

Joni Mitchell on Therapy and the Creative Mind

by Maria Popova/Brain Pickings

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It's paradoxical that while "art holds out the promise of inner wholeness" for those who experience it, the relationship between creativity and mental illness is well-documented among those who make it, as is the anguish of artists who experience it. This, perhaps, renders the cultivation and preservation of mental health all the more urgently important for artists and those operating on a high frequency of creativity.

Eight-time Grammy recipient Joni Mitchell (b. November 7, 1943), undoubtedly one of the most original and influential musicians of the past century, as well as an enormously talented painter, speaks to the value of therapy and a commitment to mental health in "Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words" (public library)—that wonderful collection of wide-ranging conversations by musician, documentarian, and broadcast journalist Malka Marom, which also gave us Mitchell on freedom, creativity, and the dark side of success.

Joni Mitchell's 1995 self-portrait for the cover of her album 'Turbulent Indigo,' is one of twenty album covers she painted herself, referencing Vincent van Gogh's famous self-portrait with the bandaged ear that has become a symbol of his struggle with mental health.

When Marom asks why Mitchell chose to record her unusual cover of Annie Ross's old jazz song "Twisted" from the 1974 album "Court and Spark"—a song about psychoanalysis—she answers, half-jokingly, that her own experience of therapy earned her "the right to sing it." But reflecting on the more serious aspects of therapy as a commitment to one's wellbeing, Mitchell echoes the famous Tennessee Williams aphorism—"If I got rid of my demons, I'd lose my angels"—and tells Marom:

Everyone has confusion... Simply by confronting paradoxes or difficulties within your life, designating a time to confront them several times a week, they seem to be not so important as they do when they're weighing on your mind in the middle of the night, by yourself, with no one to talk to...

I went through a lot of changes about [therapy]. It's like driving out your devils—do you drive out your angels as well, you know, that whole thing about the creative process. An artist needs a certain amount of turmoil and confusion, and I've created out of that. It's been part of the creative force. I mean, even out of severe depression there comes insight, if you meditate on it. It's sort of masochistic to dwell on it, but you do gain understanding.

And yet Mitchell sees therapy as a kind a clarifying tool for her inner life, for her priorities and values, at a point in time:

That's mostly what it was, questions about myself and the way I was conducting my life and what were my values in this time ... What aren't values in this time? Everything is so temporal.

Ultimately, however, she champions the benefits of therapy unequivocally:

I think it did me a lot of good. I think that self-confrontation is a good thing, whether you do it by yourself in solitude, or whether you do it in the presence of another person.

"Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words" is a wonderful read in its totality.

(This is part of our "Year of Joni Mitchell" series of articles.)