I did appreciate them, as he was right. I wasn't a victim. I had willingly enlisted and signed up for this tour of duty.

Max Shertz had little patience for poseurs, wise guys, and dilettantes. He was also mindful of his own demons, none of which could derail him from his life as a creator.

ROAD TRIP

One late afternoon, after knowing Max for less than two months, he asked me to join him and his family in a move from LA to a life of art and 'smog-free' air in San Francisco. His proposal careened inside my head like an out of control roller coaster that had lost its brakes. For me this was a moment of truth. I had to choose between seductive days of dangerous luxury and a decadent lifestyle in the Hollywood Hills and the unknown with Max. When the opportunity presents itself, you either step up, or regret your inaction for the rest of your days.

In the end, I didn't hesitate. We shook hands on our plans to scout out places to live in the Bay area. The next evening, seated in his classic BMW, Max and I were well on our way north. During our drive up to San Francisco under a full moon, Max had a stroke at the wheel, and, as fortune would have it, I was there to save his life. Max and his family eventually settled in a huge place at the bottom of a small canyon in Larkspur; I found a houseboat in Sausalito. Months later, when his eyesight had returned, he confided: "Kid, I owe you."

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Max was a people magnet. He had an astute sense of humor. One evening, after he had relocated into a rustic home in the Cow Hollow section of San Francisco with his family, he was entertaining some guests in his well-organized studio, which also did double duty as an exhilarating salon—which was the best live 'theater' in town. One man in a suit and tie piped up: "Max, insuring all this fine art must be expensive."

Of course, as the artist, Max would have preferred hearing a comment about his work, not insurance questions. He played along, looked around at all the art on the walls, then replied in his baritone voice, matter-of-factly: "None of my art is insured."

"But what if some of these paintings were stolen," said the man, incredulous at the prospect of no insurance.

Max smiled in his gleeful way, and said: "You know what I would do?"

The man leaned forward, as everyone seated at the booth listened, too, with deep interest.

“If my paintings were being robbed,” Max said in a hushed tone, “I’d be very quiet and then follow the thieves so I could find out who they are selling my art to.”

Laughter and release from the guests. Max was a showman who believed in always leaving the audience hungry for more.

After guests would leave one of his evening salons, Max and I would hang out late into the night discussing this or that. On some nights, he would say to me: “Eden, you know what I like about you? You’re loyal, you walk softly coming down the stairs, and we can be alone together. And, if I were casting you in a movie, I’d give you a role that might have been written for Montgomery Clift.” To be appreciated by Max Shertz was a great reward.

THE CATBIRD SEAT

There was a steady stream of artists, students, well-known authors, and patrons who visited his studio. And me, I had the catbird seat. My long days and evenings with Max were one on one. There were no formal lessons or a time frame for graduating from his school of man. I learned by being with him, absorbing how things worked and why—as each situation presented itself. In response to some difficulty with a person, he would often remark: “Character answers all questions.”

I was also a witness and a participant to the considerable goings on in Max’s personal life, as he dealt with each person with the same temperament and impeccable perception. In a sense, I had become part of his family. Max did not wear any false masks of personality. He was the same with everyone, regardless if you could do something for him or not. He had a beautiful and remarkable talent for distilling the complex into meaningful simplicity. This meant that ‘nothing’ or very little got passed his sphere of awareness. This also meant that if you tried putting one over on him, you wouldn’t get away with it—and you would pay the consequences.

To be Max's student meant unfailing commitment in his school of man where I was an art grunt in basic training. "Better to get toughened up here with me," Max would say. While having grown up on the mean streets made me no stranger to risk or adversity, being with Max brought me to new levels of elation and despair. This describes my own limitations, not Max's. In his school there was room only for positive results—no self-absorbed egos, no feeling sorry for your own self, no gloom and doom, and no excuses.

Max did allow for some leeway: "You can feel sorry for yourself, but for no more than five minutes."

CENTER STAGE

When Max said do it now, he meant it. He expected immediate action, not deliberation. But, loyalty didn't mean sycophantic behavior. If you were on top of your game and mindful, you could challenge Max who was always game for a duel of wits. Every now and then, Max would tell me in confidence some intriguing snippet about his past, which, over the years, helped forge a bond between us.

Max Shertz was a consummate storyteller. His deep voice and animated expressions would draw you into the tale, most often infused with drama, humor, and surprise surrealistic endings taken from his extraordinary life experiences. As we sat in the kitchen area, I would hear him recount the same stories numerous times to various guests over the years, yet each time his escapades took on a new life, and were as fresh and compelling as the first time I had heard them. Although it was natural for Max to take center stage, he would graciously relinquish the spotlight to anyone who could hold the space. He was always open for each individual to contribute to whatever was happening. The rest was up to you. You swam or sank according to your own talent.

WALKING THE DOGGIES

Culturally, I was immersed in art and spent nearly every day with Max, the master Zen artist; not only did I watch him create great art, our days and evenings together were also about the art of living and family. Max taught by example. The true self-realized artist doesn't relegate his art to some part of the day or night; his art is inexorably

integrated into every facet of his life—from cooking to whatever needed getting done. Max was a superb chef, combining ingredients and foods in intriguing and delicious ways. If you were willing to prep and clean up, he was willing to prepare the evening meal, which he often did.

Max was up for playing around, too. It wasn't beneath him to cavort about on the floor baby talking to a pair of Yorkie puppies, one of which was mine. At his insistence during our San Francisco days, Max helped me negotiate for a Yorkie puppy, Larry, who became my loyal companion for nearly nineteen years.

At the time, Max also had an African Grey parrot, Laurito, who not only had an extensive vocabulary, he had found the most annoying pitch that drove only Max nuts. Watching him argue with the bird over the screeching was hilarious to everyone but Max. Laurito also had an inclination for superb timing, saying the appropriate phrase to match the situation, as if on cue. For example, in one instance, when Max was calling an art student on the carpet for his lack of focus, Laurito immediately squawked: "I'm a bad boy," which, of course, brought a broad smile to Max, as if providence were validating his teaching.

JOURNEY OF THE INNER ARTIST

We spent our days doing this and that, often finding ourselves in a café where Max would draw or write. Then in the late afternoon, he would say: "Do you want to watch me paint?" We'd return to his organized and neat studio. Unlike the stereotypical disorganized artist living in disarray as portrayed in novels and films, Max knew where he kept his brushes, pastels, and acrylics. He stayed away from potentially toxic media.

After cueing up a few CDs worth of music, I'd pull up a chair and watch the master at work at the easel. I saw Max create hundreds of paintings that would magically transform in front of my eyes. Swirls of colors would coalesce into harmony, into fantastic objects from other dimensions, and sometimes realistic images would emanate from the limitless great Unconscious—to my amazement as well as his.

One day he told me how he came to discover his entree into the mystical realm of fine art. The underlying structure to his art was ‘shape and form’, which was unfettered by planning, thinking, clichés, and cumbersome ideas. Art from the Unconscious is not in search of subject matter. And Max’s life as a creator was the journey of the inner artist.

He would often say, rhetorically, one eyebrow arched, about his work: “Do you want each one to be a masterpiece?” Max would now and then rate his own work: This one is a ten, or this one is an eight. He didn’t mean that a ten was better than an eight; he meant that a ten represented a burst of connected and fluid brushstrokes, without hesitation, until the work was done.

STRANDED IN LAKE TAHOE

Max and I also attended many museum exhibits and art gallery openings. Max was my own private docent who possessed unparalleled insights into other creators, and what makes art—art. He was always up for doing something different, which he most often initiated. Occasionally, we would hit the movies for a matinee.

Every now and then, Max had a yen for gambling. I’d drive him to a poker house, racetrack, or sometimes a more exotic venue. One morning, he called me. “Eden, let’s go to Lake Tahoe.” Gambling never interested me, but it made Max happy to be in the heat and excitement, and sometimes he won big.

We drove up from San Francisco to Lake Tahoe that afternoon. After checking ourselves into a motel room, Max and I were soon under the gaudy glare of the casinos. He found a poker table where he’d play for most of the night while I moved about, watching the parade of gamblers—from small time to high rollers. After many hours and hands dealt, Max lost his stake; an elderly Chinese woman with an astonishing streak of luck or skill had cleaned out everyone. We called it a night.

The next morning, I opened the door to our ground level motel room, and a wall of packed snow covered the entire opening. While we had slept, an unexpected blizzard had dumped over five feet of snow on the resort. We had to check out before noon; for some reason the motel manager told us we couldn’t book the room for another night. It

wasn't too far to speculate that the motel manager wanted the room so he could substantially up the rate during the snowstorm.

Like gophers, we managed to crawl out through the snow that blocked the front door. My car was completely covered by the snow, and it would take some time to dig it out. Max was always keen on seeing what's around the next corner. "How do you know if you don't try" was his mantra. So we trundled off through the high drifts toward the hotels and casinos to see what's what. All the roads were now closed going in and out, and there wasn't a room available anywhere. The master and I were low on funds and stuck.

As we were walking the flooded sidewalks, the dense foot traffic had churned the mounds of snow into sludge, Max said: "Eden, I use to know someone who worked at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Maybe we can negotiate a room here." With that we headed onward until we came to the posh lobby at Caesar's Tahoe.

While a frazzled desk clerk was informing me that no rooms were available at any price, Max tapped me on the shoulder, saying: "He still works for them and is in charge of public relations for Caesar's right here in Tahoe. He'll be down in a minute."

The public relations man with dark curly hair greeted Max with great enthusiasm and warmth. After Max explained our situation, the public relations man said he'd be right back. After a few minutes, he returned with a card key and an envelope. The upshot was this: he comped us a magnificent suite, vouchers for some gambling, meals, plus a ringside booth for a professional boxing bout that evening. Max was a fan of the 'sweet science', so this perk really made him smile.

After we got settled in our grand suite with all the amenities, Max turned to me, saying, "Well, kid, this is the way to be stranded." Whatever difficult situation Max found himself in, it always seemed that divine intervention was at hand, and, in this case, for me, too.

MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

Over the ten years (1984 through 1994) of my apprenticeship to the master, we had our differences from time to time. Mostly they were agreeable disagreements; other times, which were rare, we clashed causing gaping rifts in our friendship. Max could be impulsive, but never irrational. He could be moody, but never out of control or petty.

But, for the most part, I was Max's student of writing, not painting, which, in retrospect, served me well, as I never felt in competition with him as an artist. Not being his student of painting with all the inherent pressure that went with it had created a pure unadulterated channel for me to absorb the secrets of Max's art without ego—his or mine.

During our years together, I was Max's advocate, and eager to do so. I loved his art, and I wanted others to know about his genius as well. From time to time, I could set up an art acquisition, which was always an occasion to celebrate. I also found him an art student now and then. Max had developed a well-tuned course for both artists and art students: two months of intensive work for a fixed price, which was very reasonable. Training under Max's demanding and unrelenting eye and criticism was not for the meek or the self-absorbed. If you wanted to know his secrets, you had to play by his rules, not yours. Few could pass the muster.

As Max would often note: "Genius is dedication."

PAYING YOUR DUES

While there were many hardships during my apprenticeship, some dire, I remained resolute. Investing my time with the master who had found the wellspring of art was the path for me—so my inner voice whispered. To an outside, or even a familial observer, I was chasing rainbows and heading for disaster. After all, these were my formative professional moneymaking years that were seemingly going down the old drain.

My long hours with Max were unique, uplifting, arduous, often gruelling, and priceless; I knew I was doing the right thing. But that didn't pay the rent—that took cash. That inner voice, which was my intuition, had led me on a precarious journey and my

odyssey was far from over. On top of sporadic bouts of self-doubt, things weren't going well on the monetary front. Fiscally, I was spiraling downward with no prospect for improvement in sight. To raise money, I had sold off what material items I could at the Sausalito flea market, and then later, my car.

After liquidating my worldly goods, I was working minimum wage faceless odd jobs such as telemarketing, loading trucks, and taking inventory in department stores at midnight. One job was less anonymous. From 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. three days a week, I handed out samples of cigarette brands in various parts of San Francisco. I had to say in a loud manner "Free Cigarette Samples" over and over.

In those days, I didn't realize or appreciate it at the time, but what seemed to me as hitting the skids, this ostensible degradation of my life, was my time for purging, for stripping away remnants of social conditioning, ego, what other people thought, and the insidious entrapments of society called security and status: tradeoffs payable only by relinquishing your soul. Paying your dues whatever the cost was one of the mandatory tests in Max's school of man for shedding the false masks of personality; it was a compulsory requirement, not an elective. This hard-earned object lesson in catharsis was in no way part of a graduation exercise either. It's clear to me now: I was cleansing myself from the irrelevant so that I too could see the truth in the mirror of art.

THE QUESTION

Eventually, Max, his family, and I were again living in LA. One day in an outdoor café in Santa Monica while we were having our usual cappuccinos, Max turned to me and said from out of the blue: "Did you ever think of being an artist? Who knows what wonders are within you?" In the decade we had known one another, he had never suggested that I might be an artist, too. Max had a propensity for relative patience—saying the right thing at the right time, which usually stirred things up, one way or another.

"Yes, Max," I said. "I have thought about it."

"Why would you want to be an artist?" he probed.

I answered him without hesitation. He smiled, saying, “Eden, my brother, that’s the right answer.”

Over the years, Max had made it clear: “You can’t teach anyone to be an artist; but a teacher or some event can unleash the creator within.” From Max’s axiom, I later formed my own conclusion of a fundamental truth: All great art is self-taught for good reason: no one can teach anyone how to be original. Max would often say to a guest or potential patron: “See this,” pointing to some image in a painting, “I didn’t paint that!”

From my catbird seat, I would observe, as countless wannabee artists (some already commercially successful) would visit him, all claiming their desire to be artists, or, as they felt stuck, take their work to the next level. Mostly, their egos truly prevented them from seeing or hearing what Max had to offer. I would think to myself: If I were an artist and had found Max, I would kiss the ground in gratitude.

NO DHARMA BUM

I am forever grateful to Max; it was through him that I discovered my dharma, or purpose in life. I was an artist, once lost and now found. If there were a hereafter, then grace would welcome creator Max Shertz into heaven with open arms. While our time together had spanned a decade, he and his teachings remain with me forever.

Of the many things that I learned from Max, there is one overarching lesson that serves me faithfully in my art life. I wrote about this teaching in awareness in my most recent book: *An Artist Empowered*. Here’s the excerpt:

THE OUT OF TOWNERS

Some years back, I was in an art gallery nestled in a charming garden-like courtyard situated off a fashionable avenue in San Francisco. The gallery had a large glass front window with a view of who was coming and going. My artist friend had recently opened the gallery to showcase his paintings. There were no regular hours as it was by appointment only. He was a superb creator, and his work was no less original than Picasso’s art. He was articulate with his brush, writing, and the spoken word. He also

had a short fuse. Although never the aggressor, he was an unstoppable and lethal counter puncher.

As the artist and I were talking, a man and a woman entered the gallery. My artist friend smiled and his eyes gleamed with perhaps an acquisition twinkle from an unscheduled walk-in patron. By their dress, fattened rosy cheeks, and the prerequisite camera hanging from the man's neck, it was clear the couple were out of towners who had come to see the sites of the City by the Bay. One thing I had learned is not to prejudge. I have seen the most unlikely people acquire fine art. And you never know who will love your work.

The couple walked up to the artist. The man spoke up, saying: "Maybe you could help us out?"

The artist nodded, yes.

"We wanted to know if you knew where we could buy some art," said the man, rubbing his beer belly. His wife looked on eagerly for the response.

In my mind's eye, I saw blood on the walls and what was left of a camera shattered on the floor. This yokel had come to the wrong place. I felt that the artist would explode into a rage that would blow them back to Kansas, or wherever they hailed from. There the couple stood, surrounded by magnificent art, and oblivious to the masterworks on the walls. I waited for the detonation as the seconds ticked off.

Silence.

I watched the artist. His face transformed from a blank stare to a pleasant countenance, as if he had run into a long lost old friend. He put his arm around the man and began moving him and his wife toward the door, saying: "You people need to go down there. See?" He pointed in a direction. "You make a left at that street and follow it all the way down to the wharf, the tourist area, and you'll find your art there. Maybe even some paintings on velvet."

“Why thank you, sir,” said the man.

The couple left the gallery with great enthusiasm, as if they had learned some great secret. When the couple turned back to look at the gallery, the artist stood at the door smiling and waved them off.

I don't think I had been breathing the entire time of that encounter. My body suddenly took in a deep breath. The artist came back to the rear of the gallery, looked at me, and simply shrugged. His behavior with the couple had taken me by surprise, but that is when you learn the most provocative lessons.

Did I ever get the message, I thought to myself. I knew then that I would remember this lesson forever. If this master artist could display such disarming self-control, humility, and humor in the face of overt ignorance, then I, too, would adopt this standard as my own—which I did. This was humility borne out of great strength and character, not meekness, which was the smart approach. You don't have to be famous to test your humility.

Humility, I learned then, is the artist's ally.

My artist mentor friend in San Francisco had shown me that conscious humility in art was the way to balance. Knowing the way and walking that tightrope of negative tautness daily was another matter entirely.

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