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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Asperger's, Art, and Teaching

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Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

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I hinted in my previous post that maybe I should do an illustrated version of my in-process book, *Zen and the Artful Buddhist: Asperger's, Art, and Academia*. I have illustrated a few pages, but it's taking far longer than I imagined it would. This book idea has been percolating for a few years. Some days I want it to be published by an academic press, but now that it's morphed into an illustrated book, I'm not so sure about an academic press. The book meanders. As does my mind. All the time. Illustrating the book feels right: it's creative, innovative, and will illustrate (literally) my evolving understanding of how I've been impacted by learning late in life that I have Asperger Syndrome (now, a part of ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder). One need not have Asperger's to reflect on one's life, to be sure. Yet this is the lens through which I see more clearly my years as a professor.

Before starting to illustrate the book, I was working on and off on another large (31x51 inches) painting. I only work on the painting an hour or so at a time, since it requires intense concentration and it is physically demanding. It requires standing, and the more I paint, the further I have to reach to complete rows higher on the paper, creating strain on my back, eyes, and wrist, to name a few. This current painting is precisely what I have been working on at various points for the past several years, namely short, parallel lines in multiple rows. While working on the piece, I thought a lot about my teaching style.

So far, my illustrated book project shows various connections between my art, Asperger's, Buddhism, and academia – all large topics themselves. I'm not an expert on Asperger's, but what I've learned provides insight into my art-making. And insofar as any artwork contains the "fingerprints" of the artist, my pattern-heavy, highly-repetitive paintings also connect to themes I recognize in how I taught my courses. Of course, I could add much more nuance, but here is a short list of Asperger-related traits that run through my art and teaching:

- Detail: I always thought it was normal to focus on details, but I see now that I was having students look at the trees so much that we sometimes would miss the forest;
- Precision: accurate pronunciation of foreign terms (e.g., Sanskrit);
- Repetition: similar assignments, just different material;
- Nuance: overall picture shows nuances, but one still needs to look intently at the details first;
- Plans: agonizing over planning the syllabus every semester.

My latest large painting contains roughly thirty-one thousand parallel lines, each one fitted within a half inch band of parallel lines. Like my teaching, it contains lots of details, all of which are necessary for building the overall painting. Looking back on my teaching, I now wonder what sort of balance I struck between looking at the individual lines/trees and making clear the connections that were being constructed throughout the course/forest. While illustrating my book project, I see similar challenges emerging. My next (illustrated) post will delve into more nuances about my progress.

<https://wabash.center/2025/06/aspergers-art-and-teaching/>