

Museum Sage

An Interview with Laurie Phillips

KATHERINE OLIVETTI



Laurie Phillips

Katherine Olivetti (KO): I first heard about your work through life coach Karen Olson.

Laurie Phillips (LP): Yes. She was in California at a life-coaching convention or training and thought as long as I was there, I should train folks as Museum Sage Guides. You were one of the volunteers who wanted to be trained.

KO: Oh, yes. It was through the Coach Training Institute in San Rafael. I loved the Museum Sage training and the process of it. Tell me, Laurie, how did you come to this? What was your background?

LP: My background is as an artist and graphic designer, and twenty-five years ago I trained as a life coach. I also have a background in 12-step groups. I wanted to learn how to be a better sponsor, so I took life-coach training. Then I got addicted to the life-coach training and didn't stop until I had a certificate.

KO: How did Museum Sage get started?

LP: I was at an art museum with my husband, Jon, who is a writer, magazine editor, journalist, and performer. He had been reading a book by André Breton called *L'amour Fou*. The book describes André Breton going to a Paris flea market with artist Alberto Giacometti. They both were blocked, writing and artmaking blocks, and they decided to choose the most surreal object to help them.

KO: They each bought an object at the flea market?

LP: Yes. Then they used it as inspiration to help them move through their blocks. My husband Jon said, "Let's do a variation on what those Surrealist people did. Close your eyes and I'll lead you through the museum, and when your body feels like it's near a piece of art that's going to give you an answer to your personal question or block, you can open your eyes and we'll have a dialogue with it." That's where it started.

I should back up. I had been grocery shopping that morning right before we got to the art museum. I get in this frantic mode in the grocery store of "get in, get out," very left brain, head down, charge through because I don't really like being there. I couldn't leave that left-brain mode when I went to the art museum. I realized I was mechanically looking at a painting, looking at a label, painting, label, painting, label, get through this exhibition on time, you have to see everything. My inner artist was screaming at me, "No. No. No. This is not how you interact with art."

I was bitching about it to Jon, and he said, "Well, let's make up a game." My question was about a job that I didn't like. I was working as a graphic designer at Blue Cross Blue Shield at the time. I asked, "How could I be happier at work?" and I got a white marble abstract sculpture that had rounded areas at all different angles. After looking at it, describing it in depth, and then talking to Jon about it, I felt this subject was telling me, "You've got too many sharp edges at work. You need to round those off a little bit." I didn't like hearing it, but there it was.

A year afterward, I got confirmation of that message. I was in Chicago at a coaching convention. Some of the coaches heard about Museum Sage and said, "Please take us to the museum and train us." I agreed. After doing a group demonstration, I paired up with a coach named Louise who practiced being the Guide with me while I played the role of the Sage. My question was, "When will I get to leave Blue Cross?" With my eyes completely closed, I stopped in front of an enormous painting that was 100 percent blue. I opened my eyes and immediately knew it meant: "You don't get to leave yet, honey, because you haven't learned what you're supposed to be learning. If you leave, your next job will be even harder."

I said, "Ugh, I don't like this. I don't want this. No. No. No," and Louise said, "Well, Laurie, what would have to be present if Blue Cross was your dream job?" I said, "That thought makes me want to throw up. I'll think about it and let you know in a couple of weeks." It took two weeks to even entertain the notion. The answer that finally popped up was that *all* of me would come to work, not just my graphic designer self, but my coach self and my public art self.

At the time I was doing these enormous public art projects that were projections onto buildings at night. I would work with communities for up to six months to photograph and interview them and then project giant images of them onto buildings.

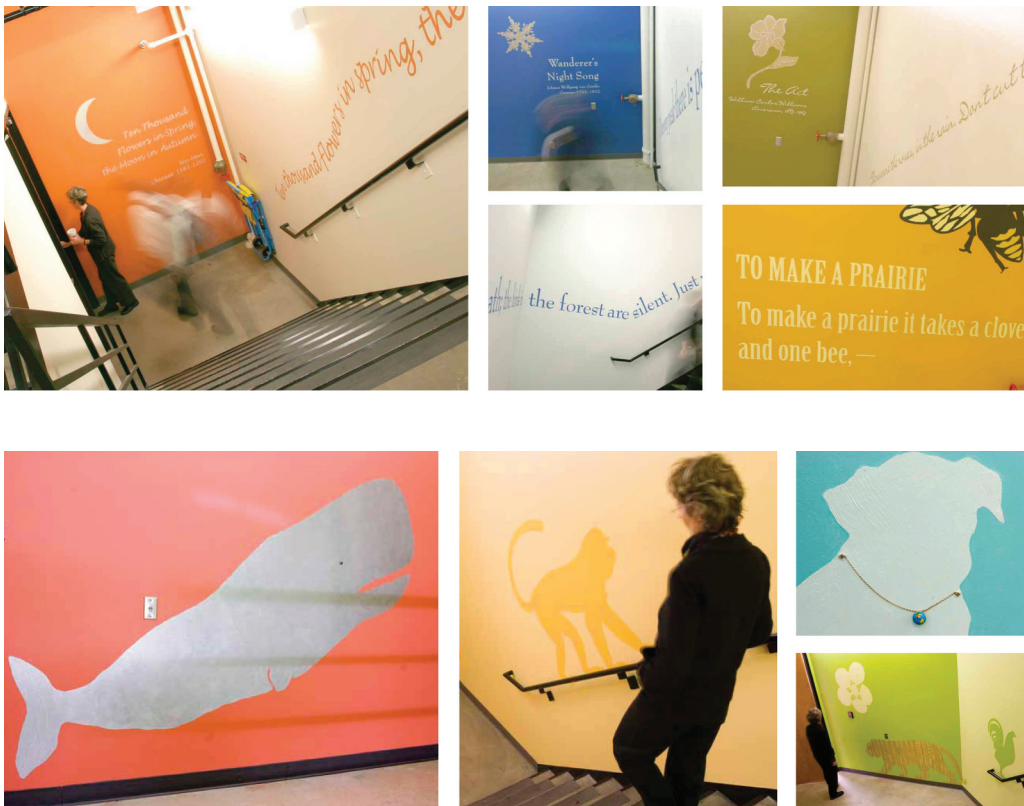
I called Louise and said, “My artist self would come to work as well as my coach self.” Louise asked, “What would that look like?” I said, “I could ask before I walk in the door every morning that all three parts of me show up and be engaged at my job.” I did that every day before I went to work, and five miracles happened.

KO: What were the miracles?

LP: A coworker revealed to me that she was going through a divorce, and I said, “Oh, would you like me to coach you on our lunch hours?” She said yes. It was great because I was isolated at my job, and I needed to connect with other people, so it helped me, too.

That gave me the courage to join the Blue Balance committee, an employee-led effort to offer resources to Blue Cross employees. I brought in people like Louise, who was a child psychologist, to give a lunch-time talk about depression.

Then someone from the health measurements department of Blue Cross Blue Shield said, “We need to walk our talk as a company—we have an ad campaign telling everyone to take the



Stairwells designed by Laurie Phillips

stairs instead of the elevator but we're not doing that ourselves." The main stairwell in the corporate headquarters building at the time was awful, with gray peeling paint. No one wanted to be in that stairwell.

The health measurements guy knew that and said, "Let's come up with a budget to have the stairwell beautified so that people will take the stairs. They'll get healthy hearts, and the company will save money on employees' health insurance payouts." The project was assigned to me, and I had so much fun redesigning the stairwell. I brought in a muralist friend of mine. I had all four floors painted bright colors. I stenciled foot-high poetry all the way up, four different poems, one for each floor, and brought in coworkers to help do the stenciling work. It really did become a successful community art project. When that south stairwell was complete, people on the north side of the building said, "We want a nice stairwell, too."

KO: What about us?

LP: Yes, stairwell jealousy! So I did another stairwell. I've been gone from Blue Cross since 2008, but I still hear from people about how much they love those stairwells. It's had a lasting impact, so that makes me happy.

Another miracle: Human Resources ordered our graphic design department to do some team relationship improvement. We worked with a coach named Pat. In getting to know her, I talked about the Vision Card workshops I offered, and she said, "Why don't you come in and do that workshop for some of my classes?" I was so excited.

KO: Yes. All of a sudden, you got to be doing ...

LP: I got to be doing what feeds all of me.

KO: ... what you love doing.

LP: After I left Blue Cross, Pat hired me to continue doing the Vision Card workshops, so it eventually brought me income.

One reason I'm passionate about Museum Sage is because I got to experience how my deeper wisdom—you might call it God or Spirit or Universe, whatever is *not* my ego—came to me through the power of that solid blue painting, and when I listened to it, my life improved exponentially. Of course, I'm preaching to the choir when I talk about the power of images, right?

KO: It reminds me of what Jung talks about, active imagination moving the ego aside. It's there as a conduit, but not running the show to allow some other part of the self to be known. The use of the image, it's brilliant. I mean, it's like creating a dream. The image becomes like the dream, and then we get to the part of us that resonates with it and finds a message with it.

LP: So much of Museum Sage has been borrowed from Jung, like the Gestalt analysis of a painting as if it's your dream.

Another thing that I think is wonderful about Museum Sage is being in the sacred space of the museum. We figured out how to effectively do Museum Sage on Zoom during the

pandemic, but there's something about being in the museum and walking mindfully. We actually used to blindfold Sages.

KO: That's how I did it.

LP: It's a deeper experience but it's a little dangerous because not everyone is steady on their feet. We don't want people to get hurt or knock over the art so now we have people look at the floor about five feet ahead of them, and that works just as well. It makes the museum guards a lot happier.

KO: I'm sure.

LP: They didn't like the blindfolds.

KO: If someone knew nothing about the Museum Sage process, how would you describe it? What's the how-to?

LP: You start with a personal question, something you really want to know about. It can be a question like "what color should I paint my bathroom?" or it could be "how can I be more present in my life?" or "should I get a divorce?" Any depth of question will work, because even with the issue of what color should I choose for my bathroom, choosing color is ultimately connected with what you value most in life. Any question can get us to go deeper, which is fascinating. After you come up with your question, through a random, intuitive method you end up with the work of art that you have a dialogue with. Ideally, it's facilitated by a trained Guide who can help you.

But I'm writing a book so that people will be able to guide each other or just do it by themselves. There's an app I've developed to help with the process.

KO: Oh, to use in the museum?

LP: Yes, so that you can come to the museum with a friend and guide each other.

KO: Oh, nice.

LP: I'm trying to democratize the Museum Sage process. My old business model was to train and license museums to deliver the experience to their visitors, which I still want to do, but museums are having a hard time grasping the power of the process so I'm building excitement from grassroots groups.

Your email was so opportune because I had just written in my business plan that I want to seed Museum Sage in different communities all over the world, and the first place I want to start is with the Jung societies. No kidding, that was in my business plan, and then I got your email.

KO: You're talking about synchronicity. I'm interested in you and your development. How did you get to graphic design? Were you always wanting to do artwork or did you go directly into art?

LP: I pretty much always did art. Writing has also been a big part of my world so I could express myself. I hung out with artists and went to art school.

KO: Where did you go to art school?

LP: I went to the University of Colorado in Boulder where I got my undergrad degree, then I did a few classes at the San Francisco Art Institute before moving to the Twin Cities and attending the Minneapolis College of Art and Design for a graduate degree, a degree I didn't quite finish for a variety of reasons.

The public art really came out of my recovery from addictions and codependency. I realized that I needed to take up more space in the world because I had tried to hide for so many years. Doing these big public artworks really helped me practice taking up space.

One of the first public art pieces I did was called *I'm As Sick As Your Secrets*. The piece was projected photographs of myself and a buddy doing things that are usually hidden—dancing, domestic violence, mysterious shadows that looked like you were seeing through a curtain in a house. I asked people to donate their secrets in a box in the front yard. I would take people's secrets and turn them into text slides and project their secrets every night.

KO: Where did you do this?

LP: In Minneapolis. I was renting a house and my landlord, who had the bottom part of the duplex, did the project with me. We did get a brick thrown through the window late one night. Not everyone liked those secrets.

KO: Or exposing or actually speaking that they existed.

LP: Right, breaking that space of the private domain.

KO: Taboo.

LP: Yes, we broke the taboo, and then someone broke the window. There were a pair of cops who would park across the street on their break to look at the piece and roar with laughter. They loved it.

KO: Well, they probably got called in on a lot of the secrets gone wrong.

LP: You're so right about that. I also worked with a group of kids from Somalia at the High School for New Americans. I did a video of them that I projected at the county government center at a huge scale. I learned a lot from those kids. They let me know that some of my questions were pretty stupid. When I asked them, "What makes you happy?" several young women said to me, "What does happiness have to do with it? It's more about are you doing the will of Allah? That's the important thing." It was a good reminder for me about life priorities.

KO: One thought that occurs to me, Laurie, is this theme of doing the community art as a way of you personally taking up more space. It's an expansive kind of experience, but it seems to me that Museum Sage is also like that. It's creating a bigger space within the museum. It's creating a personal space, an expanded personal space within the museum.

LP: Thank you. That is so brilliant.

KO: As I'm talking to you, I'm thinking about how I sometimes get overwhelmed in a museum because there are so many things. I often buy a postcard of the thing I responded to the most so that I'll be able to hang on to it because I know everything else is going to wash over me.

I think that's one of the things that's very special about Museum Sage. It's a way of creating a personal experience in the context of overwhelm. I go into a museum and think, my God, how many hours of human hands working, working, working, went into the objects that we are walking by here? It is overwhelming.

LP: It is. The energy, if you're sensitive to energy, is a lot.

KO: The Museum Sage process is expansive and containing at the same.

LP: What you're saying is really important. The data from the Louvre and other museums is that the average amount of time someone spends with a work of art is fifteen seconds—even with the *Mona Lisa*! Visitors feel like they have to see every piece. I think it's an unfortunate productivity mode. When I'm doing Museum Sage, I'm like a champion racehorse that has blinders on. I don't have to look at everything so I stay calmer. Another metaphor: getting a personal question answered by a work of art is like a carrot in front of the donkey's nose. What am I most interested in? Me, me, me. My life. When I map my personal question on to an image, that image suddenly becomes part of my psyche. The artwork is here to help me have a better understanding of my life.

KO: In my own personal experience of doing Museum Sage, but also in guiding other people, the intuitive, random, synchronistic process of what you land in front of is mysterious. It's part of that mysterious process of, for example, what you spoke about earlier of the rounded sculpture. That's what you landed in front of at that particular time with that particular question.

LP: Yes. Any work of art or any object can work, though. I could ask a personal question of the water glass on my desk, and the meaningful metaphors suggested by a water glass are extensive. But the art images people end up with often seem to *not* be random. I like to look at it as the Muse showing up to play with us, a bigger energy that's willing to hit us over the head with an answer when we need it.

The last Museum Sage session I guided was for a young woman whose question was, "I've been a stay-at-home mom, but it's time for me to get back to work because we need the money, but I love playing in my garden. Should I be hunkered down in front of my computer this summer or could I delay it until fall?" She ended up in front of a 60-foot mural of a garden. She opened her eyes and burst into laughter. She said, "I guess I needed a really obvious message!"

KO: Oh, wow, interesting. Are there any particular moments or events that stand out to you in terms of how Museum Sage got off the ground?"

LP: I started doing the process with clients when I was training to be a life coach. I thought, "They're getting my services for free, so why not experiment on them?" With the first client we spent two hours in front of a case full of African art objects. Her life just kept unfolding, unfolding, unfolding, unfolding, unfolding. The depth she got to in one session was remarkable.

KO: It's almost like the art object becomes a gateway to the deeper parts of yourself.

LP: Yes. I think that having a Guide who's there to hold the container for you is helpful. I love doing Museum Sage in a group of at least four people because others have interesting comments of what they see in the work of art for your question. It's very intimate, yet you can do it with strangers as well as with your best friends. Both are equally good. It's a space to have a sacred conversation because, in our culture, we don't get to say what we're most curious about in our lives unless we have a wonderful therapist like you. Most people don't, so where do we have the space to ask these questions?

I remember a family I guided at the De Young Museum in San Francisco for the museum's Valentine's Day event. It was a mom and a dad and two little girls. I think they were six and eight years old. The dad asked about his mother, the kid's grandmother, who had just died. His question was "Where's Grandma now? Where's my mom now?" He ended up in front of a beautiful pastoral scene, an eighteenth-century landscape with sheep in the foreground and a lot of mist in the background. He said, "I think Grandma is in the mist," and you could see the little girls taking this in: "Oh, yeah, Grandma's in the mist." It was moving that the dad felt comfortable enough to bring up a question that can be taboo in our culture.

KO: They felt comforted. The family must have been so comforted.

LP: Yes. It gave them a different way to talk about death by using an image of death as mist: "I know what mist is. It's not like she's disappeared forever. She's just in the mist. Okay."

KO: It's amazing how images do that. It's reminding me of an experience I had when I went to Egypt one year. It was over Christmastime. I got to Egypt. I think I got there Christmas Eve. I was in the hotel by myself. The trip didn't begin until a day or two after Christmas. I went early because I wanted to have an extra day or two at the Cairo Museum. I woke up in the morning. One of the images that was most vivid to me was the image of Hathor as the cow and the Pharaoh nursing. There's an image of the cow, and then the Pharaoh is nursing from the udder of the cow, and that is the goddess Hathor.

I woke up that first morning, and I had this dream. The dream was *when you die, the cow comes and walks you from one side of the green field to the other side of the green field*. I mean, it was definitely that image of Hathor. That dream changed the way I felt about dying.

LP: "I'll get a cow. That's fine. I'll be safe."

KO: Exactly. What an easy transition that must be to have that cow walk you across the field.

LP: That's a beautiful story. I love it.

KO: The thing is there's something about what images do for us and our need for images and our relationship to images, creating them, reacting to them that is so important. They touch us in a place that's deeper in some ways than words.

LP: Yes. Our culture has become so intensely visual with media, movies, and photographs, but until you stop and just be with an image, sometimes you don't know what it's trying to tell you.

KO: Right. Right. The danger is the overwhelm of just too many images, that there is no personal space.

LP: Yes, and that we're not pausing long enough. You paused at that museum in Egypt and you spent time with it and had an experience, and then it got into your subconscious where it could produce information for you.

KO: Exactly. Right, it really went deep, and it was a question I didn't even know I had, like what happens when you die? I must have had that question. Of course, in Egypt where there's so much about the afterlife and the pyramids, so much about the transition to the other world.

LP: I wanted to mention that in the museum world there's something called *slow looking* that museums all over the world promote. There's an official Slow Looking Day. Really, it's about just slowing down and being with the art and the museum. There's another process called *Visual Thinking Strategies*. VTS trains museum people to lead tours. I took a tour at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the leader had us stand in front of one work of art for half an hour. She said, "What do you see?" and when you'd say something, she would say, "What makes you say that? ... What else do you see? ... What makes you say that?" The comments from the group were fascinating because they made the painting so much deeper from digging into it.

KO: Are the groups sharing with one another what they see?

LP: Yes. It's a group of about twelve people. Everyone takes turns sharing out loud. I love that it makes people slow down. I really bonded with the work of art we were looking at, but the VTS process is missing the personal question. With Museum Sage, there's another level we go to: "What do you see in this image for a question you have about your personal life?" That takes it to another level of connection with the art.

KO: I wonder if having the question is like opening a little inner door. I'm going to open this little inner door and let the image speak to that particular aspect of what's going on for me?

LP: Yes, you bring more vulnerability to it. For any intimate relationship you need to be a little vulnerable. I love your observation.

KO: It's a little personal opening that happens. What you're describing is not necessarily there. It's just much more active. I see this. I see that. I see this. I see that. I didn't realize museums had these kinds of practices that they were trying to help people with.

LP: They know visitors go through their museums too fast.

KO: Well, the idea that people spend fifteen seconds in front of something is so interesting to me. I was in Paris in February. I took my thirteen-year-old granddaughter to Paris.

LP: Oh, wonderful.

KO: Yeah, and she had this year fallen in love with the Impressionists, particularly Berthe Morisot. Her art was in the Musée Marmottan Monet, so we went to that museum, and we did stay more than fifteen seconds in front of every painting.

LP: I'm sure.

KO: After we left, she said to me, "Nonny, can we go get art supplies? I want to go back and sketch it." We went and got art supplies and then, the next day, we went back there. She spent

about an hour. She picked her favorite of the paintings, and she spent about an hour with her colored pencils sketching and replicating the image. I was so thrilled with her level of engagement, that she herself had found a way to engage more deeply with a work of art that she was really interested in.

LP: Well, it's so beautiful you gave her that experience.

KO: I got to share it with her. It opened something for me that, if I had gone to that museum by myself, I would never have had that experience.

LP: Did you sketch also?

KO: No, I didn't.

LP: You just watched her sketching?

KO: Yes, I watched her and enjoyed her. I took lots of photographs of her sketching the painting. Not too long after we came back, it was her mother's birthday, and I got her a beautiful frame with a photograph I took of my granddaughter in the museum sketching this painting. It was a way of personalizing. I mean, I'll never think of that painting without that personal experience being part of it.

Is there anything else you'd like to include? Anything about your book that you want to talk about?

LP: The book is about how the reader can guide and receive the Museum Sage process themselves, with an introduction by me and the background story of Museum Sage written by my husband, Jon. He'll include influences by Jung and the Surrealists and *Visio Divina*, which is a Catholic method of looking at a religious image and having a dialogue with it about your life.

KO: Oh, I never heard of that.

LP: There's also *Lectio Divina*, which is using books like the Bible, but *Visio Divina* is using an image like a religious icon. Jon wants to talk about the re-enchantment of art. For much of art history in the West, religious art was used as a way to help the viewer with their daily life. What happened in modernity was that art got desacralized and it became more retinal. It's more about a visual experience, though still conveying ideas, of course. Jon thinks Museum Sage is helping to re-enchant art, to re-engage with the deep relationship with someone's life that religious art used to give people. It's not about religion, but it is about the sacred, I think.

KO: It's interesting. It reminds me a little bit about an article I wrote about Medusa.

In the matriarchal phase before the patriarchy, the goddess was everywhere, was in nature, every place, and then, with the patriarchy, the sacred space was differentiated from the secular space. The temple became the sacred space and the outside world became secular, and so there was this division.

My hypothesis was that it was also the evolution of consciousness and projection. When we project, we are making the whole world part of our mind. It's like the matriarchal era where the goddess is in everything. What Medusa did was that she violated; she came into the sacred

space. She had sex with Poseidon there, and so it was a violation of the boundary that the patriarchy was trying to set up. My hypothesis was that the patriarchy created a sacred space separate from the secular space, but what projection does is it goes in the other direction and it numenizes the external world. In a way it sprinkles psyche out into the world.

It is that idea of our mind infusing an object with value and meaning that might not be there otherwise. It sounds like that's what your husband is talking about, the infusion of mind and meaning and libido into something that has lost its value.

LP: Right, but also with the ability to impact your personal life in a practical way; it can solve your personal problems.

KO: Really interesting.

LP: The book is going to cover how to do Museum Sage in-person with a group using a single artwork. The gift of the pandemic with doing Museum Sage over Zoom is that we learned that everyone can use the same piece of art. Everyone has their own question, but as each person asks a question, that piece of art changes, it gets deeper and deeper and deeper.

I'll give you an example. I was working with two people. One of them had a question about quitting her job. She got an artwork that she described as dirty looking, dirty and dark. Her insight was, "I guess it's time to leave that job."

The next person's question was, "Should I move my mother up from the South to live with us?" She described the image as having so much light in the background. How she described that work of art made me see it absolutely differently. It was fascinating and magical. The insight she got from the same artwork was "absolutely I should move my mother up here. There's lots of light. She's in a dark space right now, but I've got a light place for her."

KO: In a way that says it all. As Jungians we are especially attuned to the power of images. When we let the images speak to us, it can be personal and universal at the same time. And you've brought a process to folks that draws so beautifully on the power of images.

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Olivetti has a conversation with Museum Sage Laurie Phillips about the origin of Museum Sage, a game of psychological imagination she created, and the process of intuitively dialoging with art to answer personal questions. They talk about her own experience of wanting to leave a corporate job as a graphic designer and being guided by her deeper wisdom, which she accessed through dialoging with an image, to stay until she had brought all of herself to work. Museum Sage opens the door to an expansive and deep engagement with both art and psyche.

KEY WORDS

art, dialogue with art, game, Guide, image, imaginal, intuition, Museum Sage, psyche, Sage, slow looking

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