



# A journey towards healing

*Henri van Bentum*

*In this personal essay, the author writes about his experience of healing through creative exploration. Artist Henri van Bentum began painting in 1952 during a long period of illness in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Netherlands. The doctors later claimed his dedicated involvement with creative activity saved his life.*

Remember when we were youngsters, how we used to play for hours with an imaginary friend? Or imagined all sorts of creatures in various cloud formations? I remember being fascinated by spectrum-coloured patterns of gasoline in rain puddles. Or the designs "Father Frost" made on windowpanes. As we grow older, many of us lose this ability of vivid imagination. Yet it is still there, waiting to be re-discovered.

For an artist, imagination is the 'breath of life', and when combined with intuition, is invaluable. Through imagination, intuition and experimentation, we can reach out and explore both the microcosmos and the macrocosmos.

## Personal Experience of Healing through Art

Destiny set the wheel in motion for my creative and spiritual exploration during a lengthy period of Tuberculosis in 1952, age twenty-three, in a sanatorium in the Netherlands.

It was November, 1952. A cold I had neglected morphed into pneumonia, then pleurisy, soon developing into tuberculosis on both lungs and all five lobes. Surgery was ruled out.

I was taken to Zonnestraal Sanatorium (Zonnestraal means "Sunbeam"), located in an oak and pine forest.



"Zonnestraal" Tuberculosis Sanatorium, Netherlands

The doctors said it was vital to have something to do, and not to worry. Worry has the opposite effect of healing. We were encouraged to get involved with **doing** things. *Anything* that would stop us from worrying. All the patients made crafts, some even creating album covers from X-rays of deceased patients.

We all had individual rooms with three walls and no windows, but with one side completely open to an outside deck. Each day the nurses wheeled our beds outside so we could breathe the fresh pine air.

One day I asked the nurse if she could set up a string across the foot of my bed. We strung peanuts along it, and soon I had feathered visitors just three feet away, delicately

pecking at the nuts and leaving some of the shells hanging on the string.

Rabbits, birds, clouds, trees — I'd quietly observe and just 'notice'.

Then one day, a local artist visited the sanatorium to give painting classes, and my life changed.

Although bedridden, I found ways to render objects in various media. Sketching and painting came to me naturally even though I'd never held a brush before.

A sense of timelessness arose, never before known. Sometimes, I'd even forget why I was there.

I made sketches and worked in chalk pastel. (Oil pastels weren't available yet.) Chalk pastels made a mess in the bed, and so the nurses were not amused. Then I switched to watercolours and oil. [Turpentine and linseed-oil smells were not a bother since we had the outside deck with lots of fresh air.]

At first, I copied works by van Gogh and Gauguin from postcards. Then, realistic still lifes. Altogether this activity kept me from worrying. Today it's called art therapy. Back then it was just "stay occupied or you'll wither away".

Much later, when I was released from the sanatorium, a doctor confided to my father that I'd taken years off the illness because of my joy in creative exploration.

Since painting came so naturally, I was curious about *where* this ability came from, and even wondered whether such a lengthy illness had come my way in order to discover this gift. Thus my quest for something 'beyond' began. While in the act of painting, I'd sometimes question "Who is creating?" "What or who guides me?" This wanting to know, led to further discoveries and evolving.

## From Landscape to Mindscape

For the next few years my focus was on still lifes and landscapes. Then, just two years after emigrating to Canada in 1957, I was given an opportunity by a doctor friend to paint in the pristine beauty and wilderness of the Rocky Mountains. Within a few weeks of arriving in the Rockies, I began to grow tired of the greens, greys, and browns. Intuition told me there was more to explore. So one day, out of the 'blue', I started to use reds, purples, orange or yellow colours.

Immediately a feeling of freedom arose. Joy sprang forth! And colour is always honest, it never misleads. It's impossible to get green by mixing yellow and red. Plus, with just the three primary colours of Red, Yellow and Blue, you can create hundreds of different colours.

A new kind of healing began, a liberation, of no longer being enslaved to rendering so-called realistic phenomena. Art became a vehicle, a journey.

## Exploring colour and painting to music

Back in Toronto, 1959, another teacher came my way, Jock (J.W.G.) Macdonald. Jock suggested I listen to music while painting. He said “*Listen with your eyes closed. When the music touches the strings of imagination and inspiration, then start the recording again, and paint. Only when music and imagination blend into one will you be able to transform it visually.*”

Again, another new world opened up. Expressing what I was *hearing* evolved into experimenting with various art forms such as Surrealism, followed by Abstract, or what I call the “Object-less” realm. Again, more freedom!

## Micro-macro

In the early to mid-1960’s, my paintings evolved again. Born from intuition and imagination, it became possible to enter the microscopic world, the submarine world, the dream world, outer space and inner space, without physically going there.

Soon afterwards, photographs taken with the electron microscope became available to the public, unveiling yet even more new worlds. These were followed by the first images from space. Witnessing these photographs was very encouraging, at a time when people would say, “*What’s that supposed to be?*” Such images told me I was on the right track, by following my intuition.

The paintings of this era were created **before** ever seeing such photographs, yet they closely evoked the micro-macro worlds unveiled by advances in both the microscope and telescope. What I called “the invisible made visible”.

Today, science and art are increasingly converging. Whenever you open a magazine on science or medicine, there are usually at least one or two images showing an uncanny resemblance to abstract or object-less art.

## Collaboration with NASA – astronomy and art

One personal example of such a convergence between science and art took place recently through a collaborative project we undertook with NASA’s Chandra X-Ray Observatory. (Chandra is one of the six great telescopes of NASA.)

However, the story begins forty-five years earlier, when I created a series of 100 small mandalas in pointillism, called “Organiverse”. (Editor’s note: one of these paintings from the “Starry Night” edition of Organiverse was featured on the cover of Network Review, Winter 2015-16.) “Organiverse” was painted in 1972 while Natasha and I were living in Morocco and Madeira. The entire series was born from intuition and imagination, the only outer reference was use of a compass to make the spherical outline.

The people at Chandra X-Ray Observatory first became aware of “Organiverse” during the International Year of Astronomy 2009, when the full series was displayed alongside images from space in the cornerstone project *From Earth to the Universe*.

The following year, we collaborated on an online exhibit called *Coloring Space*, juxtaposing five of the Organiverse “Starry Night” images with photos from space. Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, Commander aboard the International Space Station in 2013, referred to *Coloring Space* as “*a lovely fusion of discovery between art and science*”.

I am now 86, and a recent cancer survivor. The question still often arises, “What **is** imagination, intuition and inner vision. Where does it come from?” Just like that question posed by Gauguin in his major canvas titled “*Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?*”

Something guides us, an invisible force - - - made visible or audible through the resulting works, be they in science, art, music or other disciplines and manifestations.

## Inner joy of questioning and discovery

These processes are of a very personal nature - - the wonder and inner joy, questioning, meditating and discovering - - all born from ceaseless experimentation. Through these processes, my spirit and imagination are transformed, and take flight. Not unlike the life cycle of a butterfly, or what I call a flutterby. The caterpillar is earthbound, while the flutterby flies freely from flower to flower.

This wonder and joy urges me along, always following a creative inner need. The full circle contains the total sum of psychological, physiological and spiritual evolution. Intuition, observations, imagination, thoughts, and feelings steer us onward towards evolving, transcending and healing.

*Henri van Bentum was born in 1929 in the Lowlands. His schooldays lasted until age eleven, and the outbreak of WWII. He began painting at 23 during a long period of illness in a sanatorium in the Netherlands. van Bentum emigrated to Canada in 1957. His career followed an upwardly spiralling path “from landscape to mindscape”. He has experimented with and works in various media, and is a pioneer in the concept of professional artists visiting schools, giving workshops to elementary classes and also ‘inner city angels’. van Bentum has exhibited nationally and internationally. His work is represented in several public and numerous private collections. Driven by a deep interest in other cultures of far-away shores, he learned to speak five languages, and has travelled throughout the world. He was guest artist and lecturer aboard thirty voyages by ship, including three world circumnavigations, where he lectured and gave classes on creative exploration and colour. Henri and his wife Natasha live on the Pacific coast in Victoria, Canada. <http://vanBentum.org>*

## QUOTES FROM THE ARTIST

“Most visionary art is born from intuition and imagination. Intuition is the highest stage of cognition when rationality must yield to the inner voice. It is vastly quicker than thinking. Some artists may even become harbingers of future discoveries in science”.

“We are the telescope and the microscope - the microscope reveals our significance, while the telescope our insignificance.”

“When it comes to thinking about the early days of abstract art, or any new revelation, the words attributed to Schopenhauer come to mind: “There are three stages in the revelation of truth. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”

“Art on the highest level never dies, because its nature is primarily spiritual. In our contemporary times of spiritual poverty and decline, quality art of any discipline could have therapeutic value. It is these powers, the potential for healing within the creative process, that are sometimes overlooked today.”

Quotes about the work of Henri van Bentum

“Viewing a painting by Henri van Bentum is a stimulus to the imagination. Perhaps his background as a diamond-faceter’s son is responsible for the almost crystalline aspect of his work. The single most extraordinary quality in all his paintings is an incredible luminosity, a radiance that emanates from within.” *Marina Sturza*