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NAME OF AUTHOR:

Martha Jean Clarke

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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

FROM OBSESSIO TO EPIPHANIA: A VISUAL JOURNEY

By

Martha Jean Clarke

A WORK OF ART THESIS

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For all those silent and invisible yet to be heard and seen in the world.

This is for you.

## Abstract

In this Work of Art thesis, I have created a series of eleven assemblage art pieces as a way of making visible my lived experience of invisibility and self-alienation. For each assemblage piece, I have provided a written reflection in order to place the visual image of the art piece within a theological, creative, personal, and spiritual context. I have mapped these eleven art pieces together within the broader theme of a pilgrimage in order to provide an external bridge of understanding from, and into, the internal theological landscape of my spiritual journey towards wholeness. I have used the creative process of assemblage art as a method of reconstructing an authentic sense of self, and deepening my felt experience of the sacred.

## Acknowledgements

There have been many fellow *pelligrini* who have journeyed with me on this pilgrimage:

For all those who went ahead and shone a light for me to follow,

For all those who walked in tandem step for step beside me,

For all those who sat and waited with me in the darkness when I could not find  
my way,

I thank you. The journey would not have been possible without you. May much love and  
light continue to guide your way home.

The theologian, ultimately, must be a geographer as well as archivist and celebrant of the spirit.

--Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### The Game of Life

One year when I was in elementary school, we played a version of the popular childhood memory game, “I Packed My Trunk to New York.” Our teacher would begin by writing each of our names on the blackboard. Each child would then in turn recite the phrase, “I packed my trunk to New York, and in it I put \_\_\_\_\_.” In this version of the game, however, we would try to guess what we were allowed to take in our own individual trunk. The teacher would stand at the front of the room, acting as the gatekeeper, much like the Control on Windows Vista gone bad, and “allow” or “deny” the chosen item.

Although I played this game several times, I could never figure out the secret code that would unlock the puzzle. Like some children’s version of a Zen koan, there seemed to be no rational explanation for what was allowed; all categories of animal, mineral, and vegetables were possible. Size was not a factor; elephants and farm equipment were routinely passed through and packed away. It was not color; red tomatoes and green grass were definite possibilities, but not necessarily red roses or green peas. It did not matter how useful the item might be to our journey; wool toques and warm jackets were routinely rejected while blessings of unicorns bedded down in imaginary trunks. Any item could be seemingly arbitrarily and randomly disallowed, even if it had been approved for your neighbour across the row. The power of discretion ultimately remained with the teacher who knew the answer to the mystery of the idiosyncratic secret code.





I have felt this same sense of confusion and bewilderment most of my life; as though I am missing some crucial piece of essential information that other people have in their possession in order to figure out the game of life, some esoteric key piece of knowledge that I have not been made privy to which would unlock the mystery. I feel that I have watched other people pass by with that elusive, internal code that grants them access to the successful inner circle of life, whereas I am more likely to show up on the wrong day, wearing the wrong clothes, bearing the wrong gift and an outdated code that denies me access. I believe that this is the essence of the Outcast's lived experience of invisibility and alienation described in W. Paul Jones' book *Theological Worlds*, and that the vital missing key is a felt connection to one's self.

W. Paul Jones wrote *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* as a way of understanding diversity within the Christian community. His book was intended as a functional guide to understanding and ministering to the diverse theological perspectives and the unique spiritual needs between and within Christian congregations. It is similarly used in the Master of Theological Studies program at St. Stephen's College; as a way of understanding different theological backgrounds and spiritual orientations within the student population at St. Stephen's, which in turn, is representative of the diversity within the larger Christian population as a whole.

My personal introduction to W. Paul Jones' work *Theological Worlds* came during the Intake Collegium at St. Stephen's College when I applied for admission to the Master of Theological Studies program, and that initial encounter was in itself instrumental in revealing and illustrating several of the key characteristics of the lived experience of my Theological World that Jones describes in his work.

Each MTS candidate was asked to complete Jones' "Theological Worlds Inventory" prior to the commencement of the Intake Collegium in order to determine their Theological World, and then invited to participate in a small group discussion with the other members of their specific Theological World during the Collegium. There were three or four of us present at that Collegium who identified ourselves as primarily Theological World Three and in keeping with our World Three perspective, we had difficulty in relating to the other students' World Three experience in order to find any cohesiveness as a group. What we did not realize at the time was that the common ground between us was mainly that we could not find any common ground; the binding factor that unites World Three is simply that we are the fringe Outcasts from the mainstream: we do not perceive ourselves as authentic card-carrying members of a larger dominant community.

When we later rejoined the rest of the students for a larger discussion involving all five Theological Worlds, the members of World Three were silent for a long time, seemingly unable to find a place of connection. Jones describes this characteristic World Three experience of being present but invisible: "In World Three, I am in the room, but no one notices. So it may be better to remain invisible than to open my mouth and be rejected. At least I'm in the room; they may put me out."<sup>1</sup>

After several minutes of hearing from other Theological Worlds describing their experience during the large group discussion, I finally spoke up, and 'tongue in cheek,' remarked that we had not yet heard from World Three, and that I was feeling rather alienated. A student from another theological world quickly responded that my alienation was not because of anyone there. And that is precisely the point in

understanding the

sense of alienation and invisibility that pervades Jones' Theological World Three. The alienation that defines the theological landscape of World Three is self-imposed; it is an internal separation from self that begins to manifest a parallel external disconnection from the physical world. The spiritual malaise of homesickness experienced by the inhabitants of World Three is not for any displaced external location, but for an internal connection to one's own authentic self.

Each of W. Paul Jones' five Theological Worlds is shaped by the rhythm moving between two poles: the *obsessio* and the *epiphania*. The word 'obsessio' means "to be besieged"<sup>2</sup> and although it is a difficult concept to pin down concretely in words, Jones describes the *obsessio* as:

whatever functions deeply and pervasively in one's life as a defining quandary, a conundrum, a boggling of the mind, a hemorrhaging of the soul, a wound that bewilders healing, a mystification that renders one's living cryptic. Whatever inadequate words one might use to describe it, an *obsessio* is that which so gets its teeth into a person that it establishes one's life as a plot. It is a memory which, as resident image, becomes so congealed as Question that all else in one's experience is sifted in terms of its promise as Answer.<sup>3</sup>

Jones describes the *epiphania*, "to show upon:"<sup>4</sup>

One's *epiphania* is as difficult to discern as one's *obsessio*. It too is most detectable functionally--in this case, by its evocative power. Reminiscent of the workings of an oyster, an *epiphania* is known by its capacity so to enfold an *obsessio* that the grating particle is made bearable. Indeed, quietly within its promise is the hope that the *obsessio*, while never lost, might become the center for a pearl of great price, flowing back to redeem the whole.<sup>5</sup>

The movement between the opposing poles of one's *obsessio* and *epiphania* becomes the impulsing logic that shapes and defines the territory within one's Theological World: "Thus the impulsing logic which renders each life a religious quest,

whether consciously or otherwise, is this rhythm, slung between obsessio and epiphania, experienced or dreamed of.”<sup>6</sup>

W. Paul Jones explains that: “The possession of an obsessio is universal, involving one in the dynamic which shapes each person’s existence. *Ex sistere* means standing outside oneself, pulled from one’s self into self-consciousness by some graphic and grasping variation on the theme Why?”<sup>7</sup> My personal and familial variation on the universal theme of Why? is expressed as “So What?” Piecing together a solid answer that will stand in the face of a sneering well-placed pinprick of “So What?” forms the heart and its pulsing rhythm of my spiritual biography. It is the “impulsing logic” that lies at the foundation of my spiritual quest. It is more than simply my thesis question; it is my obsessio and it is my Opus; my life’s work. It is the “primal image-event of gnawing and longing [that] impulses all else into Search... It is the shape of the horizon before which one stands, to identify which turf is one’s own.”<sup>8</sup> It is also “the story one needs to tell if one is to be known.”<sup>9</sup>

It was this same sense of cynicism that I initially brought to this exploration of assemblage art. I wanted to investigate what makes assemblage a spiritual practice; what makes these art pieces more than a decorative arrangement of interesting objects? In a spiritual climate where all creative endeavours from knitting to colouring have now become a spiritual practice, I needed to find an answer for the pervasive “So What?” within myself. I wanted to find a solid place of knowing what makes the process of assemblage more than a collection of objects glued together; what makes it a transcendent and healing practice.

A spiritual journey is never linear; it is myriad of false starts, following in the

footsteps of false prophets, and retracing steps leading from the brink of spiritual dead-ends. And the pilgrimage through another's theological territory is not for the faint of heart; it takes courage and faith to venture beyond the known and comfortable boundaries of one's theological, academic, and creative paradigms into another's imaginal world. Peter Stanford, who explores the contemporary popular interest in pilgrimage in his book *The Extra Mile*, defines "pilgrimage" as: "seeking the spiritual through something material, whether it is the act of walking in the footsteps of those believers who have passed along the same road before, or the immersion in water that previous bathers have experienced as holy and healing..."<sup>10</sup>

The invitation extended here is to enter into the imaginal territory of this visual pilgrimage through one of the World's inhabitant's spiritual journey towards wholeness. The visual images assembled here have been my way to add my voice and join in the collective theological conversation begun in that Intake Collegium, and a way to heal the pervasive sense of self-alienation and invisibility by reconstructing a felt connection to my self and to the sacred.

Joan Chittester proposes that "spirituality is theology walking."<sup>11</sup> Come and walk with me through of my lived experience of Theological World Three; not as a tourist, but as a fellow *pelligrina*, seeking understanding. As Dr. Lauren Artress, a leading proponent of the modern resurgence of the labyrinth as a spiritual tool, writes, "The pilgrim participates. The tourist observes...The shift from tourist, who comes with an interested eye, to pilgrim, who comes with a searching heart, makes all the difference in the world."<sup>12</sup> And as Peter Stanford adds: "With pilgrimages, there are no liturgical rituals to negotiate, no doctrine to absorb, no church to join. All that is required is

openness.”<sup>13</sup>

## Chapter Two: Method

### Piece By Piece

Each of the eleven art pieces presented within this Work of Art thesis were created using the technique of assemblage art; a post-modern art form pioneered by American artist Joseph Cornell in the last half of the Twentieth century. Many of the specific techniques that Cornell used in his famous boxes are still used by assemblage artists today, and no subsequent presentation of assemblage art would be complete without an acknowledgement of his innovative contributions to the field of modern art.<sup>14</sup>

“Arrangement, organization, and display are all arts of relationship.”<sup>15</sup>

Assemblage art is a form of three-dimensional collage involving a process of finding and arranging common everyday objects, termed “found” objects, into works of art.

Undertaking a “Work of Art” thesis is an intimidating and daunting process; only a few professionally-trained artists have attempted it within the MTS program at St. Stephen’s College.<sup>16</sup> But because assemblage is a creative technique that requires no specific artistic training, it is a method that is available to everyone, regardless of their creative experience or artistic skills. This makes assemblage a creative option for anyone to make their imaginal world visible, and to give their theological concepts form and substance in the world. As W. Paul Jones explains, the collective theological images and symbols in our contemporary culture have failed to sustain our theological mythologies: “... to mythologize the world as one’s own is the theological task, the dissolution of mythology in our time is at the heart of our anemia... We live in a famine of conscious and recognized mythology... This may be why each of us feels so terribly alone.”<sup>17</sup>



Assemblage art returns the responsibility for creating our own significant and sacred images of our theologies back to each of us individually, instead of reserving the creative process only for a select few specifically-trained in the fine arts. As Matthew Fox expresses: “It is in unveiling our faces, in letting out our deepest selves in the self-expression that our adult work and play is about, that we all become baptized artists.”<sup>18</sup>

The process of creating this Work of Art thesis was twofold: the creation of the assemblage pieces, and the written reflections for each piece. The series of eleven assemblage pieces were created first, using an intuitive process which I describe as “working blind.” I usually began with a vague concept or theme, intuitively selecting and gathering a collection of found items that could be used in the final art piece. Wherever possible, I avoided buying new materials in order to minimize the environmental footprint of this art project, and used only ‘found’ items from second-hand or thrift stores in the assemblage pieces. Used items also often possess an authentic aged aesthetic and haptic quality that is desirable in assemblage art.

The base for each assemblage piece was a discarded trophy, usually acquired from the City of Edmonton Reuse Center.<sup>19</sup> The transformation of the anonymously-donated trophy from its former purpose in recognizing and rewarding hierarchal achievement and external success into a testament of spiritual concepts and theological landmarks provided the original concept for this assemblage series.

The physical process of assemblage usually began as an aesthetic exercise; choosing the specific trophy and auditioning the found items into a visually-appealing arrangement. This part of the assemblage process could take several days or weeks, in order to arrange the right combination of found objects. This was still largely an

unconscious process; following the assemblage process in allowing the materials to dictate their placement, and relying on a felt sense of congruence between the internal feel of the piece and its external appearance.

The final step in the assemblage of the piece was always editing; removing those found items that were simply decorative, or that seemed to have no significant relevance to the theological concept of the art piece, before the individual items were permanently attached to the trophy base.

The content of the theological concept for each of the individual assemblage pieces was necessarily autobiographical; for as Jones informs us, “Theological method, or how one knows one’s lived meaning is true, is at heart an autobiographical process.”<sup>20</sup> “One becomes knowable as a theological self by distilling one’s autobiography...”<sup>21</sup> The technique of using everyday found items in the process of assemblage art is well-suited to the autobiographical nature of theological method. As Jones proposes:

one may best be known theologically through the contents of one’s glove compartment. Far more revealing than a twenty-page credo are the rhythms detected in one’s ordinary environment and activity--one’s furniture, paintings, record collection, favorite rooms; one’s postures, the way one walks; one’s driving habits, checkbook, wardrobe, food.<sup>22</sup>

I have chosen not to explain the idiosyncratic symbolism of the individual items within my own “glove box” collections in the assemblage pieces presented here; a reductive process that felt too much like the deconstruction of an encounter with the sacred, and because the individual pieces of art within a Work of Art thesis must be able to stand on their own creative merit. Instead, I have chosen to place each assemblage piece in its entirety within five points of reference through the written reflections that accompany the image of the assemblage piece. The written reflections map each art

piece

within a theological, creative, personal, and spiritual context: within the voice of active imagination, within Jones' Theological World Three, within the sacred creative cycle, within my own personal experience, and including the point of transformation that makes assemblage art a spiritual practice.

Active imagination is a reflective technique from Jungian psychology that is used to enter into internal imaginal territory in order to gain an alternative perspective from inside the image. The technique of active imagination should not be mistaken for fantasy: ““The imagination, writes Alan Ecclestone, ‘brings the whole soul into activity, unlike fantasy which is one-dimensional: it plays with things without paying anything for them. Fantasy is not costly whereas the imagination is strenuous. Holding things together is hard work.’”<sup>23</sup>

While the focus of a Work of Art thesis must be the expression of the art itself, the intent of the written reflections was twofold. The primary purpose of the written reflections was to bring the unconscious contents of the assemblage process into consciousness. As Jones describes: “Our concern is to enter the storehouse of imagery... This storehouse is most often unconscious, unrecognized, and unacknowledged.”<sup>24</sup> Tom Crockett explains that the “work” of a “work of art” is to bring the understanding of a piece of art into consciousness:

Altering requires that we dance back and forth between knowledge and intuition. To make art in a sacred manner, you must bring materials and the elements of an image together with purpose and at some level of understanding. This may be an intuitive process at the outset, in which you play with combinations of materials, pattern, and designs, but initial intuition does not eliminate your responsibility for the piece you create. You must understand what you're creating before you create it, as you create it, and after you create it.<sup>25</sup>

The second purpose of the written reflections was to place the assemblage piece within a holistic framework of internal and external points of reference. To this end, I have endeavoured to keep the written reflections as skeletal as possible, assembling the theological bones and sketching the spiritual territory of each image, but leaving space for the reader's aesthetic participation with the images of the assemblage pieces.

Jones recognizes the vital role of aesthetic participation in understanding another's Theological World; the transformational power of images that makes it possible to make the crucial shift from 'tourist' to 'pilgrim:' "This capacity for aesthetic participation serves as hermeneutic, making it possible to experience an alternative theological World from within."<sup>26</sup> "In Christian circles, such transition from aesthetic knowing to existential commitment is identified as the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>27</sup>

## Chapter Three: The Assemblage Pieces



*I am the One*

*I am the One who steps blind  
Off the precarious pedestal of privilege and power*

*the One who believes without knowing  
who trusts without seeing*

*I am the One who carries the weight  
of the leaden chains of doubt  
stretching back through infinity  
the One frozen by the gravitational pull of fear  
Holding me hostage  
and anchoring me from  
teetering off the edge*

*I am the One balanced on the precipice  
whose heart pounds  
whose breath stops  
And the One who tips the scales of fate  
and steps off anyway*

*I am the One who risks all  
in spite of dying  
because of dying  
freefalls into life*

*I am the One*

## Working Blind

The self wrestling for meaning is often a self unknown to itself.

--W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds*

The journey from the obsessio of emptiness towards the epiphania of self-fulfillment in World Three is a journey of discernment; a painstaking process of self-examination. It is the feminine Baba Yaga task<sup>28</sup> of sifting through all of the collective baggage that we inherit to discover what is truly ours, and what rightfully belongs to others. This first assemblage piece represents the beginning of that World Three journey into consciousness; of feeling the edges of the social and familial boundaries that shape and determine who we are in the world, and the weight of the obsessio that holds us back from living an authentic life.

This is the initial step of that lengthy and arduous process of World Three self-examination; the first stage of becoming aware of the confines of the social conventions, gender roles, class status, and familial expectations that we unconsciously carry with us. As W. Paul Jones writes, “One is socialized early into roles, expectations, postures--assigned, conditioned, educated, compensated, fitted, picked--until one feels trapped, with one’s needs as conditioned as one’s responses.”<sup>29</sup> We become so enmeshed within the layers of our external roles as wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, and workers, that we become invisible: “the self is hardly distinguishable from its environment. It is unclear where it stops and one’s self begins.”<sup>30</sup>

Without a felt connection to self, the social conventions and roles themselves become our way of knowing and being in the world; it is “how things are done.” It is easy to substitute and vicariously follow other people’s knowing in place of our own. We become the Martha Stewarts of the world; experts at learning and following the rules



perfectly. And the ultimate paradox embedded within the World Three journey towards wholeness is that without a felt connection to self, it is nearly impossible to determine what is genuinely ours. Without the internal compass of self to guide us, we are spiritually disabled to undertake the task of discernment. Jones describes the healing of the obsessio in World Three as: “the courage to pick up one’s bed and walk,”<sup>31</sup> but the dilemma for World Three is that we do not have the internal authority to discern between our bed, and a bed that someone else has made for us to lie in. In the absence of a connection to self, we must rely on other ways of knowing through intuition, instinct, imagination, and dreams to know what authentically belongs to us. We must become “imaginal trackers”<sup>32</sup> following the “hints and guesses” left behind in the dissolution of self.

This is also the place of entry into the sacred creative cycle. This is the first step of the journey from the safety and security of one’s known world into the uncertainty of the unknown. It is that heart-pounding, breath-taking moment of hesitation before deciding to trust and let go, which always feels like a freefall into the creative void. For the direction of reconnecting to one’s self through the creative cycle is always downward; as Marion Woodman and Robert Bly describe, “the old theme of *katabasis*--the necessity to go down; he who wants to heal a wound will have to descend.”<sup>33</sup>

I have always adamantly resisted this initial place of stepping into the powerful current of the creative cycle. I have never been able to surrender and submit to the creative process easily; never willingly volunteering to cross over from the topside world into the underworld of creativity, intuitively knowing that it will inevitably lead me into Hades’ underground territory of shadow and darkness; “to that place of which we are all

most deeply afraid, the place under the ground where the dead ‘lean backward with a lipless grin.’”<sup>34</sup> I have always preferred to be seduced into the creative process; to be “lured into freedom,”<sup>35</sup> as Jones describes, rather than pushed or abducted.

But it is possible to remain frozen in this threshold place of entry for a long time, even for a lifetime. W. Paul Jones also describes this initial place of creative resistance within the World Three journey: “Though fascinated, one is seized by anxiety--inveigled into looking, frightened to see, paralyzed to step.”<sup>36</sup> This becomes the in-between place of the unused life for World Three inhabitants.

The place of transformation in this assemblage came through the written reflection. This was the first piece in this series, and it began as a much simpler assemblage piece; with only one unadorned figure and no accompanying baggage (see photograph p.67). During the process of writing, it became clear that I needed to alter it to accurately portray this more complex place of entry into the creative cycle. The two stages of this piece together seem to reflect the spiritual journey itself from innocence into consciousness.



*I am the One*

*I am the One who hammers through the hobbles  
of your uncertainty  
and slices through the inertia of your grey doubt*

*I am the One who jackknifes past mediocre  
and the One who will pin you  
to a standard of excellence*

*I am the One who sees the project finished  
before you begin  
I am the One who will not let you settle for seconds, almost,  
and nearly there*

*I am the One who understands the steep ways of the  
vertical paths of The World;  
I am the One who most wants you  
to succeed in your elevated stance  
I am your harshest fan and your most devoted critic*

*I am the One who will make you dig  
to make your fledgling climb  
And the One who will drive you to declare your Opus*

*I am the One who will make you turn and face  
the Thing  
you thought  
you could not do  
And I am the One who will give you the gift of precision  
in your voice and vision to do it*

*I am the One*

## The Grand Inquisitor

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?  
-- Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day"

This assemblage piece represents the place of self-imposed exile within the theological landscape of World Three. It is the moment of separation, of turning away, and stepping outside of the internalized collective expectations of one's known world. It is the moment of awakening to the absolute and inescapable knowing at a deep soul level that the cost of a lifetime spent conforming, of performing, to other people's expectations is too high. It is the moment of choosing between the slow death by spiritual asphyxiation contained within the safety and security of going through the motions of living, and the promise of life itself held by stepping out of the game into the abyss of the unknown. It is the first excruciating and potentially-suicidal step in the conscious journey towards the epiphania of reconnection to one's self; for the safety and security of belonging are no small things to relinquish voluntarily. "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul."<sup>37</sup> In many ways, belonging is synonymous with survival itself. To consciously cast oneself out by stepping out of the collective values, beliefs, and rewards of belonging to the dominant culture of one's family or society is simultaneously life-threatening and life-giving to the inhabitants of World Three.

Evil manifests as the wasted life in World Three, and the Grand Inquisitor acts as that masculine voice that calls us into account for our "one wild and precious life." World Three citizens are all too acutely aware of the gifts and talents that they have received through grace or hard work, and the pressure to use them to contribute, to make

a difference in the world, becomes the internalized voice of the Grand Inquisitor. Even within the spiritual quest for wholeness, there can be a unforgiving drivenness towards relentless self-improvement in World Three; one can always do better, be better. Through a theological lens shaped by the collective Protestant work ethic, the external objective eye of the Grand Inquisitor can only see what is yet to be done, and never how far one has already travelled. World Three inhabitants know that “time is short;” there is no time to rest, to celebrate milestones, or to reorganize for the next phase of the journey.

This assemblage piece also represents the most familiar place in the creative cycle that every artist recognizes, regardless of their particular Theological World view. It is the shadowy underworld place that anyone who has ever undertaken any form of creative endeavour has beaten down a well-worn path travelling to. It is a visual representation of that inherited voice that has taken up residence inside our head; that familiar familial voice that repeatedly lets us know that our work is not good enough: that the sweater that we knit, the pie we baked, the quilt we sewed, or the paper that we wrote, will never measure up. That we will never quite measure up to an impossible, always escalating, ever receding, never achievable standard; for ultimately the Grand Inquisitor calls us to justify, not our work, but our very existence in the world.

The transformational point of this assemblage piece, however, came during the written reflection. For the first time, I heard from the Inquisitor’s point of view during the “I Am” reflection, and what I finally heard was that the relentless criticism and incessant striving to always do better, be better, came from a place of love. I had never considered before that the oppressive stream of judgment that I experience under the Inquisitor’s masculine gaze could stem from a true concern for my well-being and a genuine desire

for me to succeed in the external world. And also for the first time, I simultaneously understood that my creative ability to find, sort, and arrange also came from this same finely-tuned place of discernment. As part and parcel of the Inquisitor's insatiable quest for perfection, I had also inherited his laser vision; inherent skills essential to my creative process. Without that linear ability to precisely arrange and edit, there would be no assemblage pieces, and no writing. There would be no rational way to organize and present the creative work to the world, and no push out of the inertia of World Three to comb through it one more time until it is "right." The gift of the Grand Inquisitor is his uncompromising faithfulness in his commitment to us; he will not give up on us, and he will not let us give up on ourselves.





*“I ... am requesting to you to please do not bother us, the children and the roommates of this residence. You have been infringing on our privacy. I have spoken to the by-law office, which gives us the approval to cut the branch down hanging over our front lawn which is killing our grass and also acorns all over the grass. These acorns has cost me a new lawn mower blade. This branch will be coming down within the next couple days. Thank you for your co-operation on these two matters.”*

There is no “I Am” reflection for this assemblage piece. This is a World Three place of angry and defiant refusal to engage with any form of perceived external authority, and so the authentic World Three response to the reflection question for this piece was to slam the door in my face. In the silent refusal of an “I Am” reflection, I have instead presented the written words of my neighbour, who I believe is also a fellow citizen of World Three, and provided the inspiration for the creation of this piece. His letter was written in response, and in retaliation, to a telephone call I had made to Child Protective Services out of concern for their children. Because it is unusual to hear the actual voices of Outcasts in the world, I wanted to give his words presence within this piece; to let his own words be seen and heard, and to allow him to speak for his experience in my portrayal of this place within the landscape of World Three. The sad irony of his letter, however, is that the trees that he is complaining about are actually on his property.

## The Neighbours

And the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad so I had one more for dessert.  
-- Kris Kristofferson, "Sunday Morning Coming Down"

This assemblage piece is the place of living in disconnection from one's self. It is the "squandering of life's potential,"<sup>38</sup> the very manifestation of evil that many World Three inhabitants live in fear of becoming. It is also the lived experience of the defiant rebellious sin of pride:

The sin of pride in this World actually becomes another form of sloth. Pride is the frenzied action of trying to escape the hard question, a posture of bravado that superficializes the game, a loss of selfhood through vicariousness, with belonging the reward for serving well.<sup>39</sup>

There is a sense of freedom inherent in embracing the role of the Outcast; of no longer trying to live up to any external standard, and deliberately rejecting the accepted social norms to embrace the acceptance of alternative cultures. This is the perfect World Three storm of the sneering cynicism of "So What?" colliding with the overwhelming apathy of "Why Bother?"

This also the place of escalating behaviours that temporarily silence the incessant voice of the Grand Inquisitor, and artificially mimic the sense of well-being of the epiphania. It is the place of self-medicating addiction that still passes for recreation in our society; a narcissistic and myopic descent into consuming self-absorption and destruction. Peeling back the mask of false gaiety and adolescent bravado that barely covers the desperate emptiness of living in disconnection from self, would reveal a darker place of deep depression; a sheer drop into the all-enveloping tar pit of inertia and lethargy from which we can no longer muster the energy to escape.

This is the place within the creative cycle where all movement stops. It is the deliberate rejection of life; the creative equivalent of a black hole that sucks all of one's life energy into the abyss. The mere presence of this assemblage piece in the room has been enough to grind my creative process entirely to a halt.

In the wake of the hollow void left behind by the dissolution of self, the Outcasts of World Three become magnets for the collective theological projections of the world. We become the evil-doers, the scapegoats for the sins of the world, and it becomes the mission of others to save us from ourselves; for "advice from other worlds is always available:"<sup>40</sup> 'if only we would ...' (fill in the blank: get sober, get educated, get a job, get married, get religion). The moment of transformation with this assemblage piece came when I realized that, from my neighbours' perspective, I had become their Grand Inquisitor. I was the external eye judging their way of being in the world, and finding them coming up short; they did not measure up to meet my standards of behaviour. It was a moment of realizing with no small horror how easily the oppressed become the oppressors.

"The eyes of others our prisons, their thoughts our cages."<sup>41</sup>



*I am the Keeper of all things lost*

*I am the One who holds all things precious  
wrenched from the middle of our lives  
I am the Keeper of all things pried  
out of clenched fists and hearts and mouths*

*I am the One who holds all the things  
that we would trade our eye teeth back for;  
For all the things whispered fervently  
to have the chance to do over one more time:  
please please please*

*I am the Keeper of all things bartered and martyred:  
All things cut in kind for payment;  
Your bargains, not Mine*

*I am the One who knows by heart  
the silent secret sealed behind every scar  
the One who witnesses every misgiving and transgression  
And the One who holds the unbearable abyss of their loss*

*I am the One*

## The Piece Keepers

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again.  
-- T.S Eliot, "Four Quartets"

In the ever-shifting landscapes of our lives, even the mountains are moving. Nothing is static, constant, or guaranteed; and moving through the progression of our lives is to experience a series of losses. From the time we are born, we begin to lose; we lose innocence, we lose teeth, we lose time, we lose face, we lose faith, we lose our bearings, we lose our selves. But most of the significant irretrievable things that we colloquially say we have 'lost' are never really lost at all. We do not lose integral pieces of our lives and our selves the way that we absentmindedly leave books behind us on the bus, or voluntarily abandon them like the unclaimed lunches in the office fridge, or not even notice they are missing from the fabric of our lives like the plethora of one-handed mittens multiplying in the church lost and found box.

Most of the precious and priceless pieces of our lives that we cavalierly claim we have lost, have been taken from our lives prematurely, before we are ever ready to give them up, because most of us would never willingly surrender them. We would never voluntarily relinquish them lightly from our lives, never knowingly release them by letting them accidentally or carelessly slip out of our grasp. Most of the pieces of ourselves that we lose are ripped out of clenched fists, fingers painfully pried off one by one, unwittingly traded away in desperate bad bargains made to keep the peace, to keep it together, to keep going, to keep sane, to keep breathing, to keep surviving. "Losing" something seems to imply that somehow we had some control over the loss, when the reality of profound loss is that it is always beyond our human control.

There is a deep sense of grief in consciously acknowledging the loss of one's authentic self. And there is no small horror in awakening to the realization that we have done this to ourselves. To know that whatever particular life circumstances caused us to slice off and offer up viable pieces of ourselves, ultimately we are the ones that have suffocated the internal voice until we can no longer hear it, numbing ourselves until we can no longer feel the protests of its living dismemberment. This assemblage piece was created out a need to imagine the sacrificed pieces of our disconnected self in a safe and protected place, with someone carefully watching over it until we can re-create a felt connection. Within the creative cycle, this is a fallow place; a time of mourning and waiting for new life.





*SingingCrowWoman*

*I am the One*

*I am the One who dwells in darkness*

*I am the One who sees in shades of shadow  
with rods and cones of shining black and grey*

*I am the One who unravels all  
rhythmically picking and pulling apart  
all that has been neatly composed  
In day*

*I am the One tending and turning the compost  
Churning and stirring the sweet rotting decay  
Patiently minding the matter of dissolution  
Of all that is*

*SingingSilverMagpieWoman*

*Kuaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrkkk!*

*I am the One!*

*I am the One who travels under black and white zen wings  
to the darkest core of life*

*I am the One who carries the promise  
of iridescent light into the forest of the night  
And returns the glint of dawn into the dusk*

*I am the One who emerges full-fledged out of the box  
Unabashed to show her brazen face to the Sun  
I am the One whose voice will not slip silent  
Whose wild pagan heart will not be caged*

*I am the One tethered to darkness  
Bound to the One who will not be denied*

*We are the One*

## SingingSisterCrowWomen

This assemblage piece is the underworld place of dissolution. It is also a fallow place of waiting; the winter place within the sacred creative cycle where nothing seems to be happening on the surface. But much is taking place underground; out of sight and beyond conscious knowing.

This is the underworld place of the disintegration of self in my World Three experience. This is the place of the inexplicable sense of internal dissipation within World Three that Jones' describes: "when the day is over, the tedious routines are quieted, the family is in bed, and the cat is put out, then sleeplessness at the kitchen table takes on a persistent ache. It seems bottomless, for it has no apparent reason, aimed at nothing in particular."<sup>42</sup> It also seems beyond the linear dimensions of language to accurately begin to convey the depth of the abyss and the darkness of the insidious all-encompassing emptiness that descends upon World Three like a thick blanket of fog at the end of the day; enveloping and dissolving any illusions of a solid sense of a self that have been carefully built up during the daylight hours, back into the absolute zero of nothingness.

This is the awakening; the necessary but excruciating and terrifying "dark night of the soul" experience of feeling into the edges of the vacuous void left behind by the dissipation of one's self. It is the felt experience of the persistent gnawing at our insides that will not let us rest, and lets us know that something is terribly wrong even though everything looks fine on the outside. It is this pervasive sense of the annihilation of self that leads World Three to keep searching for connection and significance.

This is also the dismantling place of creative deconstruction within the sacred creative cycle. Through many years of encountering this passive energy of disillusionment, I have learned not to engage with anything creative in the evening, when I am tired or overwhelmed. I have learned to put creative work out of sight at night, to preserve it from dissipating and disappearing under the darkest consuming shadow of the creative force.

The unexpected piece of this assemblage was the emergence of the second figure herself. The original title for this piece was “Spirit and Soul;” the two figures are connected, and balance each other. The spirit of creative work cannot hold without the sacred container of soul.



*I am the One*

*I am the One who rises vertically  
Vertebra by vertebra  
Awakened out of ashes  
by your blinding sticks and stones*

*I am the One who risks karmic incineration  
in flash points of righteous Pentecost  
A volcanic baptism  
of red-hot lava tongues on fire*

*Burning eyes  
Burning words  
Burning worlds*

*I am the One who protects the preyed  
Who protests the silent sacrifice  
Of unseen voices*

*I am the One who rights the scales from your eyes  
The One who turns the tables of despair  
And makes you the hunted*

*I am the One*

## The Eco-Warrior

The gospel of light is the crossroads of --indolence, or action.  
Be ignited, or be gone.

--Mary Oliver, "What I Have Learned So Far"

W. Paul Jones writes that “the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. It is out of indifference that one must be shocked.”<sup>43</sup> In World Three, it is the familiar comfort of our apathy and inertia that we need to be shocked out of, and into, action. Jones also writes that “When [a World Three] game-plan for filling emptiness is stripped of its pink bows, one is awakened to rage. Only then is the carefully groomed passivity invaded, to reveal, behind aborted assertiveness, a true self.”<sup>44</sup> This assemblage piece is that place of the underlying fire raging in World Three that serves to reveal our true identity to ourselves, and to the world.

There is a great energizing force that comes with rage that moves us from apathy into action. Rage instantly clarifies, cutting through the muddled murkiness of cultured social passivity, and politically-correct ambiguity. And as W. Paul Jones writes, “Individuals ripe for such rage today are legion--women, ethnics, native Americans, poor whites, gays, the Third World, the aged.”<sup>45</sup> As an aging ‘Third World’ white woman, I seem to encounter my rage more often; there seems to be more in the world to rage against as I grow older, and less self-conscious concern over being seen raging. The overwhelming force of unleashed rage, however, is still a place where I have the least experience in handling, and one of the most difficult shadow places for me to own. It is

far too easy to slip into a place of vengeful and self-righteous abuse from this place of rage, and the uncontrollable rage that I have inflicted on those closest to me that instantly erodes the thin veneer of “carefully groomed passivity” is not part of the spiritually-enlightened tolerance of all others that I would like to embody and emulate in the world.

Jones describes that the “agony of obsessio resides often in the fact that their re-remembrance threatens to evoke the deep precariousness of the first five years of life.”<sup>46</sup>

When I was five years old, we lived in a big white house in a small town in New York State, about an hour’s drive out of Buffalo. My beloved cat Whitey had just given birth to her first litter of three or four kittens. One afternoon I was walking home, and saw some older boys standing in the road in front of my house. They were throwing stones, killing the kittens who were outside in the front yard. I remember telling the boys that those were my kittens, and one of the boys turning and laughing at me. I do not remember what happened after that; I would like to hope that I screamed and yelled at them to stop, shaming and inflicting pain on the murderers, but that is more likely a reconstructive act of adult active imagination than the accurate reliability of a five year old’s memory.

I also do not consciously know what lasting effect that traumatic experience would have on a five-year old child; on her ability to trust, to rely on, and to make sense of the world as an ordered and rational place to be. But I do know that even after a lifetime, recalling this event as an adult more than forty years later, is always enough to instantly engulf me in that same pit of overwhelming despair and utter helpless futility at not being able to control or stop the unbelievable event happening before my eyes. And I believe that this pivotal obsessio event lies at the root of the consuming despair and murderous rage that I still experience when I witness unimaginable arbitrary cruelty and

the senseless destruction of life on the planet. It has fuelled my life-long passion for an eco-spirituality and my lioness fierceness in protecting the other voiceless and innocent creatures living in my front yard.

I have fought many battles in my neighbourhood since that event over the rights of the nonhuman creatures to co-exist in my yard. I have physically and verbally defended the rights of the ants, the squirrels, the crows, the dandelions, and the trees to live on this small suburban section of the planet, declaring my outraged intolerance and waging war with my murderous neighbours bent on eradicating these innocent Outcast beings from their civic neighbourhood, as they proudly extol the lethal virtues of extinct leg-hold traps and the poisonous “Doktor Doom” in the killing fields of their backyards to me. I have also personally taken on the drug houses and the addicts in our neighbourhood; confronting and actively participating in shutting down the individuals and gangs involved in drug trafficking and illegal activities on my street.

These defensive acts of protection were often initiated by the motivating force of rage; forcing me to consciously take a stand and clearly be seen and heard in no uncertain terms, when no one else would come forward. In yet another alchemical example where the healing element is contained within the wound of the obsessio itself, it would seem that my World Three obsessio of invisible futility carefully concealed under the feminine guise of pink bows is effectively incinerated in the refiner’s fire of murderous rage towards the injustice of other Outcasts without voices or power, revealing a true self.





*I am the One*

*I am the One who carries the seed of you  
the fragile sea urchin germ of your becoming*

*I am the One Present at every birth  
In every new born breath*

*I am the One who bears all things  
All dreams dared and incarnate  
All whispered hopes set in motion*

*I am the One who stands firm for all those  
Foolish enough to believe*

*I am the One*

## Our Lady of the Unused Life

But you might wear that blue dress  
And you might draw me in...

--Susan Crowe, "Blue Dress"

The concept for this assemblage piece came from the novel *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* by Diane Schoemperlen. It is the story of a contemporary single woman visited by the Virgin Mary, who comes to spend a week in her home. After unpacking Mary's suitcase, they sit together and unpin the milagros pinned to Mary's dress; two women sitting and sorting hundreds of silver milagros. Diane Schoemperlen's word images of Mary's skirt, heavy and jangling, covered in silver charms and the whispered silent prayers of millions of unseen people, have always stayed with me, and became the creative inspiration for the physical incarnation of this assemblage piece.

This unfinished assemblage piece represents the place of the unused life within World Three. She is the creative energy in the perpetual potential of becoming that never ends for the inhabitants of World Three. The realm of creative potential presents a paradox in World Three: while the creative function itself resurrects and regenerates a living-giving connection to self, it can also become a fatal phantasmal trap that prevents us from ever making any choices and keeps us from incarnating into the world of substance.

I believe this place of generating creative potential is what leads the inhabitants of World Three to become what Jones' refers to as "Robin Hoods of the spirit...the lyric, childlike, animal-loving earth mystics who turn maturity on end."<sup>47</sup> That same sense of childlike wonder, awe, and playfulness that enables us to see the creative potential in every thing, and that is essential to the regeneration of the creative cycle, can hold World

Three hostage in a fantasy state of perpetual possibility.

For as Jones describes, “Choice entails nonchoices, and each realization entails possibilities forever lost.”<sup>48</sup> This assemblage piece is also the holding place of all the unchosen choices left behind; the roads not taken, the career paths not followed, the affairs never consummated, the invitations not accepted, the phone calls not returned, the projects left unfinished, the wine left unopened in the bottle.

It is through the process of making choices that we incarnate into the world; birthing from the ethereal world of possibility into the concrete world of matter. The transformation with this assemblage piece came in the unexpected realization that for all the past World Three wistful and sentimental sadness for the choices left undone, there is also an emerging sense of understanding for choices made, and a growing appreciation for the effort required to create a handmade life, painstakingly and imperfectly assembled piece by piece. There is a deepening spiritual maturity in the acceptance of our human limitations of finite time and space, and an awakening possibility of forgiveness in the dawning awareness that perhaps there never were any inherently right or wrong choices, no predetermined right answers to blindly guess, no preset code of fate to follow; only choices courageously made in the fallible context of not knowing.



*I am the One*

*I am the One Eternal*

*I am the One who carries in the Spring  
And the One who ushers out the Fall*

*I am the promise of the new summer bud on the twig  
And the certainty of its fallow winter death*

*I am the insatiable devouring devastation of destruction  
And the delicate redemption of rebirth*

*I am the Sower of the seeds  
And the Reaper of the harvest*

*I am the One beyond time  
beating out the solar cycles of the seasons  
and the underground lunar rhythms of the Universe*

*I am the One*

## My Garden Kicks Ass

The epiphania in World Three is rooted in the task of incarnation; of the felt sense of self being birthed into the physical world. Jones writes, “What is craved is a ‘God’ to touch, smell, see, taste--and only then, hear. For some, it is sufficient that the self become united with the earth in its organic rhythm of birth, growth, and death.”<sup>49</sup> Nowhere is the healing experience of physical incarnation into the world of matter more likely to occur for me than in my small suburban garden.

My studies in theology have afforded me many opportunities to explore and to name my World Three passion for eco-spirituality. Several experiences throughout the MTS program have helped me to process and to define my relationship to the natural world; from exegetical papers to a weekend workshop in Banff with the grande dame of deep ecology herself, Joanna Macy. Most of my lived experience of the natural world has come, however, not through the work of short-term ecological projects or the academic research of eco-theology, nor even sporadic retreats to magnificent tourist destinations, but rather through working in my own front yard.

It is in my garden where I have cultivated the spiritual task of being present in the world that is the foundation for healing the obsessio of World Three. It has been through the mundane and repetitious physical tasks of watering and weeding that I have learned to stop listening to abstract busyness, and to pay attention to the immediate and concrete task in front of me. It is in my small garden where I have most often experienced the wonder and awe of creation, witnessed the miracle of rebirth and regeneration, and seen and felt the immediate effects of the labour of my hands. There, I have learned to be patient following the slower pace of the rhythms of the seasons, to be grateful for the rest

afforded by the darkness of a frigid prairie winter, and to anticipate the hope contained within the ever-faithful promise of “next year.”

It is also in my city yard where I have sown the seeds of relationship to the larger community of the external world, and especially to the nonhuman creatures who share this tiny pocket of the planet with me. I know the thundering sound of the squirrel performing his death-defying race across on the trapeze of telephone wires at the same time every morning to collect his daily cache of nuts. I know the impatient screams of the jays madly bobbing their blue heads and impatiently hopping side to side from one foot to the other as they call for their breakfast. I know the thump of the crows’ feet awkwardly landing on the wooden platform looking for peanuts, the call of the magpie family announcing their arrival, and the incessant squabbling of the turf wars between all of them. I know where to look in winter for the snow hares’ barely discernable outline under the giant spruce tree, where the ants have established their enormous underground colonies in the summer, and where the sunflowers will volunteer to seed themselves next spring.

Most of all, my garden has reminded me over and over of my human place in the universal cycles of life and death. When our home was flooded in an unprecedented hail storm in July of 2004, I watched helplessly as the garden was totally decimated in a matter of minutes. The torrential hail shredded the plants to the ground; the violent destruction seemed unsalvageable. And yet, it was only a matter of a few weeks before I unexpectedly began to notice tiny green shoots appearing; emerging from plants that I believed had no hope of recovery. The garden gloriously showed me once again in no uncertain terms that I could neither stop the destruction, nor cause the regeneration; that



there is a life force that exists beyond me and operates outside of any human-centered construct or control.

It is through the ordinary small tasks of working in my garden that I have learned the larger alchemical lessons of a living a spiritual life; that the ubiquitous fecund matter of creating relationship to my self and to the world are present here in front of me, and that the eco-spiritual practice of cultivating a kinder, more reciprocal relationship to the earth is immediately available rather than somewhere more remote and exotic. My garden continually reminds me of what I am responsible for in this world, of what I actually can control, and that at best, I can participate with this universal life force and co-create to be the ‘hands of God’ on earth.

This assemblage piece is about humbly acknowledging and respecting the awesome destructive and regenerative feminine power of the natural world that exists beyond any specific religious dogma or individual control. This is the place where the eco-theological ‘rubber hits the road;’ the place where all abstract theological discussion kneels and pays homage to a deeper and older way of being in the world. The title “My Garden Kicks Ass”<sup>50</sup> came after the piece was finished, inspired from a greeting card by Anne Taintor. The title speaks to me of the contrast between the general notion of suburban gardening as a genteel hobby for housewives and a pleasant pastime for retirees, and the majesty and mystery of the life-giving and life-taking power of the natural world.



*I am the One*

*I am the One who swims upstream  
against the current  
with the Odds*

*I am the One following the ancient voice of an underground river  
driven by archaic rhythms pounding in a limbic brain*

*I am the One migrating past the potent potential hooks of memory  
past plastic tricks and shiny slippery traps of glittering watery illusion  
Past the deadly distracting siren of could have would have should have  
the fatal never-ending replaying of what might have been...*

*Do not turn your head*

*I am the One on my way home*

## Swimming Upstream: On My Way Home

The experience of swimming upstream, moving against the current flow of the mainstream, is the lived experience of the Outcast in World Three. We do not run in packs, and we do not follow in herds. And as Jones describes, “that which seems sufficient for others leaves us gasping.”<sup>51</sup>

In an Art and Spirituality course that I attended at St. Stephen’s, the instructor, Dr. Madeline Rugh, told the story of a border collie who, despite given the more conventional alternative of a goat, would consistently choose to herd a donkey. I have spent much time, much too much time, examining and despairing over my own border collie consciousness that refuses to follow the conventional choices presented to me. I have spent much of my life worshipping the trail of the elusive holy goat; trying to genuinely want to want goats in the way that others seem to, when it is always one lone surefooted donkey that obstinately refuses to walk down that well-trod path, who will invariably lead me off the beaten track, away from the crowds, and down to “the smallest sign on the darkest street.”<sup>52</sup> That faithful four-legged familiar continues to remind me that we don’t always get to choose our passions; sometimes they choose and herd us.

“Home” in World Three is, of course, an internal state of being; it is the felt experience of the reunion with one’s alienated self that is most often experienced as an encounter with the divine. As a child, our family moved every two or three years, a pattern that continued throughout most of my adult life and contributed to the internal sense of outcast; “home” was simply wherever we happened to be. My first felt experience of truly being “at home” did not occur until I was in my forties; a sacred

moment of grace, of absolute peace and profound knowing that “God’s in...heaven -- All’s right with the world.”<sup>53</sup>

And yet, like geese following some ancient instinctual migratory cycle, I still feel the overwhelming urge every three years to pack up everything I own, dismantle everything that has finally been assembled in its place, and disrupt my life by all starting all over again somewhere else. I still compulsively search for that next home, scanning real estate listings the way other people read horoscopes and weather forecasts, looking for that perfect dream home that exists within the imaginal realm of potential possibilities; still searching for an external remedy to the internal spiritual malaise of World Three homesickness.



*I am the One*

*I am the One who dives deep*

*I am the One who breathes and moves  
beneath the surface;  
I am the One who comes alive  
underneath the movement of the waves*

*I am the One who knows the heartbeat of the tide  
pulsing against her skin;  
the One who feels the lunar ebb and flow  
waxing and waning in the breath of her body*

*I am the One at home  
In the rhythm of the rocking undulations  
of the soft sealskin-soulskin beings*

*I am the One who remembers the iridescent reflection  
of her own limbic scales and fins  
I am the One who longs for full body immersion  
that no symbolic dipping of metaphorical fingers and toes can mimic*

*I am the One who surfaces steeped in the memory  
of another way of being  
I am the One who cannot breathe beached  
in the parched air of your world;  
the One who cannot negotiate its sharp rational edges  
nor navigate the shallow confines of its flat-line terrain*

*I am the One resting on the bottom*

*I am the One*

## The Mermaid

This is the place of fulfillment to the emptiness of World Three's obsessio. It is the felt experience of the internal reconciliation with self that is experienced as the divine encounter; the sensory experience of coming home to oneself. This is the place where my physical vision shifts and my body softens, the place of exhalation where colours deepen and words become vibrant, and where everything; every object and being, every movement and gesture, every dream and memory, is connected and imbued with significance. It is being fully present in the moment of the "pregnant Now," the shift in consciousness from *kronos* to *kairos*, and as much as I adamantly resist stepping into the creative cycle, this is the place that I most long for when I am not there.

I chose this representation of the mermaid because she is older; she is not Disney's pubescent Ariel. This mermaid has spent much time underwater, tingeing her hair a subtle shade of green; for she does not live in the shallow end. Neither does she multitask; she single-mindedly follows one thread all the way to its end, travelling deeply, fully immersed in the process and trusting her way through the deep. She is at home breathing on the bottom; there is a deep sense of peace and rest here after the long and arduous struggle to finally get back to one's self.

Most importantly, however, she knows her way back, because there is a real danger contained within the creative cycle to become permanently lost in the underworld; the addictive pull to stay within the unconscious bliss of the sacred encounter is highly dangerous. This is the sensory experience of euphoric well-being that every addictive behaviour seeks to replicate, but living in the full force of the creative encounter is never easy nor without substantial risk and significant personal cost. Many of the most creative



artists throughout history have danced too close to the divine source of creativity and have been destroyed by the power of the creative spirit.

In their book *The Maiden King*, Marion Woodman and Robert Bly discuss the strong physical and psychic container that is required to hold the creative force, which they describe as the spirit of the mythical firebird:

Can you imagine the presence in the body that is required to support the influx of spirit, when spirit is the firebird? Saul, on the road to Damascus to kill Christians, was knocked down and blinded when the firebird visited him. Many artists, poets, and musicians are visited by a firebird and some do not survive: Emily Bronte, Sylvia Plath, Dylan Thomas, Mark Rothke, Janis Joplin.<sup>54</sup>

When I began with the “I Am” reflection for this piece, I believed that this place of flow and creative bliss was the final epiphania for the obsessio of World Three. It was not until I had followed the reflection to the end that I realized this is only one piece of the epiphania. Tom Crockett describes the two parts within the sacred creative cycle in his book *The Artist Inside*:

The sacred creative cycle has two arcs. The descending arc is external. It is the work of our hands as we manifest spirit in material form. The ascending arc is internal. It is the journey for inspiration and direct contact with spirit. Both are necessary, and both can lead us into art as a spiritual practice. People tend to have an affinity for engaging the sacred creative cycle in either its descending or ascending arcs.<sup>55</sup>

This assemblage piece represents the internal arc that Crockett describes: the “direct contact with spirit.” The much more arduous part of the creative cycle for me has always been the journey back from this place; bringing back the sacred and ephemeral pieces of that numinous encounter with the divine and giving them form and substance in the material world. The ancient alchemists described this transformation of birthing spirit into matter as “the difference between mercury and lead,”<sup>56</sup> and the process of

transforming the numinous encounter into the leaden stuff of words often feels like carrying balls of silver mercury back in my hands. By the time I reach the surface, most of it has dissipated into a million tiny little irretrievable droplets between my fingers.

The mermaid lives at the *temenos* of two worlds; between the fluid underworld of water, and the ethereal aboveworld of air. She is not equipped with human legs and feet to walk upright on the earth, nor to survive in the flesh and bone world of gravity and matter. She resides at home in the lyrical world of myth, fairy tales, and imagination. The healing of the obsessio of World Three is ultimately to incarnate into the substantial world of matter; for the invisible to be seen, and the silent to be heard in the material world. As W. Paul Jones writes, the healing in World Three is: “to take up your bed and walk.”<sup>57</sup> The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh describes it this way: “...the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth.”<sup>58</sup> For the emptiness of World Three to be truly healed, I would have to keep going. The journey to wholeness through the landscape of World Three would require me to travel deeper and farther than I had travelled before, for the final leg of the journey leads full circle back into the shadow of the unconscious, back into darkness of the unknown.

My initial expectation of the experience of epiphania was an expectation of enlightenment, and euphoric bliss; an ‘epiphany’ moment where the struggling ends and all is finally revealed. But because the natural path of creativity is always cyclical, continually moving outwards from a quickening, through its zenith of expression and emptying back into stillness, as Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes states, “...creativity can never be paradisiacal, it can never be utopia.”<sup>59</sup> And being seen and heard for inhabitants of World Three will never be bliss. It is a dangerous life-threatening choice between death

in the safety of invisibility or death by the vulnerability of visibility. In the end, it is never really a choice; as the instinctive life force continually carries us forward toward wholeness and healing, until it becomes more of an effort to hide than to risk living an authentic life.



*I am the One  
I am the One who speaks  
hands shaking  
voice quaking  
Cutting golden teeth on every tentative word*

*I am the One who walks upright  
every hesitant step  
barefoot tendons on broken glass*

*I am the One retrieving  
Ephemeral words culled  
from seaweeds of mercurial visions*

*I am the One met in grace  
embracing circles of unseen hands  
with untold voices  
Cheering legions of one*

*I am the One stooping to pick  
up  
dropped  
pieces of memory,  
lost images of story  
collecting and keeping  
their beating hearts alive*

*I am the One who is free  
from the prison of your vision, from the cage of your words  
I am the One who is free to write  
to speak to sing to move to dream  
I am the One who is free to be*

*I am the One who is free*

*I am the One who is*

*I am the One who*

*I am the One*

*I am*

*I*

Wearing My Long Tail Feathers

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?  
The world would split open.

-- Muriel Rukeyser, *Kathe Kollwitz*

## Chapter Four: Conclusion

### Leaving the House of the Lord

There were several epiphania experiences during the process of bringing the contents of the assemblage pieces into consciousness. The first experience occurred when I read W. Paul Jones' book, *Theological Worlds*. Although I had encountered Jones' work during classroom presentations in the MTS Program, I had not actually read *Theological Worlds* until after the assemblage pieces were complete. Reading Jones' descriptions of Theological World Three was an epiphania in itself; a healing experience of being seen and known in the world, and I am deeply grateful for the gift of the conceptual framework that *Theological Worlds* has provided as an overlay in order to map this series of assemblage pieces within a theological landscape.

The second epiphania occurred during the "I Am the One" reflections. "I Am the One" is the starting point of a written answer to the unstated but implied question to the image, "Who are you?"<sup>60</sup> Until I began the writing process, I had assumed that the assemblage pieces that I was creating were, in some form, parts of myself; much as the characters in a dream may be interpreted as different aspects of one's personality. During the writing process, however, I realized that the "I" in the "I Am the One" was not me, but that I was encountering something much bigger; something much deeper and beyond the small "I" of me. It was a significant transcendent and powerfully-humblng experience of encountering the sacred behind the images; an altered state of consciousness where the demarcation between external reality and the internal reality of the imagination blur. The kataphoric experience of the divine encounter through the assemblage pieces did not so much answer my question of "So What?," as to shut it down

and reveal the question for what it was; a small “i” ego-based dismissal of the profound and holy. Recognizing that I was standing in the presence of the sacred was a Job-like moment of realizing the human arrogance of demanding answers from God.

We cannot create the sacred: “Ultimately the holy exists entirely apart from any human control. It demands its own freedom to chose.”<sup>61</sup> But we can create images and symbols that remind us and point to those experiences and places where we have encountered the sacred. Storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estes describes *descansos* in her work *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. *Descansos* are those crosses and memorials that mark the place on the roadside where something significant has happened; something “that altered that person’s life and the lives of other persons forever.”<sup>62</sup> They represent a place of transformation where someone has transcended this material world and entered the world of spirit. These altered-trophy assemblages are my *descansos*; my way of marking where something significant has happened in my spiritual pilgrimage that has altered my life; a place where the sacred has transcended the spiritual world and entered into the material. “This moment of transcendence makes every collected object, be it a matchbox or a martyr’s fingernail, valuable. Every collected item is, to some extent, a totem.”<sup>63</sup> It is this transcendent power of images that enables us to enter the mercurial world of imagination that makes them sacred. Through the inner realm of imagination, we can bring back our images of the holy and give them form in the material world; finding, arranging, and gluing them down to be seen and known in the world of substance. Ultimately, it is only through the power of imagination that we have access to our human images of God:



Mystics, prophets, and visionaries of the different religions have realized that the formless God can assume form in the human imagination. In the absence of all form there is no God to worship, but any God that is captured in a specific form is an idol and not the God who should be worshipped. Within the imagination, however, God is without image, yet appears in the human mind by means of multiple, varied images. No one sees God in exactly the same way.<sup>64</sup>

Through the transcendent power of imagination we can give our human ways of experiencing the sacred form and substance.

“Above all else, sacred place is ‘storied place,’”<sup>65</sup> and as in Chaucer’s example of the theme of pilgrimage in his literary work *The Canterbury Tales*,<sup>66</sup> the telling of the tale of this pilgrimage has revealed the teller. And much more than I have created this series of assemblage art, the spiritual journey of assembling and reflecting on this art series has created me. The conscious process of piecing together the images and the stories of their significance has assembled a deeper understanding of my self and of the sacred. For as Matthew Fox describes, “Only art as meditation reminds people so that they will never forget that the most beautiful thing a potter produces... is the potter.”<sup>67</sup>

During the MTS program, I had the opportunity to participate in a labyrinth workshop with Dr. Lauren Artress at a retreat center in Edmonton. It was a pivotal experience, with many epiphania moments. On the last afternoon of the workshop, we had time to walk one more labyrinth, and I went outside to walk the outdoor labyrinth at the retreat center. As I got closer to the labyrinth site, I saw a line of fellow *pelligrini* waiting their turn to enter the labyrinth. I kept on walking; past the line-up of people, past the labyrinth, past the retreat center, and I knew then in my heart that as valuable and deeply healing as the labyrinth had been for me as a spiritual tool, I was free. I knew that I no longer needed to stay within the fixed and contained lines of the labyrinth structure;

that I could carry on walking in my own way on my own path. As I continued walking down the road, a song spontaneously came into my head, and I found myself singing the words, “leaving the house of the lord” out loud as I walked.

The paradox inherent within any given paradigm for the inhabitants of Theological World Three is that eventually it is the structure of the paradigm itself that becomes too confining, and it becomes the next container that we need to grow out of and step beyond. The completion of this Work of Art thesis leads me full circle back to the beginning of this assemblage series: “working blind,” poised on the brink of a new threshold, about to leave the secluded shelter of the porch afforded by the familiarity of the academic world, and begin the next phase of my creative journey of becoming out in the world beyond the classrooms of St. Stephen’s.

I do not know yet where the next piece of my pilgrimage will lead me; only that I have assembled more pieces of self-connection and understanding to pack in my trunk and help guide me this time. I still do not have all the answers of the puzzle that will unlock the mystery of life, but I am on my way to assembling them, piece by piece. Like the mystery of the elementary game, the answer was within me all along, carried in the initials of my given name, and in the entelechy of becoming who I was created to be in the world.

“Selfhood is an ongoing birthing, an event in progress, a process of being led out-never finished, never totally determined -- a project always in the making.”<sup>68</sup>

My pilgrimage towards wholeness is still on-going, and the series of assemblage pieces presented here is far from complete. Each of the individual assemblage pieces has generated new concepts for additional assemblage pieces already in varying stages of

production. Even the eleven assemblage pieces within this series are not static pieces; they continue to evolve, with the addition of new found pieces and alterations. Like the inhabitants of World Three themselves, the process of assemblage art itself is also an ongoing creative work of perpetual becoming.

In one of the Art and Spirituality courses I attended at St. Stephen's College, we were invited to create a "spirit house" out of modelling clay. Most of the students' clay houses looked like miniature caves or bird houses; small enclosed containers where spirit might be enticed to enter and inhabit. All except for one student; her spirit house was flat and open with several upright pillars, somewhat resembling the structure of the ancient Stonehenge monument. The student described that in her experience, spirit flowed everywhere, in between and around the pillars, and could not be contained. And the instructor Dr. Madeline Rugh replied that, in that case, love was the container.

The journey to selfhood represented in this series of assemblage pieces has taken me beyond my known paradigms of spirituality, theology, and creativity; "lured forth" by the spiritual container of love. Through the inner journey of this visual pilgrimage, I have experienced the enabling power of creative transformation and the World Three epiphania of "love filled to overflowing" in order to find, sort, and assemble what rightfully belongs to me; reconstructing hands that can create a sense of self, and feet that will carry me forward on my journey in the world. And I am learning to love the gifts of the Outcast, with its unique perspective of living in the temenos between the worlds of spirit and matter, at the intersection between the profane and sacred imagination. It is the world of the shaman, the artist, and the theologian. And as Jones describes, "In the end, two things are clear. One can only be loved into love. And one cannot love others if one

does not love oneself.”<sup>69</sup> Robert A Johnson concludes, “our love of self is also the divine love: our search for the ultimate meaning, for our souls, for the revelation of God.”<sup>70</sup>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Sanford, "Pilgrims in Search of Silence," *Edmonton Journal*, February 27, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Joan D. Chittester, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men* (Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 1998), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 35.

<sup>13</sup> Sanford, "Pilgrims in Search of Silence."

<sup>14</sup> For a thorough discussion of Cornell's life and work, see, for example, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, Richard Vine, and Robert Lehrman, *Joseph Cornell : Shadowplay...Eterniday* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003); Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (Toronto: Penguin Books of Canada, 1992); Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (Boston: MFA Publications, 1997); and Diane Waldman, *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Crockett, *The Artist Inside: A Spiritual Guide to Cultivating Your Creative Self* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 157.

<sup>16</sup> When I began this project in 2009, there had been two Work of Art theses submitted in the MTS program; Shirley Serviss, a writer, wrote poetry for her thesis, "Un/conditional Love" (1997), and Nancy Chegus, a musician, composed church music for her thesis, "Music as Liturgy: Singing Our Emerging Theology" (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Sante Fe: Bear & Company, Inc., 1983), 185.

<sup>19</sup> The Reuse Center is a City of Edmonton initiative within its Waste Management Branch. It accepts donations of items from the general public that could be re-used for arts and crafts and makes them available to organizations and individuals for a nominal fee.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Alan Ecclestone, quoted in Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Crockett, *The Artist Inside*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> For a description of the feminine task of discernment in the Russian fairy tale “Baba Yaga,” see Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 99.

<sup>29</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 139.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>32</sup> The term “imaginal trackers” originated with art therapists Straja Linder-King and Madeline Rugh to describe this internal process of following the elusive trail of self in the signs and symbols of dreams, images, and imagination. World Soul: Art, Nature and Spirit, St. Stephen’s College Course, July 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, *The Maiden King: The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 46.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 150.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 43.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 76.



<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>41</sup> Virginia Woolf. BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2010.  
[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/v/viriginiawo\\_147093.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/v/viriginiawo_147093.html), accessed August 23, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>47</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Taintor, "My Garden Kicks Ass," *Vintage Revisted*.

<sup>51</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Laura Smith, "So Close to My Knees," *Vanity Pressed-A Collection* (CornerMuse Productions Inc., 1994).

<sup>53</sup> Robert Browning, "Pippa Passes," quoted in M.H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, vol.2, 6th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993), 1186.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, *The Maiden King: The Reunion of the Masculine and Feminine*, 200.

<sup>55</sup> Tom Crockett, *The Artist Inside*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Edward F. Edinger, *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1985), 86.

<sup>57</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>59</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *The Creative Fire*, (Boulder: Sounds True, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> For a written description of the “I Am the One” exercise, see Seena B. Frost, *SoulCollage: An Intuitive Collage Process for Individuals and Groups* (Santa Cruz: Hanford Mead Publishers, Inc., 2001), 75.

<sup>61</sup> Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press), 21.

<sup>62</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 365.

<sup>63</sup> Phillipp Blom, *To Have and To Hold*, quoted in Lynne Perrella, *Art Making and Studio Spaces* (Beverly, Massachusetts: Quarry Books, 2009) 149.

<sup>64</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, quoted in Adam Gaynor, *Images of God* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1999), 1X.

<sup>65</sup> Beldane C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in M.H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, vol.1, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 79.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew Fox, *Original Blessings*, 192.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 142.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>70</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983) 194.

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