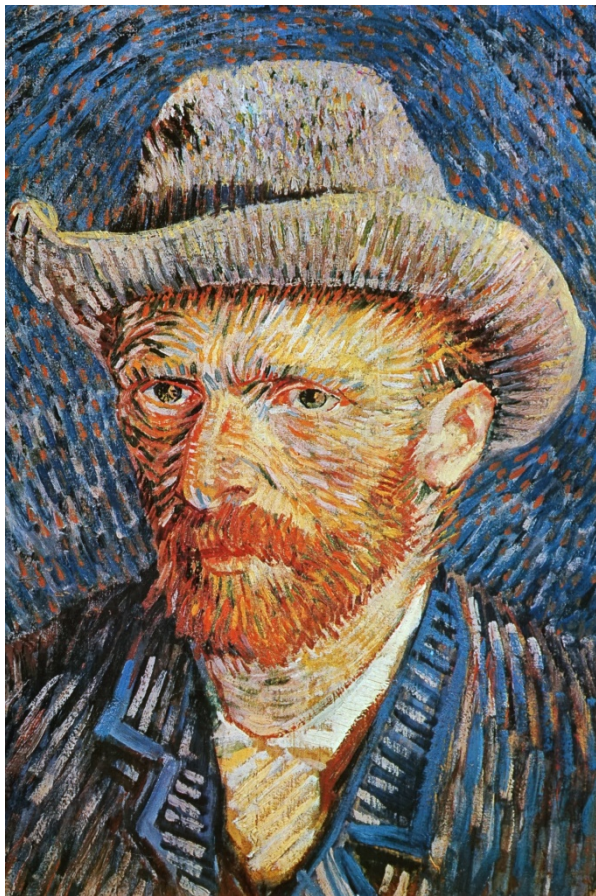


Reflections on Vincent van Gogh

The Artist and his Frailty

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Written after experiencing *Van Gogh Alive: the experience*, Canberra March 2022. Quotations from the *Official Program*.



Self-portrait, 1887

Recently, I spent 3 hours surrounded by the works of Vincent van Gogh, a fellow Dutchie, immersed in stunning images from his vast output of painting. Also moved by the beautiful and powerful classical music accompanying the paintings, whilst reading short extracts from his letters.

I felt that I had entered van Gogh's soul life – its beauty, intensity, and struggle. For the first time I really appreciated his powers of observation, especially of people and nature, and his self-taught technique expressed through colourful brush-strokes. Van Gogh expressed himself fully in his short artistic life – the 10 years between his 'zero point' and his second Lunar Node. He started painting at 27 years of age and died at 37. During those 10 years he completed more than 2,000 works of art – around 930 paintings and 1,100 drawings and sketches.

I wanted the ending of his life story to be different – how would a modern-day counsellor have tried to assist him to manage his experiences and his feelings without him ending his pain in suicide? This question resonated with me for the rest of the day. After discussions with my husband Karl-Heinz Finke, and after all the reading done to prepare for our module on **Mental Health Crisis and Spiritual Emergency**, I knew I had to put some of thoughts in writing – van Gogh was living strongly within my own soul life.

When van Gogh starts painting, he has already experienced rejection in love, and failed at 2 career possibilities, as an 'erratic' administrator and an 'over-zealous' pastor. Influenced by a bleak, impoverished, religious environment in the southern Netherlands of the 1880s, he records his observations in sombre dark colours, bringing labourers and their lives to life with realism and understanding. After a move to Paris, he finds his people, makes friends, Gauguin becomes a good friend – he discovers colour, café society, a bohemian lifestyle, early impressionism, alcohol (especially absinthe) and sex. A heady mix for a young man, intelligent, articulate, creative, trying to find his way in the world. His painting style changes, and he takes to colour – he observes and creates form, but with the sensitivity of someone a little dreamy, and sometimes approaching the 'crossing point' between the physical and the spiritual world. Painting makes him feel alive, and he brings his subjects to life through his use of form and colour. He writes: *'The only time I feel alive is when I am painting'*, and *'The emotions are sometimes so strong that I work without*

knowing it. The strokes come like a dream.'

When the intensity becomes too much, he uses alcohol to quieten his mind, or in his own words: *'If the storm within gets too loud, I take a glass too much to stun myself.'* We seem to have a young man with a melancholic temperament and some mercurial tendencies exploring his creative journey, and finding some collegial support for the first time.

After 2 years in Paris, he needs a change and moves to the south of France – Arles – and for over a year, experiences a very happy time painting. He paints his sunflower series to welcome his friend Gauguin to his studio. It is after Gauguin decides to leave that van Gogh, after an argument with him, severs part of his own ear. The apparent loss of that supportive friendship has been a big blow to him. He feels deeply, acts on impulse.

It seems that until this point, van Gogh has managed his moods, his strong feelings through constant painting, drinking, friendships. However, he has not been able to establish a rhythmical life with adequate self-care, even though he is aware of the need. He uses his etheric life forces to paint constantly, pours himself into his work quite consciously, but does nothing to replenish these forces. Relationships have not worked out for him, even friendships that he values (*'close friends are truly life's treasures'*) are not working out. The time spent in nature, in observation and in painting his observations, have provided food for his art, for his soul, but not for his physical and etheric bodies.

What would a contemporary counsellor suggest at this point? Certainly, van Gogh is struggling with mental health issues, possibly feelings of despair and depression, manic episodes, self-medication through alcohol, self-harm as a way of being in touch with his physical body, and possible threshold experiences when nature, the stars, the world seem especially luminous and meaningful to him.

- Would we label him as having a *Bi-Polar 1 Disorder*?
- What could we suggest to help him bring his 4 'bodies' into greater balance?
- Could we suggest gardening, labouring as a physical activity to encourage immersion in nature in a different way?

- Mindfulness as a way of quietening the mind, weaning him away from the apparent relaxing effect of strong alcohol (absinthe is around 70% alcohol and was one of his drinks of choice)?
- Talking out as well as painting out his feelings?
- Establishing a base with sufficient supports around him?

He is far from his much-loved brother, his closest family, even though he writes to him regularly. Van Gogh seems to have longed for love and friendship, belonging and connection, and somehow in his intensity this has eluded him. Painting alone has not been enough to keep him in balance, and has in fact helped deplete his etheric life forces. Was he too intense, too different? Van Gogh himself says: *'I put my heart and soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process.'* He seems to have become lost in the dream of painting, and in painting his dreams. With his Astral intensity eating away his Etheric life forces, he becomes frail over time. If I was to wave a magic wand, I would grant him a home, a garden, a warm relationship, good friends, good food, good coffee, good company, time and energy to paint – all the things that Monet managed to find and create for himself in the south of France.

From here on, there seems to be a physical, emotional and mental decline for Van Gogh – time spent in an asylum, determination to keep on painting, trying to connect with his family but feeling he may be a burden to them, aware of being very much alone, wanting to continue on but struggling with his feelings.

Amidst all of his questioning, is also his awareness of the fact that his work is not being purchased, perhaps not valued and he feels unappreciated. Was he just too far ahead of his time? Part of the vanguard for a new way of looking at the world and expressing it? He writes: *'The painter of the future will be a colourist in a way that no one has been before'*. Certainly, he leaves a legacy of work that still speaks to us over a 130 years later.

Van Gogh was so sensitive, so close to the outer threshold, so attuned to observation and colour and nature, and people too, yet somehow it was not enough to sustain him. He could not integrate his Astral/'I' being – his strong astrality, his capacity to reflect on himself and his experience – into his Physical/Etheric being, and keep himself in balance and alive. There is such poignancy in some of his statements –

'I will not live without love.'

'I would rather die of passion than of boredom.'

'Someday death will take us to another star.'

'In an artist's life, death is perhaps not the most difficult thing.'

In the end, his suicide may have been an impulsive act, a gun-shot made at a moment of despair at the unfolding of his life, close to his second Lunar Node, when he realises life is not unfolding as he wants it to. We are the poorer for this action. The images that we know so well as his – the starry night sky, the golden sunflowers, the many self-portraits, the blue bedroom in Arles – remind me of what else could have been, and is lost, and of the dangers of living so close to the edge where earthly reality and spiritual striving meet.

I am heartened though by another extract from his letters: *'I feel a certain calm. There is safety in the midst of danger. What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?'*

In his striving to express himself, deeply through painting, and in writing to his brother, he touches on universal truths that still resonate.