

Find Gold Through Painting a Story

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For two years the Ginger Group has been conducting a live “storytelling experiment” with poster paints and paper. It began in March 2004 when we invited an artist/facilitator to join us at a semi-annual Ginger Group retreat. All of us are professional organizational consultants spread out across Canada and the northwest United States. We love the energy and learning that happens when we get together, but at our gathering the previous August we had begun to wonder if we could manage to keep meeting as we were. We were not ready to give up, but we were not sure what might emerge next. Somehow we had to test our deeper sense of purpose and commitment to the possibilities.

That weekend in March, ten of us gathered to consider our dilemmas, “Do we have the energy and vision to stay together? Is it time to go into business together? Are we going to get real or not?” We were at a turning point. So we invited Linda Naiman to bring her collaborative painting techniques to our retreat at Edenvale Center in British Columbia, to help us have a conversation we were finding difficult. In the words of one participant, “to go

The Ginger Group Collaborative (www.gingergroup.net) is a network of organizational consultants, educators, and leadership coaches. Together they explore the many dimensions of collaborative interaction in complex environments, using dialogue, artistic expression, contemplative processes, and plain talking.



Painting stories with the Ginger Group.

beyond simple words and create a picture of the story that was in the process of unfolding.”

For several hours we created paintings full of color and movement. Some were “visual conversations” painted together in silence. Others were visions of the future, “as if Ginger were a garden of paradise.” One of the painted stories emerged unexpectedly. It came from a member who was coming through an intense period of self reflection after a major struggle at an institution she had left behind. Few of us knew this story. She told us later when she began, she had no sense of what to paint and the image seemed to create itself. In the painting, she had climbed into a craggy chasm with no footholds. Climbing down felt frightening and risky. “In climbing down I began to see that instead of a bottomless cavern, what lay beneath me was not an abyss but a well, with all that means about replenishment and resources; but I had to be willing to climb down to get to them.” Although she was still climbing upwards, she pictured herself in

the light above the purple depths, like a warrior queen who had discovered in the unknown darkness a source of life. We had struck a vein of gold that helped us shape our future together, i.e., finding gold through painting.

Since the Edenvale retreat, we continue to experiment with visual storytelling in other settings. We have brought some of our clients into our Ginger Group “inquiries” to paint their stories and visions of the future. In my consulting practice, painting sometimes helps people talk together about things they never thought to say in words. These experiences are teaching us about other ways of knowing and expressing what matters. We have learned that it is not about making art, not about performance. It is about creating meaning together, using powerful visual symbols and images that come from the deepest parts of our being. One of the Ginger Group summed it up, “It appears the human species has a way to communicate through picture storytelling that’s very, very powerful. Storytelling is a powerful way of changing the world!”