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NAME OF AUTHOR:

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TITLE OF THESIS:

BROKENNESS INFUSED IN A MOTHER'S HEART:
THE ART OF LIVING WITH THE SACREDNESS OF LIFE

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS IS PRESENTED:

MASTER OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SPIRITUALITY
(ART THERAPY SPECIALIZATION)

YEAR DEGREE GRANTED: 2014

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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

BROKENNESS INFUSED IN A MOTHER'S HEART:
THE ART OF LIVING WITH THE SACREDNESS OF LIFE

by

Maria Hutton Aldcorn

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SPIRITUALITY
(ART THERAPY SPECIALIZATION)

Edmonton, Alberta

Convocation: 2014

[Insert certification page]

DEDICATION

My precious son Gerard Michael

My soul and lifetime partner Colin William Shuckburgh Aldcorn

ABSTRACT

This paper charts the process of moving through the trauma of the loss of my adult child to murder. A heuristic in-depth self-inquiry methodology complements the phenomenological art therapy process I engaged in to accomplish this work. A depth of peace in brokenness emerged from dialogue with the divine, expressed through art, writing, and the images that arrived in nature. Art therapy facilitated a recognition and embrace of the coexistence of life and death in daily existence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Albert James and June Baker

Ms Winnifred Josephine Hutton

Thomas Knox and Vivian Heather Aldcorn

Susan Hendren

The Havin Family: Dianna, Mark, Mandy Samara, and Phillip Thomas

Trevor Cole Shuckburgh

Barbara Ann Baker and Holly Grace Aldcorn

Noella Poirier and Suzanne Desjarins Shimoon

Dr. Jane Simington - everlasting gratitude.

My extended Hutterite family - for your continual love.

Dr. Winston Wing – my soul friend for always-thank you!

My thesis supervisor, Dr. Pat Allen, who held the space, sacredly, and continued to have faith and trust in me. A very soulful and heartfelt – Thank you!

With enormous gratitude to Dr. Margaret B. Clark, and Dr. John C. Carr, and to the faculty and associate faculty of St Stephens College, and my colleagues.

With heartfelt gratitude to Margaret Whibley, for the person you are and for the 'vocational' editing gifts that you brought to my thesis.

All my relations!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This paper charts the process of moving through the trauma of the loss of my adult child to murder. A heuristic, in-depth, self-inquiry methodology complements the phenomenological art therapy process in which I engaged to accomplish this work. A depth of peace in brokenness emerged from dialogue with the divine, expressed through art, writing, and the images that arrived in nature. Art therapy facilitated a recognition and embrace of the coexistence of life and death in daily existence.

Research Question

How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart?

Methodology

I understand that a traditional Master's thesis consists of an orderly progression of sections arranged in logical sequence. This thesis, however, operates on three interconnected levels. On one level, it is a scholarly enquiry into the role of art therapy in attaining the awareness of wholeness. On another, it is a phenomenological and personal account of a traumatic grief experienced, taking the form of a heuristic in-depth self-inquiry. Finally, the thesis is itself created as an art form, bringing into a creative synthesis the relationships between suffering, art, healing and the divine. This concept of creative synthesis borrowed from Moustakas (1990) is explored in detail in Chapter 3, on methodology.

The traditional thesis begins with an introduction to the research question in straightforward, objective terms. This is usually followed by a critical review of the existing literature in art therapy and related fields. A literature review is meant to demonstrate that the writer has thoroughly examined the prevailing points of view related to her question, including both supporting and dissenting points of view. The literature review also helps to provide a context for the writer's findings.

In this instance, I chose to take a somewhat different approach. My thesis is a self-study of an experience that was both extremely intense and deeply personal. The literature is therefore reviewed in such a way that it functions as a complement to the personal narrative. Furthermore, because the focus of the thesis is grief and the way grief is addressed through art therapy, the literature review is limited to works dealing specifically with grief and trauma, and does not include works on the more general topics of violent death and murder. Aside from space constraints, such a study belongs in a separate work.

An integration of the literature with personal experience is also found in Chapter 4, which explores the art therapy process, while simultaneously drawing on art-therapy texts to illuminate the process that unfolded.

In this thesis, I look back over the months and years since the death of my son and seek to understand how I survived. In a sense, this is an expedition like an archeological dig: sifting through memories of spiritual practices, art making, writing, deep listening, and rituals as outlined in Appendix C. The focus is very specific, and again there are limits to what can be included; limits that have to do with maintaining focus and space constraints. I do not, for example, include a detailed or lengthy account of the precise

circumstances surrounding my son's murder. What I do is provide sufficient contextual information for the reader to grasp the enormity of what happened, so they will understand how such an event functioned as the starting point for my journey through the Open Studio Process, which is the real focus of the thesis.

I engaged in the Open Studio Process with integrity and focus. The discipline and practice of having to continually sit, with mindful consciousness, through my *intention* and the inclusion of *witness*, meant that a felt sense of completion was reached and brought to fruition through my writing. As one of the originators of the Open Studio Process says in a book called *Art is a Spiritual Path*, "witness writing to that feeling is a crucial step in the process" (Allen, 2005, p. 51).

I had the confidence that the Open Studio Process was the container capable of holding my in-depth self-inquiry so that I could keep moving forward in my process with open creative curiosity. "Intention and witness are reliable means of raising the marginal ideas to the forefront, of seeing what we are missing" (Allen, 2005, p. 205). My thesis work could progress in a holistic way, sacredly and safely. Allen (2005) describes this place: "Art allows us a safe arena in which to explore ..." (p. 75)

More information on the Open Studio Process can be gleaned not only from Allen's book, but also from her website. However, for quick reference I include this brief overview of the Open Studio Process which describes the use of art-making as:

Inquiry: Art is a place to raise any question about any subject.

Engagement: Art is a means to enter, to play with, to dance with, to wrestle with anything that intrigues, delights, disturbs or terrifies us.

Celebration: Art is a path to meaning, which includes all forms of honoring, sharing, memorializing, and giving thanks. (Allen, 2005, p. 1)

General Statement - Personal Interest

My personal interest in this thesis inquiry was my need for intimate knowledge of the phenomenon of a mother's broken heart in grief and trauma. Even if I could survive the onslaught of being so violently deconstructed by my lived experience, I still needed to understand *how I had survived*. I could then in turn be wholly present to others, with a greater measure of confidence and wisdom.

There were constant triggers that could potentially reactivate the trauma, mostly without warning: press releases, news reels, documentaries, requests for interviews. Therefore, a depth of peace had to be found in the brokenness in order to survive, to be resilient, to be called whole.

In my experience of grief and trauma I did not believe I could contain the magnitude of what was happening in hearing the words that my son "Gerard Michael had been murdered." Had I not brought immediate ritual into my lived experience, it could have all gone very differently for me.

The sense of my broken heart was felt on both a mundane and a sacred level. Somatically, the pain was so greatly felt that my breath even desired to escape my body, leaving me unwillingly gasping for breath, to the horror of onlookers. I was informed by my doctor that it was a natural response to the grief and trauma I was suffering. I did not know that this could happen. My autonomic nervous system decided that my breath would return to me, and be breathed again. My attitude was that I had nothing at all to lose. "You wanted my life, take it," I said to a God who I felt had betrayed my son and

me. For that matter, I was already dead. Therefore, I needed to find a *meeting point* with life to continue to live from a felt presence of wholeness. How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart? An organic response to my tragic circumstance and a heartfelt soulful, scholarly inquiry ensued.

There was no greater loss this world could have imposed upon me, no greater loss I would ever have to endure than the loss of my only child. Still, there appeared to be no choice but to find a purposeful meaning for my continued existence. This was the only way to keep moving through. When I knew what my needs were and where they could be met, I found a way to fulfil them one step at a time; no more than that action did I expect of myself. Therefore, regardless of what was going on around me, I remained vigilant to what was happening in my interior world.

Spiritual Life and Rituals

I have been a part of different initiations in my life time, in my spiritual walks and journeys, having experienced baptism, holy communion, confirmation, confession, and rites of Christian initiation of adults. I have attended synagogue, attended church services countless times at Hutterite colonies and other denominations. I have walked and prayed at pilgrimage sites. I have participated in pagan ceremonies and celebrations. So initiations and my own evolving spirituality have been important parts of my life. I genuinely saw their significance even before the experience of the death of my son, in how they shaped me, and I knew how they could continue to shape me going forward.

It made perfect sense to me, when I looked back over the last six years of grief and mourning, that rituals played a significant role, most certainly in recommitting myself to a relationship with life, to the creator.

On receiving the news of Gerard Michael's death to murder, my first spiritual response was to drum, chant, and sing a grieving song, facing each of the four directions, for him to know his way home, for his protection. Then, I sat in silence, mystified, begging, pleading in prayer, for hours thereafter, asking for this lived experience to be taken away from my son and me.

When my son lay in the mortuary for five weeks, I set in motion a personal call to the ancestors to take care of him. My request and questions to the Divine were the continuation of my parenting role. Nightly, I looked for Grandmother Moon. I lit candles before the dawn of each day, and I journaled for hours on end. I said my rosary, used my *ma la* beads, repeating chants, and made personal prayers to the divine, to nature, to infinity.

All of this was a part of reacquainting myself with a "sacred presence" felt before my son's death. I was more alert, I was more challenging, I could not be fooled, "Make your presence known" was my attitude. Now I know soulfully that Presence did! The energy I felt was like that of waking up from a dream and not quite feeling wide awake enough, yet knowing I had to begin the day. I was occupied in two worlds: here, and where my son had gone. The latter took precedence.

Seeds of Awareness Sown

The beginning of my grief journey was akin to the need to limp around, on crutches, to cater to a missing leg. Through sheer necessity, we have to learn to adjust; however, the leg is still missing. We are personally reminded of this *missing* aspect of our living experience.

A few days after hearing of my son's death and having travelled to Britain, the media printed these words that I spoke: "I feel betrayed by life." I had wanted everything to remain in my natural life span, as I had been led to believe that it would. Namely, a parent dies before their child, although it can happen (logically) to *others*, but not to me! Now, on a very personal level, I was feeling the horror of this not being so. It came ringing on the phone, knocking on my door – it was now my reality. More of my narrative is revealed in Chapter 2 of my thesis.

That I had lost such a deep trust in life was a death experience for me, and brought alongside it far-reaching effects. Everything was being torn apart, the very structure of me in this world, of my perspective of life in this world.

However, life had not given up on me. Since that day of the press release, I sunk deeper into a life that had expanded to regions that I never before knew existed. I had to be prepared to do the hard work of journeying to these regions of the unconscious and, as a consequence, weather the storm of my conscious awareness being expanded. This would always be so, this would always be my process, until my earthly life was done. I did not desire to live any other way; indeed, I *could not* live any other way.

There was to be an intimacy gained by me, deeper than I had known before, that brought me into the infinite. I was to plumb the depths of both pleasure and suffering.

Life was engaged by me, and in return I found my place, and my son's continuous place of belonging, in life's cyclical way of being.

Re-membering the Circle

The unfathomable utterances of life's circle and divine presence let themselves be known. For instance, five weeks after arriving in Britain, Gerard Michael's body was released from the mortuary. There was a shop in England that had a tremendous effect on my psyche and on my soul. I entered this store, accompanied by two other people. I was looking for specific herbs and a smudging shell, items that I was familiar with from my rituals back home in Canada. I was preparing for a personal ritual, for my son, in the sacred preparation of his body and coffin for cremation, and for our sacred last time together on earth. Nobody in this particular shop could have had any possible idea of these facts or who I was. However, a woman in this shop became an intricate part of my healing and understanding.

I was wandering around the store looking for what I needed. Suddenly, this woman was standing in front of me. One of my companions was going to say something to her. Immediately this woman stopped them by putting up her hand in their direction and saying to them, while looking straight into my eyes "I know." Then she led me to the back of the shop, motioning again to my companions to stay where they were. They were not invited. I just allowed myself to be led. The woman opened the back door to the shop, and there before me was a beautiful sacredly adorned gazebo-type building. It was obviously used as a prayerful, meditative space. In the continuation of our shared silence, this woman handed me a drum. She then turned and left me alone, closing the door

behind her. I sang and drummed to my son, to all the directions, as I had done in Canada. How was it possible in this world that she could have known?

This woman played a significant role in initiating me into life's circle and the continuation of my listening for the utterance of the Divine. Very confidently she delivered, from the divine circle of life, what she knew she must, one woman to another. Her teachings remained with me (and always will) as I continued my grief walk. I had faith that I could not possibly be alone. I had been shown a bigger picture of circle connection. The waves of grief crashing over me meant a loss of ability to navigate to gentler waters. The bigger picture of my own natural circle connection, however, did not leave me.

Intuitive Guidance

A few months after returning to Canada with Gerard Michael's ashes, I made telephone contact with a mental health professional, requesting information about a local bereavement group. I was advised that I could not attend the bereavement group "because they had not had someone like me before," meaning the mother of a murdered child. I remember replying sadly to his statement with "I will not say a word, I will just sit in the group." He said he would get back to me with an answer after talking to the bereavement group – he never did!

So, I boarded a Greyhound bus and travelled through the night to Edmonton to get what I intuitively knew I needed – more education about grief and trauma – and to feel a connection to those who may know. I spent five days being trained by a group from the United States, who just happened to be giving their training workshop in Edmonton.

There may not have been cognitive knowledge that my action would further my holistic health, at that point or down the road. I remember being governed more by an intuitive, gut feeling that came over me. This *intuitive gut feeling* was felt yet again when I returned from the murder trial in Britain, and sought out further training. I spent many more weeks in intensive training in Grief and Trauma in Edmonton, with Dr Jane Simington, after which I enrolled in the Masters programme at St. Stephen's in Edmonton, in Psychotherapy and Spirituality in the Art Therapy Specialisation stream.

I have to admit to being shocked by some of the extremely negative, unconscious responses toward me as a bereaved mother, something I never have thought could happen. Yet somehow these unconscious negative responses were always balanced by more positive caring responses from my fellow human beings. How I was treated in my grief and trauma did play a big part in how well and how quickly I reconnected to my exterior human world again.

Creativity and Art Therapy

I was living creatively before, taking art therapy training and practices. However, my own creativity now became magnified, as a healing tool, due to art therapy training. My creativity brought me into the 'now' of my existence. Art therapy recorded, in that now, with oils, water, colours on brushes, that smudge their way across the paper, leaving their residual shapes wherever I happen to place them, along with the ashes of charcoals, which would leave their mark on paper and my fingers, tracing every movement made. Clay was transformed by my hands; my writing, my poetry, my embodied art performance. The mapping of my journey was spread out by my art installations. As I

ventured deeper and deeper into my process without aesthetic judgment from myself or from others, I was able to be present in the stillness of what was to be revealed.

Storytelling

I decided to present the literature in the following chapter by using my own narrative and personal journey through grief and trauma. The literature included is thus only that which was pertinent to my own in-depth self study and which correlated with my personal account of grief and trauma within a narrative format. This is what I determined I needed to do to keep my process of self study authentic. This, at times, was a difficult decision to make. It would have been much easier to be diverted and to hold on to another's point of view, for a quick solution, for momentary comfort, and in order to move on.

My storytelling is also my art form and is why my thesis used an arts-based discourse. It was my way of communicating what I needed to reveal about my lived experience along with my art images. I therefore believe that in what follows I have given an authentic, raw account of my brokenness and have validated the premise that wholeness was found, and made more succinctly manifest, through the medium of art therapy.

I honour (without any doubt whatsoever) that today, some years later, I could not write with such vulnerable rawness and authenticity what has been captured by me and shared in this thesis. I embarked on and journeyed bravely and courageously forward accompanied by my inquiry: How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart? My very personal and unique descent into a mother's

heartbroken sorrow and its revealing soulful depths are recorded in what follows, along with my own personal revelations.

CHAPTER 2: MY CHANGING WORLD – NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted in the introduction, the following literature review departs from tradition and takes a narrative form. It is a creative interweaving of the relevant materials with the facts of my lived experience.

My journey began in what I believed was a special moment, on an ordinary day. I was engrossed watching three deer feeding; they were grazing outside my west window. They appeared so peaceful, without a care in the world. I was grateful and yet perplexed that Jude, our black Labrador, was not chasing after them. I was also remembering how, with prints and wood and sculpture, our son Gerard Michael would always buy three animals together, saying that they represented our family. From there, my mind wandered on to the teachings of the deer given by our First Nations people and the path of love that the deer represented. Andrews (1994) says in *Animal - Speak*: “When deer show up there is an opportunity to express gentle love that will open new doors to adventure for you” (p. 264).

This new adventure would lie in the shredding of my heart, screams from my soul, and a body that I could no longer feel safe in, or for that matter would any longer desire to live in. Everything was alien; what I knew to be normal no longer existed. There appeared to be something ‘other’ than my body’s innate wisdom that had taken over, not only in its mechanics, but in my body’s will and spirit that appeared elsewhere occupied. I could not bring ALL of me back together in the strength I once knew, into what I knew

was the shape of my familiar existence. J. Allen (1995), in his book *Coping With Trauma*, pointed to this moment, giving a glimpse into its workings at the very least:

We each come into the world exquisitely prepared by aeons of evolution to cope with challenges and stress... The more you can understand your responses as part of your “human nature,” the more forgiving you can be about your limitations. (p. 25)

My inner world and outer world were going to collide, they were on a collision course; I was to become an observer, a witness. A new reality was now being housed in the entirety of my body and soul, one that knew immediately it was not welcome. Levine (1979), in his book *A Gradual Awakening*, says that “by trying to control the uncontrollable, we create hell” (p. 99). Of course as a mother, these words made perfect sense to me and what I was attempting to do: I was entering hell, wide awake, eyes wide open, exposed and vulnerable. It was changing my reality forever. This would and did impact me on every level: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

The phone was ringing.

The phone ringing was in actuality the bell tolling for our son Gerard Michael. Colin answered the phone and immediately secured a place in our home where I could not overhear what was being said. Colin would make other phone calls and the necessary inquiries before returning to pass that same horrific, traumatic news on to me. Rothschild (2000) says in *The Body Remembers* that “trauma is a psychophysical experience, even when the trauma causes no direct bodily harm” (p. 5). My next memory is Colin’s voice telling me that “this would be the worst day of our lives.” He held my hands as he told

me. He was pure white and shaking. Schneiderman (1989) brings to our attention in his book *Coping with Death in the Family* that

...the death of a child must surely be one of the most devastating experiences to be endured by a family...even so shocking and so repulsive to our established pattern of life and death, that the damage to the survivors can often be irreparable. (p. 24)

I could not in a million lifetimes have imagined what Colin would say next. Our son, “Gerard Michael has been murdered in England.” Schneiderman (1989) says that “when a child dies the family is no longer whole” (p. 32). Every cell in our bodies is pierced by this truth.

On August 12, 2007, our son had been randomly chosen by his murderers, who Gerard Michael never knew, and who never knew him. I dropped to my knees on hearing the words. There were times when I became lucid enough to hear myself screaming, moaning like an animal caught in a trap, ripping at itself to be freed. There was to be no freedom for me. I was tearing at the floor with my fingers extended, my teeth snarling like a lioness ready to pounce on my now reality. I desired to hit my head repeatedly on anything hard that would smash it open, again and again, to throw my body against anything that would keep allowing its impact, without caving in to my body’s repeated demands of it. I didn’t do either, but the feeling in my body was very strong to do so. Had I been alone, I dare say I would have done so. Simington (2010), in her book *Setting the Captive Free*, when talking of trauma and the impact on our souls, reminds us that “according to Shamanic beliefs, circumstances that shock the body can shatter the soul. During a soul-shattering experience, a part or parts of the soul and its associated

characteristics may flee in an effort to escape an unbearable life situation” (p. 163)..

These words by Simington (2002) chronicled in her book *Journey to the Sacred*, also capture what I too, as a mother who had lost her son to sudden death, experienced: “A mother is supposed to nurture and comfort, and keep her child safe and warm” (p. 91).

Just like Simington, I too asked these questions that seemed to override all else; the answers imperative to my continuing to breathe: “Was he safe? Who was caring for him? What did he have to face all alone? What was it like where he was?”

Colin’s and my interior and exterior worlds were shattered everywhere we looked, including each other’s faces. With every breath we took, this fact of our lives was mirrored back at us, a reminder of the evidence that our new reality held. Our old reality had been shattered into a million pieces, lying before us with no hope of ever being put back together again.

Was I forever going to be locked into this dream-like state of reality, and if so, what did it mean to my wholeness of being? Sanford (1968) said in *Dreams: God’s Forgotten Language*, that “psychologically, the coming of Christ into history coincides with the emergence of a reconciling centre capable of uniting the opposites one to another in a paradoxical unity that can restore our wholeness” (p. 149). Every bone in my body felt broken. Nothing would look or feel or be the same again. How could it? I could identify with what Lewis (1961) wrote in *A Grief Observed*: “They say ‘The coward dies many times’; so does the beloved. Didn’t the eagle find a fresh liver to tear in Prometheus every time it dined?” (p. 117). In my descent as a mother in her grief, I willingly gave my liver and challenged ALL that occupied this world, this universe, to give me back my son.

The magnitude of this horror that crushed at our hearts with repeated blows, that imprinted our souls forever, was man's inhumanity to man, which was yet again playing itself out in human history. For Colin, for me, and for our families, this fact had become very, very personal. We felt exquisitely its all-invasive, penetrating sting. There could never be any logic found; this was a senseless, heinous, premeditated, callous, cowardly act of evil intent. I would have to learn (and very quickly) what Chodron (2001) means in *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*, when she writes: "compassion ... is more emotionally challenging than loving-kindness because it involves the willingness to feel pain" (p. 49). If I was, with awareness, to mindfully, spiritually, soulfully survive at all, man's inhumanity and its onslaught on my soul must embody itself in this agonized knowing.

I looked out of my window and saw the medicine wheel that I had built some 18 years prior, on the north side of the house. Instantly I knew what I had to do. I headed outside reaching for my hand-drum on my way out. I started in the East and began to drum and sing to the soul and spirit of my son. He needed to know his way home. A smudge of sage and sweetgrass was placed at my feet by a friend of the family who had arrived to be with us. Afterwards I was told that my big black Labrador, Jude, had rested his face on my right foot and with each turn of my body to the direction I was pleading to, begging to, Jude silently and gently continued his connection to me, to the moment, to the universe, to the sacredness of the ritual.

I do not know for how long I drummed, sang, sobbed, choked on the words, or for how long I watched for any signs at all to tell me what I needed to know. It mattered not. I was not a part of man's clock-time, I was on a personal journey of my own, a mother's

journey, needing to connect with all that IS, to find her son and have him find her. Moore (1992) says, in *Care of the Soul*, that “ritual maintains the world’s holiness” (p. 226). Perhaps also it was my way of bringing some order into a world I no longer desired to be a part of. My creativity, my drumming and singing had the means to bring a much-needed connection that defied words. Moore (1992) continues, saying: “Art shows us what is already there in the ordinary, but without art we live under the illusion that there is only time and not eternity” (p. 304). I needed to sense where my son had gone or was heading towards, and let him know he was not alone.

We were parents who would now find ourselves occupying a space in the world where, by rights, by the laws of nature alone, our son should be, long after death had taken us, his parents! We were dying in front of each other’s eyes. Time had stopped, or was racing forward. I did not know which. In *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, Blakney (1941) writes: “... to go down to death with love and knowledge makes death nobler and more precious than all the good works done of love and desire in holy Christendom” (p. 237).

The phone rang repeatedly. The Chief of the Warwickshire Police Constabulary in England phoned, wanting me to give proof that I was Gerard Michael’s mother. I heard myself telling the leading investigator how much my son had weighed at his birth, the day, the hour he was born, the hospital Gerard Michael was born in, and so on, as if I was caught in some kind of nightmare that was refusing to let me go. Because we were talking about a dead body in a mortuary; I was being informed that my baby was now dead. I was met with compassion by the head of the investigating team. “When you have understanding, you can listen with compassion, you can listen deeply,” writes Hahn

(2001) in *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* (p. 95). A fax machine would give them the visible evidence they required.

What I know personally now with this traumatic life experience is – as we process through our experiences – what happens after the traumatic news has been given to us will play a big part in how well we can heal. In some cases these memories also have been known to be very wounding and traumatic for those of us who are grieving. How well were we treated? What did people do or say? What did they not do or say? In *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*, Rothschild (2000) says “the time following a traumatic event is critical” (p. 156).

What should not be ignored at this time is what Simington (2002) urges us to consider in her teachings that have been passed down from our ancestors, namely that “psychic shock experienced following trauma shatters the soul. A part or parts of the soul may flee the body to escape back to the peace of the spirit world” (p. 63). Therefore, this part of our grief journey, along with the story of our loss, had to be acknowledged in recovery, at the onset of our healing journey. Having gone through my own personal counselling, training and healing with Simington, I know this first hand. It was vital to honour the fact that the horrific news of the murder of a loved one is life changing for those receiving the news. Genuine care and compassion for the family’s immediate descent into their individual and collective trauma and grief can become a remembered healing experience for their hearts and souls; and a gentler memory for their mind to hold, in their heartbreaking recovery.

I needed to hold my child. I wanted nobody to touch his body. I had over six and a half thousand miles to travel when I left Canada for England. Fear gripped me every

breath of the way. Simington (2002) writes that “the initial responses to trauma are experienced first in our physical body. The adrenaline rush prepares us to fight or to flee” (p. 59). It was up to me to go and officially identify the body of my dead son. I felt I was being drowned, smothered, buried alive – consumed by the flames of fire. “It takes a few days before the insulating shock allows our emotional body to feel the wracking torment” (Simington, 2002, p. 59).

I could no longer trust. I had been betrayed by life itself in the recesses of my mind. Strangely though, I somehow believed that they had it all wrong, and that the minute I saw who they thought was my son, I would have to tell them. This personal creative, mythic, fanciful thought even extended itself to feeling sadness for the parents of the child! Feinstein and Krippner (1988) in *Personal Mythology*, say: “a mythic outlook also reminds you that you are part of a larger picture than our immediate concerns... myths talk to psyche in its own language: they speak emotionally, dramatically, sensuously, fantastically” (p. 9). Another consideration, of course, could be that which is given by Worden (2002) in *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy*:

A sudden death will usually leave the survivor with a sense of unreality about the loss. Whenever the phone rings and one learns that a loved one has died unexpectedly, it creates this sense of unreality which may last a long time. (p. 125)

This was a time of utter vulnerability on every level of my existence – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Every part of what could be considered life in the exterior world was being magnified back at me, appearing to mock the death of my son. To the noise, the light, the dark, the words, silence and nature, I became an observer! To

participate in what others were calling life was asking far too much of me. And yet, still I found myself trying hard to participate. Most of us who need to be taken care of as we grieve may find ourselves doing the same. This, I now know, can be a distraction from our own need to grieve, our own healing process. Ultimately I came to realize that I could not “really hide from death; it is part of life” as LeShan (1976) wrote in *Learning to Say Goodbye When a Parent Dies* (p. 107). As a parent I was facing death, that of my child and my own exquisite death, on every level of my existence, yet I was still, for all intents and purposes, alive. I knew that I needed to accept, to surrender to these seeming polar opposites, to find their meeting point, to find a connection with my son. A reflective point of interest for me would be what LeShan (1976) says about putting another perspective on what I needed to learn: “heartbreak is life educating us” (p. 108).

My very first trip to any mortuary was to see my son. I could no longer play with the notion, or deny the fact that this was my boy. He was laid out in front of me, in front of others. I could not protect him, protect his vulnerability. A white sheet had been placed over him. I could only see my precious beloved son’s face. I began to talk and sing to him, songs I sang to him as a child, songs I now chant in ritual. Simington (2005) says in *Responding Soul to Soul* that “music, art, song, and dance are time-honoured methods for getting in touch with spiritual energies” (p. 7). Later I stated that I “was bargaining with death – you cannot have him, he is mine!” I remember looking at the detectives when I was being removed from my son’s body and crying out to them, “Please do not hurt him anymore.” I left a part of my soul behind that moment, that day, that hour, that breath. The door of the mortuary closed shut with a click, which for me was a fierce sounding

bang that would not leave my heart, soul, or ears. I knew I needed to be on the other side of that door, to protect my boy, to be with my boy. Nobody could guard him as I would.

As his death was caused by a criminal act, the murderers needed to be found, and so Gerard Michael lay in the mortuary for weeks. He had to undergo two autopsies. The second was performed the day after I had identified my child. That morning and every morning thereafter before the dawn of the day lifted the *visible* shadows of the night, I lit a candle at 3:00 a.m. and wrote to my son for hours, holding him in my heart, surrounding him with my spirit, trying to keep him warm, bargaining with the universe, a part of me still believing any minute now I would wake up and this part of my life would make itself known as merely a grotesque nightmare. This before-dawn ritual helped me in the process of grieving. It was a time that belonged to my son and me.

With the arrest and placement in custody of the seven men ultimately charged with the murder of our Gerard, a family liaison officer informed me just moments before the news would reach the media. I then informed our family in Canada, and phoned Colin. I sincerely hope this procedure/protocol is in place for victims' families in Canada. The triggers are acute, wounding deeper still, when carelessness is thrust upon the survivors of a family whose loved one(s) have been murdered. As the newspaper and television imagery abounds, so the courtesy of a phone call can appear and act like a healing balm in the midst of uncontrollable chaos for those of us who are traumatized and grieving. Weber (1987) says in *WomanChrist* that "the body records our distress and plays it loud enough for our hearing" (p. 33), and that very amplification is sought after by our souls' cries to be brought back to wholeness. Simington (2005) says in *Responding Soul to Soul*, that with "the effects of trauma on the human spirit... complete

healing requires attention to the spiritual concerns which surface in the wake of the experience” (p. 3).

The funeral arrangements went ahead. Our son was cremated on Saturday, September 15, 2007. Colin, along with his sister, Dianna, and our niece, Mandy Samara, flew over to attend the funeral. I gave the eulogy for our son. I spoke about his birth, his life, his hopes, his dreams, and paid my respects and condolences to all who had been in his life. The music I chose was Leonard Cohen’s; however I chose to have an artist by the name of Antony sing it, from a rendition he dedicated to Cohen on a DVD entitled *Leonard Cohen I’m Your Man*. Antony, I felt, gave the added soul of the feminine that, for me, he best represented, and could sing my soul and heart to depths it needed to be heard by my son. Strange how the seemingly little things take on greater meaning. I had given no thought at all in my life that I would be choosing music for my son’s funeral. A question was asked. “What song would you like played?” Immediately I gave my answer... just like that!

If it be your will
that I speak no more,
and my voice be still
as it was before,
I will speak no more,
I shall abide until
I am spoken for,
if it be your will.

If it be your will
that a voice be true,
from this broken hill
I will sing to you.
from this broken hill
all your praises they shall ring
if it be your will
to let me sing.

If it be your will,
if there is a choice,
let the rivers fill,
let the hills rejoice.
Let your mercy spill
on all these burning hearts in hell
if it be your will
to make us well

And draw us near
and bind us tight,
all your children here
in their rags of light,
in our rags of light

all dressed to kill;
and end this night,
if it be your will. (Cohen, 1993, pp. 343-344)

My son loved Jesus Christ, and taught Bible class in his home and at a local church. He also worked tirelessly for and with the homeless, the downtrodden, the less-thans in society. It was his path. Gerard Michael had a heart of gold and the positive acclamations regarding his character were and are abounding, in print, on film, and talk, all of which only he can take credit for, as his life path dealt him unnecessary heartbreak and blows that did not befit such a shining light and such a sensitive soul.

As one reporter asked me, “Does it make you feel proud that so many turned out for your son’s funeral?” “No,” I answered, ‘I just wanted to wrap him in a cloth and take him home.’” I wanted to shield my son. Now I can give the funeral the reflection and the credit it deserves in accounting for Gerard Michael’s life and the impact he had on others, both spiritually and physically.

The pain as his mother of seeing the beginning, the middle, and the end of my son’s life cannot be overstated, cannot be fathomed. There was an eeriness about it that broke me wide open. The depth of my consciousness expanded and influenced my daily life, which made me believe that I was also whole in my brokenness. I feel life exquisitely, all of life, not just what I want but what is! Frankl (1946) said in *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

And yet is not this transitoriness a reminder that challenges us to make the best possible use of each moment of our lives? It certainly is, and hence

my imperative: Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now. (p. 175)

We brought our Gerard's ashes home to Canada on September 18, 2007. I had a special piece of paper, given to me by the funeral home, to let the airport security know the contents of the cardboard box that I clutched, with my son's urn inside. I said to the security people, "Please just look at the paper, don't put it through the scanner system – you may harm the contents." I was frantic and on the verge of breaking down in tears, and I suppose I looked it. They looked at me as if I was mad, and yet remained steadfast with their silence and their duty. In retrospect, it was a very good response at that time, as I had retreated from the world and yet felt thrown into the bowels of its continued existence: without me, without my son, without hope, without trust. How could I have been so awake, so aware, and yet felt so otherworldly?

Suddenly a woman in a security uniform came from behind and said, "You did very well, dear." I smiled and clutched my box, my urn, the remains of my son, my world in tatters. I remember my body shaking and my heart thumping so loudly I could hear it pounding in my ears. Silently, I walked away. That moment is etched into my memory, making me even more aware how we as humans suffer so greatly, so deeply, mostly invisibly.

A few days after returning home, I was out at the corral, the corral that Gerard Michael, Colin, and I had built. The planks in the corral have 3½ inch spaces between them. My body was folded up, my nose to my knees literally, with this memory, as my fingers caressed the wood, hoping to touch where Gerard Michael had touched. I could not bring my body upright, I was sobbing, gasping for breath. Masters and Houston

(1978), in *Listening to the Body*, quote Penfield, who talks about the mind, saying “the brain’s highest mechanism is as ‘messenger’ between the mind and the other mechanisms of the brain” (p. 51). I grabbed onto a space and started to bring my head up a little way, as still my spine was not cooperating; it was as far as my head could manage to go, which was not far at all. As I did so, through one of the spaces I could see Father Sky, and I yelled within my heart, “Did you cry when they murdered my son?” I felt a very strange feeling come over me and a sense that the answer was “Yes,” and then I said, “Did you hold my son and cry?” and again this same feeling came over me, and again the answer was “Yes.” I saw in my soul’s imagination: Jesus held my son and I felt his heartache, his tears, as raw and true as anything that I’ve ever known in my life before. I said nothing more. I believed. Solle (1990) said in *Thinking About God* that “God himself is no longer one who imposes suffering, but a fellow sufferer” (p. 188).

That part of me as a mother had been answered, the suffering I was to live with and endure had a companion that defied logic. I could not deny, even to myself, that this moment had happened. It was a pivotal moment in time for me to hear these utterances from the divine, more especially because I personally knew their truth. Another dimension of knowing entered my inner world and my outer world, especially when seeing other people’s suffering. Now I could reflect deeply, bringing to my aware consciousness what Solle (1990) shares: “In the Talmud the image of God in human beings is not understood as a spiritual image; rather, we are the image of God” (p. 188), and I most assuredly knew this resonance of truth.

The steps of a man is established by the LORD,
And, He delights in His way.

When He falls, he will not be
Hurled headlong
Because the Lord is the One
Who holds is hand. (Psalm 37: 23-24)

There were to be many signs that would come to give reassurance, but still a mother's agony needed to be a lived human experience. However, there was a knowing that I had received which, when I allowed it, would give me relative comfort. Jones (1989), in *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*, says: "It was grace as infused, enabling power that provided epiphania. The Eucharist, especially, provided the nourishment necessary for faith, hope, and love – the characteristics of the fulfilled self" (p. 146). Christ was for me, as he was for my son, the Eucharist.

Those charged with our son's murder entered their plea on December 23, 2007 and on our son's birthday, March 26. Anniversary dates were triggers. I did a round-the-clock candlelight vigil on each date. Not for justice or for political reasons, I did this for no other reason than the continued protection of my son's spirit, his soul, knowing that his name, images, and so on would be talked about, would be on display. As for the dates that these proceedings were to be carried out, an apology was given to us by a detective in England, who was designated our Family Liaison Officer. That recognition by the investigating team went a long way in us feeling supported as a family in our grief and traumatic circumstance. Van Katwyk (2003), from *Spiritual Care and Therapy: Integrative Perspectives*, has words that are wise and worth remembering: "Despair sets the stage for the experience of grace. Grace is signalled by the liberating moment when

guilt dissolves into the assurance of free forgiveness” (p. 32). As a mother, the despair that I had no control over had the potential to continually take me to my knees. The legal system was unfolding. It was a world I knew nothing about, but in which I was now being educated.

I did not take my sacred hand-drum to Britain. Whilst in Britain and with the continuation of my spiritual practice for my son each day and night, I asked my son to please hear my heart beat in place of the drum, reminding him that it was the self-same heart beat that had kept him alive in my womb; my heart and his spirit knew the rhythmic beat well. I found solace in that decision and had, without a doubt in my heart and soul, found a much-needed connection. However, when I got back to Canada where my drum was waiting for me, I was perplexed that I could not use it! It was days later, when I was rolled up in a fetal position, sobbing uncontrollably, that I understood the reason why. In a very deep psycho-spiritual way I needed to trust that I could still feel the presence of Gerard Michael in the sacredness of our connection. In the unfolding of letting go came the aligning of my son’s and my own spirits, our souls, our memories, with the rhythm of the natural cycle of life itself. My ears needed to hear, nature needed to be acknowledged, my trust in creator and creation had to be a part of my initiation into our external collective breath.

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden,

and I will give you rest.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and

Humble in heart, and you will find

Rest for your souls.

For My Yoke is easy and my
Burden is light. (Matt. 12: 28-30)

Trial

In October and November of 2008, I sat every day in England at the murder trial of our son. The trial lasted nine weeks. I saw their faces. I was in the presence daily of those who had made their calculated decision to take Gerard Michael's physical life, and take Gerard Michael away from us, his family, serving us all with a life sentence without reprieve for, the remainder of our days and nights.

The first day of the trial, I sat in a vehicle with a detective and others, awaiting the "okay" to enter the court house. The magnitude of what was happening struck me; again I became protective of my son's spirit. I sat in the vehicle and sang to the four directions, as if I was holding my sacred drum: for my son, for peace, for strength, for courage. Those in the vehicle were silent and respectful. I was a foreigner to them in my practice and needs, yet they sensed the sacredness for me to do what I was compelled to do. They, just like me, had tears in their eyes. Kinast (2000), in *What are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* when discussing intercultural praxis, states:

Formation of Christian identity does not take place apart from cultural influences, and Christian responses to social change would be guided by theological reflection on the culture, reflection that has a formative influence on those who engage it. (p. 51)

I had lived in Canada for over 30 years, had adopted and been adopted into the spirituality of the First Nations people and those of my own ancestors, the Celts. I could not readily appease those who did not understand, nor did I feel the need to do so. In my

pockets I had a feather, a rock, a rosary, *ma la* beads, and a crystal. Each day I had to expose these sacred items to the security officers before entering the court room. I asked that they not touch them, as I held my palms out, exposing my articles to the light of day. The rest of my body and clothes would be scanned as per usual, along with my bag. “For religious reasons,” I heard one officer say to another, who was dealing with me, and looking at me quizzically. I felt comforted to be honoured that way.

Simington (2002), in *Journey to the Sacred*, encourages “those willing to thrive beyond the trauma to reflect upon the impact of the loss, the change, the hurt, the torture, has had on their sense of wholeness” (p. 55). When sitting in courtroom 12, I would also practice Tonglen (sending and taking – meditation). Chodron (2001), in *The Places That Scare You*, explains Tonglen this way: “We breathe in what is painful and unwanted with the sincere wish that we and others could be free of suffering” (p. 55). With each breath I took, I practiced conscious awareness whenever possible. I was eclectic by nature when it came to my spiritual self and my higher power accepted– period! Given my life experiences, it made perfect sense for me to authentically, soulfully practice and believe. I was served well, as I believe Creator was also, by my trying to communicate personally with the divine. Gibran (1973) says in *The Prophet*:

And if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles... look into space; you shall see Him walking in the cloud, outstretching His arms in the lightening and descending rain. You shall see Him smiling in flowers, and then rising and waving His hands in trees. (pp. 78-79)

In the area of emotional and moral support I was privileged. Colin and I had family in Britain. Each took their turn sitting with me through the trial; regardless of how

long it took, they were committed. Close friends in Canada also kept in contact with me, a true support and blessing for which I was grateful. Support systems are, without a doubt, the elixir when it comes to most things in life that we are determined to change or have a need to move through, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically. This is especially true of grief and trauma.

The evening prior to the sentencing by the Judge, of the murderers who the jury found without doubt to be guilty, there was to be a national press conference. I was to speak.

I mention it for this reason also: when I returned to the room after the press conference, the rain was thrashing with great intensity against the window. I had not witnessed the rain so ferocious before. I turned to the woman detective, who had been a part of my life for the last nine weeks, and I said to her “I have just suddenly realized that I thought I could pull Gerard Michael back from death. Deep inside I still felt that if I did everything right, I could defy death for our son, he would be brought back to us.” I was sobbing, my heart was broken wide open and haemorrhaging. I felt betrayed by life yet again.

In looking back at this memory, my need to share it now is because of how I see it today. Our wounds are deep; our healing takes place within the width and depth of the many layers of our individual and collective consciousness. These parts of our selves that surface, that scream out in their need for attention, they do need to let go, and to allow healing, to allow life! No matter how illogical it may sound or appear to others or even to ourselves; it was a part of my process. “When the cry from a tormented soul is not heard,

the physical and emotional body demonstrates the ‘woundedness’ at the core”
(Simington, 2002, p. 29).

On the night before leaving England, a few days after the trial, I decided to cut off my hair as a ritual sign of my grief. My hair, along with a handwritten letter to my son, to our ancestors of that land, also to the elements of earth, fire, air, and water were buried, burned, and given to the winds, thrown into the Irish Sea. Some of my hair I brought back to do the same thing with in Canada. I had birthed my only child and held his dead body on the continent that in the physical had also birthed me, and in a very profound way, had also killed me. I could deeply understand why in some cultures this was a part of their tradition and ritual: to cut their hair.

For me, it represented something deep within my interior that needed to be manifest in the immediacy of my present moment reality. The past image of myself was gone; my future time on earth would be marked by the growing back of my hair. It was a ritual that brought me into the circle of my ancestors and onto my own personal path of healing, honouring the collective human journey of grief and its horrendous suffering in the circle of our lives still being lived. In retrospect, it was perhaps also a grounding ritual bringing the ineffable infinity (that I was preparing to meet and was in discourse with) and my earthly existence onto the road toward balance. Cognitively, my world was in stillness at the time of that ritual.

For the Earth Peoples, healing and spirituality were not separate. They celebrated the Divine in all of nature and honoured the wisdom and ability of the healer who could connect to the Divine Source of energy and use it for healing. (Simington, 2002, p. 51)

I also wanted the elements and ancient ones to know I was Gerard Michael's mother, and I was fully accountable and proud to be, even in death. I was asking them to please take care of my son and protect him for me. This ritual helped forge a strength, courage, and trust in myself to keep living my life holistically. I was safe in the ancestors' circle. My entire sense of self could not trust those other humans that I walked the earth with. My heart was flooded with grief and struck by our inhumanity as a race of people, one toward the other, given my very personal circumstance: my son had been randomly chosen and callously murdered. All I knew for sure was that I could place my trust with the ancestors, who, in my belief system, were far wiser than I was and could be trusted to hear me.

These words of Owen (2002) in *Jung and the Native American Moon Cycles* were of no surprise to me:

The ancestors are drawn to the living as we are repairing what has been damaged, are completing what has been left incomplete, or are damaging what has been whole. We are their dream in physical form, we dream their dream onward. (p. 26)

I had to walk my talk as I took each step on my own grieving journey. I did the best I knew how to do with integrity, with truth, with my inner depth of knowing, with my own felt wisdom, with my own belief system, that may or may not be shared by others. I did not need to change or have others change who they were, in their truth, in their own beliefs, in order to feel or give a sense of connection, one human being to another. These are wise words from Storm (1972), who speaks eloquently in *Seven Arrows* about the need for self care:

Do not try to understand it all at once, my brother. The Club of Wisdom can appear as a monster, like the striking arm of Winterman, only when we complicate that which is simple. Have patience, because the Story will unfold easily and you will understand. (p. 258)

How I feel today is that death is, in and of itself, a birth. It is all a part of our sacred journey. Having given birth to *both* within myself – with the birth and death of my only child – and being present with the fullest awareness and reflection that I could bring to both these human experiences, I strive for a relationship with both sides of life and death, which means, for me, being in relationship with life itself. Lewis (1952), in his book *Mere Christianity*, gives me strength. He speaks to me resoundingly of the need to ‘get out of my own way.’

...in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussing and fretting; coming in out of the wind. (p. 166)

I remember being asked by the woman detective how it felt, the loss of my only child to a senseless murder? How could I possibly endure being with the murderers and the very traumatic, graphic trial proceedings? I asked her if she had ever birthed a child. She said she had, “Three times.” I went on to say, “Remember the transition time of labour, when nothing else in the universe is present in that space in time, just you and your baby, yet to be born; we don’t know when, but very soon, we expect to be holding our baby.” I said that was what it was like for me, without the actual birthing of the visible form, the baby. I felt I was stuck in that transitional space. I had entered the

stillness of the transition, not knowing what next to expect, but knowing I was there; I recognized the energy. I had surrendered to what must be born within me.

She said I had given her a personal understanding, she had gratitude. I could see that fact on her face; it would help her in her work. I was trying to explain what ultimately could not be explained! However, I had tried. The woman detective had also given to me in being present and meeting me at that place of much needed connection with a fellow human being. I was grateful for her courage in asking. Having that place acknowledged and seen was a gift of healing. Social isolation that has been imposed upon us as we grieve can bring such agony, if for whatever reason, society or folk remain silent, or are not present to us.

Back in England on March 26, 1972, I was a labouring birth mother. I had to go with life's flow then. Now death was presenting me with another dimension of life: that life was eternal and belonged to both polar opposites, life and death. Because I have found life in death, I can believe with the fullness of knowing and feeling, the joy as well as the brokenness that life moving through grief and death can bring to us.

I needed to trust life again, in all of its forms, its manifestations, and all of its invisible presence, its mystery, all my relations. That was a huge undertaking in the practicality of every day and every dark night of my soul. Schlauch (1995) describes in his book *Faithful Companionship: How Pastoral Counselling Heals* that "accepting life's ambiguity contributes to becoming open to the unexpected. One is more willing to be confronted with something truly new" (p. 148).

There are many little deaths we all experience daily: all the endings in our lives as the night falls with each passing day. The death of my son made me realize that a huge

gaping hole had appeared in my existence here on earth that would not be ignored, not even for a moment. In the darkness or in the light, it was present.

I had to meet death. If I accepted the changes in my world, dead to my old self, I would touch upon the true mystery of life itself. Firstly, however, I had to enter Hell. This meant allowing the burning of my true feelings to be felt: the loss, the horror, the betrayal. In surrendering and dying to them, I would be able to see with new eyes life itself, life's true essence. Zukav (1989) in *The Seat of the Soul* says that "grace is the tranquilliser of the soul. With grace comes a knowing that what you are experiencing is necessary. It calms you with a sense of knowing" (p. 241). I would change 'calm' to achieving a sense of peace.

The idea of living itself brings death into its sphere. The opposite of life is birth, not death as I had once upon a time believed. What changed this for me? Given that I was always in process and perhaps was not always aware of the fact, it had to do with the closeness of those that I have lost to death. Their continued existence I felt (and feel), assured of through my love for them and theirs for me. Bonanno (2009), in his book *The Other Side of Sadness*, states this personal process very well: "When we grieve, we live with the dissonance. We are pulled toward the unknown. We want to know what has become of our loved ones. And sometimes we continue to sense their presence long after they are gone" (p. 201).

Every step I take forward in my life will ultimately be a step forward toward my own physical death. Therefore the fuel for my heart, my spirit, and my soul is compassion, love, peace, and joy. Yes, even joy through the tears and heartache I keep moving through, never giving up for too long a period of time. Compassion, love, peace,

and joy connect me to Gerard Michael, bring me into his knowing about life, to where he now resides with god/the holy, with the angels, with eternal life itself. I can and do meet him there.

I was embodying the wisdom of these words of Rollo May's found in Judith (1996), *Eastern Body, Western Mind*: "To love means to open ourselves to the negative as well as the positive – To grief, sorrow, and disappointment as to joy, fulfilment, and an intensity of consciousness we did not know was possible before" (p. 241)

Ritual and ceremony have always been a part of my life and continued to play a major role as I dared to feel the intensity of my descent into my own grief, and as I witnessed the agony of my family. I realized my actions in this regard could become the bridge between life and the passage of death, with my prayers, my intentions, my soulful, spiritual self remaining present here on earth. Salvation could be possible for us all; we were all in need of healing. Killen and DeBeer (2010) say in *The Art of Theological Reflection*,

Those things that make life bearable in difficult times, which allow us to resist oppression and unjust suffering, which lead us to celebrate, which give us the inspiration and courage to be our best selves, all meditate salvation, in its root meaning – healing. (p. 134)

Bruce Springsteen (2005), one of many artists on his album *Devils & Dust*, encapsulates this divine and human connection in recognizing the suffering and despair of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, whose son had been ordained to be crucified, before her eyes, her heart, her spirit, and her soul. As we too watch, we become witness not only

to our own despair, but to that of others we know or do not know, as we merely hear their story, helplessly.

We feel the connection, should our hearts be open in Eucharist to receive. In this semi-popular song, Springsteen (2005) captured what, for me, needed to be heard:

Jesus was an only son
As he walked up Calvary Hill
His mother Mary walking beside him
In the path where his blood spilled Jesus was an only son
In the hills of Nazareth
And he lay reading the psalms of David
At his mother's feet
A mother prays, 'Sleep tight, my child sleep well
For I'll be at your side
That no shadow, no darkness, no tolling bell,
Shall pierce your dreams this night;
In the garden at Gethsemane
He prayed for the life he'd never live
He beseeched his heavenly father to remove
'The cup of death from his lips'
Now there's a loss that can never be replaced,
A destination that can never be reached,
A light you'll never find in another's face,
A sea whose distance cannot be breached

Well Jesus kissed his mother's hands

Whispered "mother, still your tears,

For remember that the soul of the universe

Willed a world and it appeared... (Jesus Was an Only Son, track 8)

Is there suffering after our physical death? More importantly for me as a bereaved mother, will my son be suffering? This was a very important question for me. I chose to believe that only if there was a sense of disconnection, a lack of continuity with life itself, could that be possible. Eternity does exist; life after death does exist. Is there a Hell? I will say emphatically and resoundingly, no, there is not. Although I was raised in the Christian tradition of Roman Catholicism, I do not believe in Hell today, not for me personally, or for anyone else. Human despair and suffering itself is a hell. Does that make me less of a Christian? Maybe it makes me more of one. There is enough despair and suffering on this very precious, gifted Mother Earth of ours that we all can call home.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

As a researcher, I primarily structured my research around a heuristic method which Moustakas (1990) describes in *Heuristic Research, Design, Methodology and Applications* as an “organized and systematic form for investigating human experience” (p. 9). An outline of this method follows in this chapter.

I researched an in-depth self-inquiry around the following question: How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart? Moustakas writes that “the heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing” (p. 10). In *Phenomenological Research Methods*, he explains: “The meaning of *heuristic* comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find ... Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17).

There are six phases to Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic research method: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. In experiencing these phases, I used an arts-based phenomenological approach. I was living the lived experience under study. I was the case study. As a researcher I thus needed to be, as van Manen (1997) advises in *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, “creative in finding approaches and procedures uniquely suited to this particular project and this individual researcher” (p. 163). These words provided validation for the arts-based phenomenological approach, an approach I had already intuitively established would support my inquiry.

Allen P. B (1995) writes: “I believe this path is available to everyone and requires no ‘talent’ beyond the talent for living inherent in us all. The gift of creativity within each of us waiting to unfold. The results of one journey are in no way comparable to any other” (p.xvi). I also agree with McNiff’s (1998) comment in *Art Based Research* that “methods are inseparable from the particular circumstances of a research project” (p. 169). I was to find myself further inspired as a researcher by Allen: “All that is necessary is the courage and curiosity to make contact with the imagination and the means to make a mark. The stories are already within you, waiting to be told” (p. xi).

Initial Engagement Phase

As a researcher, I needed to embody my lived and living experience and trust the process of my interior journey, wherever that may lead me. Moreover I had to gain a trust in the research methods that I had in place. When researching the question: “How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart?” Moustakas (1990) provided another insight into why I should choose a heuristic method: “The heuristic researcher is not only intimately and autobiographically related to the question but learns to love the question” (p. 43). Considering the intensity of an in-depth-self-study, and the ensuing journey, these words of Moustakas (1994) were also relevant: “The deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one’s sense perceptions, beliefs, and judgement” (p. 18). I knew intuitively, to remain authentic, ethical and responsible as a researcher, I had to remain true to my lived experience. In *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi (1966) describes the ongoing implications of truth-seeking as follows: “To know that a statement is true is to know more than we

can tell and that hence, when a discovery solves a problem, it is itself fraught with further intimations of an indeterminate range” (p. 23).

I applied my mind, heart and soul and was prepared to remain unrelenting in my inquiry. For the rigor and vitality that Moustakas (1990) emphatically requires one should be imbued with as a researcher “requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered” (p. 15).

This tenacious attitude informed my inquiry.

Tacit Knowledge

“Polanyi recognized that each person, novice or expert, has great stores of tacit knowledge with which to build new understandings,” write Lincoln and Guba (1985) in *Naturalistic Inquiry* (p. 196). As a researcher I wanted to bring to my conscious awareness the in-depth intuitive understanding that I had and could build upon—that “tacit foreknowledge of yet undiscovered things” (Polanyi, 1996, p. 23). I knew what I knew, but did not know how I knew it: that although broken wide open I still remained whole. Moustakas (1990) writes: “underlying every intuition and genuine knowing of any kind is a tacit sense, a hidden dimension, a realization that is prompted by what is known but which requires a tacit connection” (p. 114). As a researcher and participant I was also seeking ‘a tacit connection.’

Without question an arts-based research approach was to be a part of my thesis inquiry as a researcher. In *Art as Research Opportunities and Challenges*, McNiff (2013) writes: “Art is a way of knowing, problem solving, healing and transformation that we marginalize if we do not embrace it as vehicle of research” (p. xiii). Also worth mentioning is a chapter in this same book authored by Rappaport entitled “Trusting the

felt sense in art-based research,” in which they state: “Artistic expression serves to explicate our felt sense – or embodied knowing” (p. 201). Moustakas (1990) explains that “the goal of every technique is to help the phenomenon *reveal itself more completely* than it does in ordinary experience” (p. 44). The use of an arts-based phenomenological approach secured my confidence as a researcher that I was leaving no unconscious possibility outside the realm of encounter. A bigger picture could and did unfold using an arts-based phenomenological method when asking the question “How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart?”

All My Relations

My orientation and spiritual praxis rooted in the concept of *All My Relations* is best described and validated by Wilson (2008) in *Research Is Ceremony - Indigenous Research Methods*. This was the unrelenting thread, or umbilical cord that echoed its wisdom, breathed out inspiration for me to inhale, as an authentic, holistic wounded researcher and participant. I could not consciously or unconsciously push aside this aspect of my lived experience. It mattered not only ethically as a researcher, but was an integral part of my own preordained life experience even before the murder of my son. This instructive knowing, teacher and guide, was a constant faithful part of my own ongoing lived experience and chosen spiritual life path, as my thesis continued on its journey of unfolding its truth. It would have been tantamount to sacrilege for me, to have disregarded this aspect of my personal and professional life. Wilson puts it thus:

These relationships come to you from the past, from the present and from your future. This is what surrounds us, and what forms us, our world, our cosmos and

our reality. We could not be without being relationship with everything that surrounds us and is with us. Our reality, our ontology is the relationships. (p. 76).

I appreciated also the following words in Allen's (2005) book *Art is a Spiritual Path*, which I perceived as being in accord with the above quote of Wilson's. They were also in accord with the path I chose to walk as an egalitarian participant in life, and held as sacred. "Art is a spiritual path to the true, indigenous soul of the ordinary person. The path is inclusive, democratic, common, and diverse" (p. 173).

Immersion phase

Moustakas (1990) describes the immersion phase as one in which the researcher enters "into the material in timeless immersion until it is understood" (p. 51). For me this was a process of researching all the feelings, scholarly reflections and thought patterns that rose up within me in both the mundane and the sacred parts of life, *day in and day out*. I did not impede their arising. This process (of staying with...) taught me, and I soon realized my feelings would become (through osmosis) an 'entry point' (port-hole), for further exploration into the phenomena. "This kind of personal, private immersion provides the initial essential preparation for discovering the nature and essence of a particular experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p.45). This praxis would ultimately evolve into my own initiation as a researcher, in journeying into even greater holistic depths of knowing, of understanding, as my arts-based phenomenological research continued. In the process of exploring my feelings I sought not to bring judgement upon them, not to push them away, not to be in denial, but to give them space to be known – regardless.

The intentional acting upon this research process involved gently, patiently, mindfully acknowledging the emergence of my feelings; whether I was actively doing

art, writing, studying, daily routines, meditating, breathing, etc. In other words, as a researcher allowing for this *space* (with the fullness of acceptance) not only brought in the ‘witness’ to my felt sense of self, but also gave rise, as my research continued to unfold, to a greater sense of expanded compassion within me, for me, for us all. This expansion of connection was visceral, felt as a wholeness of truth, as the participant also. This I believe had a direct correlation with my beliefs at the outset of my research into the concepts of the collective unconscious. Furthermore, the praxis of compassion for *all my relations* had been a part of my spirituality for many decades. Nevertheless, in allowing this process to manifest its results, there was a definite shift in my conscious awareness, and in the unfolding shape of my inquiry. An embodied sense of trusting the process resulted in an expanded level of human and spiritual connection.

It came as no surprise to me to read in Romanyshin’s (2007) book, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind*, Jung’s statement that “although we are specialists par excellence, our specialized field, oddly enough, drives us to universalism” (2007, p. 24). A maturation, a relationship, a process was forming, that in giving my feelings space would in turn bring a sense of objectivity into play for me as a researcher, who could then more easily become a witnessing presence! I was whole. I was embodying my research at those times, and I knew its unequivocal truth. I agreed with this statement of Romanyshyn (2007), that “psychology’s humbling would amount to the recognition that soul is in our psychologies because our psychologies are within soul” (p. 26).

I held the image of a welcome mat in front of me when contemplating reflexively those “intuitive clues or hunches, from the mystery and sources of energy and knowledge

with the tacit dimension” (p. 28). This praxis of the *welcome mat* also became one of my entry points in the process, for the gathering up of my courage, ability and tenacity in continuing to enter deeper into my unconscious. As a researcher I needed to remain open, allowing for a neophyte's initiation into the unknown. I would step onto the welcome mat, and the process of doing so would lend itself to researching the depths. To know the essence of my inquiry, heuristically and phenomenologically, to embody the lens of the researcher, was to enter the ebb and flow, the natural balance of what was taking place for me: How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart? “The task involves timeless immersion inside the data, with intervals of rest and return to the data until intimate knowledge is obtained” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 49).

Incubation Phase

“Incubation is a process in which a seed has been planted; the seed undergoes silent nourishment, support, and care that produces a creative awareness of some dimension of a phenomenon or a creative integration of its parts or qualities” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). I had had no formal training in art and while creative, I had not considered myself to be an artist *per se*. An arts-based phenomenological approach in my thesis inquiry could have been an intimidating undertaking as a researcher, although it was nurturing a much-felt need for me, expressed in these insightful words of Allen (2005): “Creativity transcends the power-drenched assumption that people with specialized training create art that is more valid than that of people without it” (p. 226). I can now personally and professionally claim this wisdom as encompassing my own truth, having personally experienced what her words imply, words which validated me as a researcher and as a participant.

Expanded Awareness

If I was not going to have what it would take (and give me) as a researcher moving deeper into my inquiry, this would assuredly have been the moment in the process where it would have shown itself. Moustakas (1990) says that this is the time that “allows the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness” (p. 29). I was gaining a greater re-search capacity in trusting the unknown. I was intuiting, as a researcher, that there was *something* there. I sustained the faith and trust (in a maturing relationship), that *it* knew it was beyond my capacity in that particular moment to be a container for an immediate cognitive understanding. This was an opportunity for me to exercise patience, tolerance, relationship, non-judgement and grace. My process was to keep *showing-up* and keep nurturing with patience, space and openness (heart, mind, soul) until revelation was achieved, at the right time and place, and to trust implicitly that it would.

Creativity and the arts-based phenomenological approach that was occurring spontaneously, and for the most part seamlessly, was to be a continual great support and confidence booster. There was an active (holistic) circle of research inquiry into how does the presence of wholeness manifests itself amidst living with a broken heart? “Art making has many healing possibilities, the greatest of which is to allow relationships to develop” (Allen, 1995, p.137). As a researcher and participant, as both the object and subject of the ‘field’ of inquiry under study, the process of setting up the environments of my interiority and exteriority (wanting manifestation) was ‘thick’ with the energy to relate, to connect to wholeness.

I continued therefore to look through the lens of a researcher, naturally, organically and with integrity and confidence. I had to learn at an extreme level to “trust the process,” that gallant notion that McNiff (1998) puts forth in *Trust The Process - an artist's guide to letting go* (p. 13). Moustakas (1990) states “the heuristic research process is not one that can be hurried or timed by the clock or calendar” (p. 14). Researching, I made space for grace in my soul and mind. As Nepo (2012) puts it in *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen: Staying Close to What is Sacred*: “To move through the dark into blossom is the work of soul” (p.71). I agree with Nepo, as I do with this next statement of Allen’s (1995): “Direction must come from the soul, which is eternal, elemental, and ultimately unknowable to both men and women” (p. 182). Wholeness meant that the whole of me was invited to be present in the moment(s) being made visible. I was given the dignity and soulfulness that the finite and infinite needed to make manifest.

“A topic chooses a researcher through his or her complexes as much as, and perhaps even more than, he or she consciously chooses it” (Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 135). These words made sense to me as a researcher and participant. I heralded this as a truth, as I reflected on the many facets involved, by virtue of me being voluntarily both the object and subject of my in-depth self-study. As a researcher, I was very much aware that there was at times a surreal energetic rhythmic alive presence sustaining me. I knew I had reached this *something* (this calling) and *it* had touched me when a visceral sense of calmness came over me, a sense of expansion, an intuitive wholeness, a peace that did not need to be cognitively understood, to maintain *its* relationship truth to me and me to it.

This was an in-depth process, a holistic process, one that defied words, and answered only to itself. I just needed to respond by *showing-up* with openness of mind and heart, which, as my inquiry unfolded into years of study, was becoming a natural occurrence. Sometimes, however, this implicit (unknown) *something* became explicit, manifesting *itself* in my creativity in a way that could not always be reduced, or coaxed to take on the form of words, but that remained present nevertheless. My process was to spend time gazing at my images and allowing them the space to gaze back at me. There was nowhere to go (cognitively), nothing to be (researcher/participant) - just to remain present- allow for space - for now. This was a very important part of the process of re-searching - the not knowing and allowing manifestation to occur.

Sacredness of the work

As a researcher I made a specific sacred space to hold the sacredness of the work I needed to do, both in the interior of my home and also in the bush environment outside. Although he was referring to the hermeneutic field of enquiry, I concur with Romanyshyn (2007) in how this impacted the ‘how’ of my thesis work. The *space* held relevance for me also and was fundamental to my process as a researcher and participant in the writing of my thesis. In establishing “the presence of the unconscious we are the ones whose task it is to set the stage, as it were, for this to happen” (p. 258). This was also a matter of being a transparent ethical researcher, giving the reader my own bias in this regard, as I believed what Romanyshyn says is fundamental to the process of an in-depth self-inquiry, and most assuredly was for me, in bringing my thesis through its unfolding and to completion.

Allen (1995) writes that “the wonder of the image process is that it supports us at the level of need we have at any moment if approached with intention and attention” (p.105). I found this to be true as I kept inquiring how the presence of wholeness manifests itself amidst living with a broken heart. There was a definite shift of consciousness happening for me, in a way that I had never thought possible and I believe Polanyi (1966) touches on it when he says: “These levels form a hierarchy of comprehensive entities, for the principles of each level operate under the control of the next higher level” (pp. 35-36). A maturation occurred in relation to being a researcher, in what I was creatively engaging in (image making), and in what I was attending to in my scholarly studies. Sense-making took place, albeit not always in the realm of the cognitive ability to write about it immediately. Primarily, my intuitive place of knowing “knew”, and I continued to trust the process with vigor, vitality and enthusiasm.

Emergence

My process at this time included deep play in the writing down of spontaneous, copious notes and phenomenological art renderings, (on paper or land) ‘in the present moment.’ Moustakas (1990) would say I was being “awakened in consciousness” (p. 31). Deep within me I was also experiencing what McNiff (2013) states here:

Just as artfulness permeates scientific invention (Beveridge 1953), art can be pursued scientifically, but it will always assert its unique nature through the spontaneous emergence of discovery, often contrary to plans and most carefully developed strategies. (p. 7)

I wanted to be mindfully aware of my responsibility in using an arts-based phenomenological approach, in order to remain with the spontaneous flow of creativity

needing expression. Allen (2005) writes: “If art is a spiritual path, it must lead outward from the individual listening with the body, mind, heart, and soul into the commons, that place where we are called to serve. To be authentic, this path must be well trod both inward and outward” (p.205).

Moreover, Moustakas (1990) has recognized that “the heuristic researcher has undergone the experience in a vital, intense, and full way” (p. 14). As a researcher actively and organically using an arts-based phenomenological approach, my process naturally became an embodied experience. There was a depth of soulfully knowing that my inquiry was being answered.

Trusting the Art

My confidence in the use of an arts-based phenomenological inquiry had to be garnished with trust, as Allen (1995) adjoins: “Trust soul, trust image, and trust your own gut” (p. 63). Taking this advice to heart, I was not disappointed, as a researcher and participant, as the subject and object. How does the presence of wholeness manifests itself admits living with a broken heart? My images and creativity played an ineffable role in moving me phenomenologically through my lived experience. This definition that McNiff (1998) gives of a heart image resonated with me: “If the image of the door, or the heart, emerges from both personal artworks and those of clients, we are anchored to immediate experiences as we investigate more global patterns” (*Art Based Research*, p. 127). As a researcher, deep into the process of my inquiry and having gained more and more understanding and insight into the universality and connectedness of our human existence, McNiff’s words held a hallmark of truth for me.

I was becoming more self-reliant and self-confident in my research, engaging in an intimate trusting relationship with my arts-based phenomenological research inquiry. I needed to delve into depth psychology and undertake a spiritual self-study. In fact, bringing creativity into the body of my inquiry was making me more eloquent in researching. It became a wonderful container for what my heart and spirit needed to explore, and what ultimately would need to be unearthed and faced on a personal level. My process is best described firstly by McNiff (1998) in *Art Based Research*: “Art-based research grows from a trust in the intelligence of the creative process and a desire for relationships with images that emerge from it. These two focal points are the basis for a new tradition of inquiry” (p. 37). My thesis inquiry about the manifestation of wholeness was similarly fueled by my desire to know and to trust the creative process as a researcher, and to embody the results as a participant. McNiff’s words therefore cannot be overemphasized, for they express the inner logic of the methodology I followed. According to Allen (2005), “each art experience moves through a cycle of inquiry, engagement, and celebration” (p. 8). As a researcher I began to call this the ‘trinity’ of wholeness, as each needed the other in this step-by-step process. This process has been succinctly and clearly outlined by Allen (2005), and it is a very powerful praxis with immeasurable empowering effects and affects. That as a researcher I can personally attest to. There is a natural unfolding that occurs. With intention, the research question becomes enlivened and is evoked in moving through the cycle of art inquiry.

Illumination Phase

Moustakas (1990) writes: “The process of illumination is one that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. Illumination ...adds something essential to the experience” (pp. 29-30).

In *Art Based Research*, McNiff (1998) writes of Pat Allen’s authorship and contribution to the field, that she “has taken artistic self-inquiry to a new level of depth. The enthusiastic response to Allen’s book illustrates the hunger within the creative arts therapy profession for this type of inquiry” (p. 28).

I too felt this ‘hunger’ develop over the process of my thesis work - an insatiable appetite to create and understand the healing process that was occurring, something that as a researcher I could not always articulate with words alone. However, the moment of knowing did not necessarily have to be lost to memory. Delving deeper into my inquiry: “How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart?” I needed to follow an arts-based phenomenological research approach. The Open Studio Process (Allen, 2005) spoke to me of a path I could follow to explore the illuminative organic nature of just remaining present to this moment in time as a creative *being*, as a researcher and participant. Palmer (2004) writes: “When we are rooted in true self, we can act in ways that are life-giving for us and all whose lives we touch” (p. 39). Moustakas (1990): “At the heart of heuristics lies an emphasis on disclosing the self as a way of facilitating disclosure from others - a response to the tacit dimension within oneself sparks a similar call from others” (p. 17). Through transparency as a researcher with my in-depth self-inquiry, I was hoping for such a response from the reader.

Allen (1995) writes: “The images are carriers of aspects of our soul’s experience rather than symbols of religious dogma. The soul’s remedy comes in letting the images

convey their message directly” (p. 73). Deep listening to my images (some of which I have shared as part of this thesis) most certainly enriched me, not only in the ‘present moment’ of doing art, but also later, at the completion of my thesis. There were revelations in the manifestations of the images, akin to when a scientist in a laboratory witnesses the changes made in his petri dish. The cyclical process of dialogue with the images uncovered their insights for more detailed research purposes. Greater integration, greater wholeness (mind, heart, soul) was embodied by me as a researcher in my openness to deeply listen, to deeply play. Without fear, in the bounds of creativity, I did and could explicitly embody Oneness at a level that can only be described as soulful. “When the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition, the illumination as such is a breakthrough into conscious awareness” (Moustakas, 1990, p.29).

Explication Phase

“Interpretation not only adds nothing to heuristic knowledge but removes the aliveness and vitality from the nature ... and essences of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 19). The heuristic method together with an arts-based phenomenological approach lent itself as a structure, a tool for me to go deeper and deeper into my self-study: “How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart?” It allowed me further insights and illuminated the point of entry that I needed to take. “The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31).

My research transformed and reshaped and forever changed the totality of my existence in this world and the lens through which I perceived. I was being instructed by

life *itself*. I was awake if only for *now* and as a researcher; that *now* gave me wholeness and life. Nepo (2012) writes: “God keeps breaking our trance so we might have another chance to be enfolded in the Whole” (p. 66). I had been altered: I knew it, I felt it, I allowed it. My free will had been discharged in my every earthly exhalation, into my very existence. As a researcher I witnessed it all. I was not, nor was my world, what it had been before. In fact it was an impossibility, it was no-longer a truth for me to even contemplate. Moustakas (1994) writes: “Epoche requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to *see* what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (p. 33). In researching my in-depth self-inquiry thesis question, an arts-based phenomenological inquiry became an invaluable partner, a true gift. The process of becoming aware of my interiority, (creativity and image making), and having that awareness acknowledged, witnessed by self and at times by others, began the alignment of wholeness in action. My interior and exterior worldview of self and others was changed. Giving space to the witnessing presence and acknowledging the participant’s unique journey, brought a co-research partnership to bear. In a soulful way, a knowing way, an action orientated way, art images would birth and be cradled when the time was right for me. These would in turn give me the strength, courage and tenacity to continue with its process. Ultimately, recognizing the wholeness, that I was all along, paradoxically expanded out to incorporate *all my relations*, in communion and community with wholeness.

My re-searching journey could be best described as a pilgrimage, I remained aware of what Polanyi (1966) brings attention to when he says:

To see a problem and undertake its pursuit is to see a range of potentialities, believed to be accessible. Such heuristic tension appears to be generated in the alert mind ... But this tension appears to be deliberate: It is a response striving to comprehend a solution believed to be predetermined (p. 89).

Of course, this is the journey I had embarked on as a researcher at the outset of my thesis inquiry. Another point to make here about my experience in using an arts-based phenomenological approach is that the images and my creativity (on the land for instance) took on a persona all of their own, they likewise became ‘the subject.’ This allowed for another *research* perspective to come into view, they did (naturally) broaden the lens of object and subject. Allen (2005) writes: “art is a vehicle that allows us to transcend linear time, to travel backward and forward into personal and transpersonal history, into possibilities that weren’t realized and those that might be” (pp.1-2). As a researcher I was committed to that aspect of image making and saw it as especially pertinent around grief and trauma regardless of a person’s personal narrative. The space given to ‘transcend’ time, also gave a reprieve – a natural creative flow took over. Thus establishing grounding and transcendence on a very visceral level created greater potential for accessing holistic healing.

Creative Synthesis Phase

Using an arts-based phenomenological approach allowed me to become what Romanyshyn (2007) refers to as “an alchemist of meaning.” By this he means the researcher as alchemist attends to what is not said in what is said (p. 320). Images (even after the fact of co-creating with them) have a life of their own. After three years researching my thesis inquiry, I would have to say that there was always *something* more

that the image needed to communicate, either to myself and/or another. The ‘unsaid’ was ever present and that was a meeting point of relationship development in trusting the process, which unfolded in its time.

This quote from Laforgue also resonated with me: “Method, Method, what do you want from me? You know that I have eaten of the fruit of the unconscious” (cited in Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 259). Tacit knowing was either touched upon or accessed as my thesis unfolded, and the inquiry was embodied by me deeper still. Polanyi (1966) writes: “This shaping or integrating I hold to be the great and indispensable tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true” (p. 6). Mention is also made of this by Moustakas (1990) when he speaks of:

a recognition of tacit-intuitive awarenesses of the researcher, knowledge that has been incubating over months through processes of immersion, illumination, and explication of the phenomenon investigated...that can be expressed through a narrative, story, poem, work of art. (p. 52)

The inclusion of my art studio process brought this process of creative synthesis alchemy to life. The studio process is all detailed in Chapter 4 of my thesis. There I take the reader phenomenologically through the sequential process of my subjective unique experience: embodied wholeness. I now have a much deeper understanding and appreciation for these words from Polanyi (1966): “The true discoverer will be acclaimed for the daring feat of his imagination, which crossed uncharted seas of possible thought” (p. 76). Using an arts-based approach was an invaluable research tool in this regard. As a researcher I knew with the fullness of certainty, that I had ‘crossed uncharted seas’ that I would not have done otherwise. Using an Open Studio Process (Allen, 2005), I applied

myself with rigor and vitality to the deepening and ultimate fullness of my creative experience. Wholeness existed and was personally uniquely tangible, as is beautifully stated by Bridgman (1950), as cited in Moustakas, (1990): “This checking, judging and accepting that together constitute understanding are done by me and can be done for me by no one else. They are as private as my toothache, and without them science is dead” (p. 33).

My creative synthesis and art studio process also secured for me, as a researcher, a path for the reader to follow, a step by step process, that could be witnessed. The essence of my arts-based research experience was therefore brought into a creative synthesis not only for me, but equally for the further understanding of the reader. Polanyi (1958) in *Personal Knowledge*:

Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap which lies between problem and discovery. (p.143)

In the translation of my dialogue with the re-searched images onto the written page I was engaged in co-creating with them in relationship. I was actively involved in an insightful, healing partnership, subtly and profoundly held in this mysterious (organic) process. A bridge of a much greater understanding, both visceral and cognitive, was crossed by me as a researcher. This is an important point not to be missed. Moustakas (1994) writes, “Prior to any consciousness or directedness toward phenomena or intentional experience there is an existing individual” (p. 73).

In the praxis of image making, journal entries, writing, a birthing of awakened creative attention (focus) was experienced. Creative tension was present, but Romanyshyn (2007) alludes to the necessity of this, because “it holds the tension between concrete and symbolic modes of thinking” (p.213). In that *tension*, as a researcher I also found the other, the ancient ones, the brokenhearted who had walked this path before me, and who also had followed in my wake. Archetypal shadow(s) haunted my days and nights as a participant. My reality was exposed. Moustakas (1990) writes: “Finally, the heuristic researcher develops a creative synthesis, an original integration of the material and reflects the researcher’s intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of meanings and essences of the experience” (p. 50).

I wrote from the bones of my psychological and spiritual felt death. I had *quested* for and awaited my soul’s own nourishment to reach all the facets of my known (and unknown) earthly existence. My lived experience had to be journeyed with objectivity as a researcher and with subjectivity as the participant. My research question itched in my mind and heart day and night wherever I was: How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart? My seminal truth was this: *Brokenness is symptomatic of my conscious awareness of having been created infinitely whole.*

There are two quotes worth citing at this point. In *Meaning*, Polanyi and Prosch (1975) write: “the integration of incompatibles accomplished for us by the creative powers of the imagination are as in religious thought as they were in the arts” (p.125). Moustakas (1990) states: “the creative synthesis brings together the relevant factors of ambition, hope, expectancy, distortion, and denial and points the way to a new vision and plan of action” (p.122). I would have to agree.

For me personally, wholeness needed to be embraced in an intimate relationship with all of life. Through my research I realized that my wholeness of *being* did not go anywhere, as life was continuing on after the death of my son, *its* presence surrounding me was evidence enough. My wholeness is imprinted into life itself, a personal ‘blueprint’ that it does not hide from me, but I may choose to deny the fullness of *its* existence, (free will). There can be times when life can appear to be wearing a mask, a mask of total indifference toward me personally, my circumstances, my plight. As a researcher I would now admit to knowing life as the container for the soul of the wholeness of all of existence – the known and the unknown— that as a human I cannot possibly fathom and still hope to maintain a recognizable form of sanity. I can trust, surrender, believe and know my truth. I can walk with grace. Therefore, in the bigger picture, I do not necessarily need to take this aspect of experiencing life, living my life, too personally. And their incompatibilities *remain* incompatible. They must be joined together by a new act of our imagination every time we contemplate them. They thus appear to us as meaningful and coherent, but nevertheless have meanings that go quite beyond the “natural.” (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 125). In a world where we seem to take for granted that we are entitled to ‘know’ everything, this is a humbling and empowering truth to remember and practice.

As a researcher and participant I consider life and soul as a marriage, a partnership of birthing and (re) creating. Their union of love brings forth ‘form’ for the finite human eye to see, to brail, to connect to. Our wholeness always awaits us to reveal its presence, for our intimate relationship to be acknowledged, through our awareness, through our acceptance of being whole. Life and Soul’s offspring: you, I, and *All Our*

Relations are manifestations of love. Life and soul, love us all and will not, and cannot destroy love, it is Our Creator's Way. It is also my way as a mother and a *fellow traveller*. Allen (1995) sums up my own understanding in having journeyed through to the completion of my thesis. "It is in the telling and retelling, as truthfully as we can, and in the genuine witnessing of all the stories of all people that we heal ourselves and the world" (p. 199).

Ethical Issues

I honoured the fact that my son could not speak for himself in death - I gave him dignity. I omitted all names other than those of family members who wanted their names to stand. I held myself to a high level of accountability, responsibility, trustworthiness, truthfulness, authenticity, reliability and transparency as a spirit human. In the documentation and sharing of the process of my grief in an acceptable academic format, has been a challenge. I weathered what I needed to in order to achieve an in-depth self-study that would add to the field of literature for the benefit of my colleagues and fellow travelers.

In the process of my thesis work I was given the opportunity to share on an ongoing basis with my thesis supervisor. I was also open to answer questions or to listen to the observations of peer groups in embodied performances and thesis workshop discussions, as well as those of close individuals and peers. I shared my thesis with three separate faculty chairpersons in the past two years. I attended two thesis workshops given at St Stephen's, which provided an opportunity to discuss with faculty members and peers, the content and intent of my thesis, and acquire their guidance.

My personal counsellor and therapist read and discussed my thesis with me, both in person and on the phone. My thesis has undergone much scrutiny from both internal and external readers, who have made their comments known. I reflected deeply on what was said and or written, and when appropriate implemented their suggestions and/or observations.

My thesis work has been very sacred and personal for me. I secured what I needed to in this regard, in a prayerful and ritualistic manner. My first accountability was always to my own soul's wisdom of my experience and to the spirit of my son, in reverence.

CHAPTER 4: INTEGRATING WORLDS

In this chapter, my step-by-step process of doing art therapy is analysed in detail. This was my first art therapy intensive training experience, three years into my grieving journey. It was an incredibly powerful experience that literally turned my worlds: my aware consciousness, my unconscious, and the divine, into a manifested, integrated, seamless, soulful dialogue of wisdom wholeness made visible. This was life changing for me! The references cited in what follows connect to my studies in art therapy training, theology, and psychotherapy, as well as my own personal witness and reflective journal writings.

In what was to become my initiation into art therapy training, my pagan ancestors' call in the *how to* continue on in my process and on my life journey was honoured. I was immediately converted to the integrity of art therapy's soulful healing holistic process. I have not looked back since, nor will I. I was instantly and intuitively reminded of my wholeness, my ancient memory having been soulfully touched upon. Humanly, I sought to make visible my own innate knowing of wholeness; a portal into my innate wholeness wisdom was made manifest. This is what I now share.

My first experience of facing a blank piece of paper entailed two coloured oil pastels, one in each hand. I breathed a very deep inhalation and an equally deep exhalation – this breathing exercise helped to centre me, and ground me. I wanted to empty; I wanted to approach the in-class experience with openness and with the clarity of my intention – to remain empty (without prejudice) and open. Allen (2005) says in *Art is*

a Spiritual Path that “intention, our direct statement of what it is we hope to receive through our images, is the first step of art as a spiritual path” (p. 7).

It was requested that I close my eyes. I felt my heart beat begin to quicken, pulsating faster than was usual. I did not want to miss a beat. I needed and wanted to be present, even for myself. Could it be that I was now with eyes closed navigating toward the blank paper? My heart was gripped in fear. There was tension; this I knew was due to being a part of the creative act of art making. Co-creation must and would take place in what was to unfold: all that was visible and invisible in all of creation. Nachmanovitch (1990) writes in *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* that “the imagination is our true self, and is in fact the living, creating god within us” (p. 193).

I clutched one oil pastel in each hand. In the left hand was yellow, in the right hand was blue. I made the forward steps, the forward motions toward the blank, stark white paper. My movement forward seemed to me a preamble to entering the energy (motion) of all that exists or will always be so. There was a sense of wonder at knowing and yet not knowing the other dimension, that other place that I was now entering into.

On touching the paper with the outstretched fingers on my right hand I was confident that the paper was in front of me. I proceeded to make long, sweeping motions with both of my arms, placing the oil pastel onto the paper; with each encounter it left its mark. No movement was wasted, all was to be recorded. My eyes were still closed. I had a sense of utter freedom from being seen by myself or the other students on either side of me. My breathing was willingly going deeper; in fact I wanted this. I could feel my whole body engage, as if my body had already known the dance, the rhythm. Soon, there were no thoughts at all, just movement that carried me into it. More precisely, I felt one with it.

Chaos of creation held its own peace, and was the only response I could cognitively register.

It seemed to be far too soon that I heard a faint voice ask for my “eyes to open.” I looked with amazement at what was before me, on the no longer blank white paper. It was at this particular moment that I remembered that I had used an intention before embarking on the art work, a possible end product already having been determined. That being said, it would be fairer to say that the intention had become the silent observer, soon in lexicology to be forgotten! My intention, which had been drawn into the creation, perhaps in the position of co-creating, was now at peace.

I looked at the now becoming creation. “Now, I must invite the image to speak. In order to move into the realm of the spiritual with this image” (Allen, 2005, p. 64). I asked it, “What is it you have to tell me? What is it you need me to listen for? What is it I need to heal? How may I serve you, who is also me?” I used soft eyes. I used tearing up eyes. I used eyes wide open. I used closed eyes to take a breath. I did not want to miss a thing. Our relationship had been initiated, in the darkness of my closed eyes, born now into the light; a continued trust if its (our) unfolding was needed.

Soon came the head of the Buffalo – what? Really? I remember thinking to myself “this is working, this works!” Needing to outline the buffalo in a darker colour, I walked over to the materials table. The image of the buffalo was still there when I returned, it was very visible to me. The colour I chose was an acrylic dark brown paint. I continued to deeply inhale and exhale. I stepped back, smiling as if soon the very motion of the smile would bring tears rolling down my cheeks – tears hungry to keep moving along their own experience would fall down my chin. All my senses appeared to be on

alert. “Is this full embodiment?” Later I would ask myself this question, but then I just wanted to feel. This wholeness was very real, very healing, very nurturing, and very soulful.

Then came the shape of the Earth Mother: breasts, belly, thighs, and eyes. “Blessed be, welcome home,” she spontaneously spoke to me, after I had made inquiry of her. I outlined her with full vigour; I used green and brown crayon. The Snake, coiling upwards toward Earth Mother from the bottom of the page appeared, looking Earth Mother in the eyes. Asking the snake what it wanted, I was told to look for its tail. I looked and at the very bottom of the page, two circles presented themselves, taking on the guise of a head, an attached small circle, which was forming a body configuration with the bigger circle. No other features were present. The Snake’s tail pointed to where the heart would be on the bigger circle. This was true creation, I thought, the shedding of forms to become one and then another form, born from the heart of love. I had entered the womb of creation, I had entered a place of meeting all that is, was, and will ever be. It was an ineffable place.

I stepped back again. Excitement now overtook my senses, my spirit, my soul. What would I see next? A Bear appeared, a tiny baby bear face. So prominent was the baby bear face I was utterly amazed that I had not seen it before. A gentle, contemplative smile caressed his face. I did not need to ask him a question. I knew instantly he was to be my witness. My son had been given a Cree name when he was about five years old by an Elder, and that name in English was Bear. The badge of the Warwickshire police investigating team also has a bear on it. Relationship with my art piece was becoming deeper, more confident, and trusting. I outlined Bear in a lovely, rich, deep blue acrylic

paint. It was at this time in the process that I realized I had not been using a regular paint brush, but rather a small metal fashioning tool, perhaps used with clay. Somehow this was of no concern whatsoever. We must “inquire about what intrigues and interests” (Allen, 2005, p. 33), and I had been doing this with my imagination. “Hear the image on a soul level when it speaks, which allows us to respond with compassion and gratitude” (Allen, 2005, p. 25). All was well! I belonged to an ancient circle. I was whole.

Just atop and to the left of my tiny baby-faced bear, I saw a Mama Bear, with three of her cubs, all gazing out of the paper as if witnessing me. I outlined their forms using the rich, dark blue acrylic paint. No sooner had I finished their outline when right beside them came Eagle. I loved this flow, this creative zone, this wholesome infinitive space. Colin had brought my ceremonial Eagle feather over to England, to place in our son’s hands, along with sweetgrass and sage as he lay in his coffin. Gerard Michael was cremated holding the Eagle feather. The Eagle visited Colin and me in the physical on our return home to Canada, by circling us. Another day an Eagle feather was left for us, in a place that could not be missed. In this moment also the Eagle was a gift.

Between the Two Circles coiled by the tail of the Snake and the baby-faced bear, (Image 1) two full horse faces appeared, with just the forehead and one eye of a third directly behind them. I outlined them in dark blue; the contrasting lightness of the blue oil pastel that I had initially used was now a background colour. The horses’ heads were gently covered with a billowing light blue cloud, other-worldly for sure.

A wolf head appeared by the body of the snake, and also the head of a cattle beast, horse, and beaver. I outlined them quickly in dark brown acrylic paint, not wanting to miss their call to be seen. No sooner had I completed that task when the shape

of what could be considered the image of Merlyn presented itself. Only the right side of his head was visible, covered in white hair, with a long, white, flowing beard. His shoulder was covered in gold, and his arm was visible up to the elbow. This image presented some other colours that needed to be used. “How usual is that?” I asked myself, then decided it did not matter. I was not alone. I was not so isolated in my grief. Levine (2005) says in *Unattended Sorrow*, “It is as the heart turns toward others that it finds room for its pain – the heart we all share, experiencing the pain common to all” (p. 189). In my case, the ‘others’ were not in the physical, but served me well, spoke my language, in my unconscious they had waited for me. Levine (2005) adds that “feelings of loss don’t go away, they go deeper” (p. 9).

I was no longer envisioning with just my eyes but with the fullest of imagination, colour and all. The journey of co-creating was unfolding before me in unimaginable, ways. Levine (2005) knows that “to make peace with our pain, we must come to trust it enough to be able to approach it without tightening our belly” (p. 119).

With the golden colour of acrylic paint in my left hand and a thick paint brush in my right hand, I stepped back in the rhythmic motion of a creative dance, between the images, the colours, my imaginative insight, and my body. We were all participants. I desired to do my part, and whatever I had to move through to achieve that aim. Rogers (1993) says in *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing* that “facing the unknown can be terrifying, whether we face it through words, art, movement, sound, or writing” (p. 125). I saw Angel Wings and their silhouette heads embracing the art piece, becoming the art frame within the outskirts of the paper. Immediately I coloured the gold of their outline, the wings needing to be fully coloured in with the gold. I felt completely

connected. The baby Bear asked for the gold to be swept over his head, in long strokes of gold coming only to the left side of his head. Willingly, I did just that.

Mother Earth was now birthing shadows of embodied images. I fetched red paint and a bigger paint brush. I made short strokes of red paint down from her breasts, which coincidentally were now resembling Owl Eyes. I pushed on using the short red paint strokes along her thighs, across her heart, across her whole torso. She seemed complete with that vibrant colour of red, of blood, of birth, of death, of renewal.

As part of the creative dance I stepped back from the art. Now the whole piece was asking that all that be embodied in the Womb of the art. Their spirits were asking that the red paint enclose them all, in the shape of an unfolding multilayered heart. I stretched out my right arm with red paint dripping from the brush, and then I stretched out my left arm in the same manner. Over and over I went, using the envisioned shape the art piece had asked for. This communion of intimate, soulful relationships persisted until I had the bodily sense the work was completed. When talking about method and language, I would concur with the statement of Levine and Levine (1999) in *Foundations of Expressive Art Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives*:

...the search for an adequate conversation becomes a 're-search' of philosophical traditions closer to phenomenological epistemology, aesthetics, and hermeneutics or musicology, art history, ethnology of the arts, religious studies and anthropological psychology, than to behavioural science and clinical psychology. (p. 38)

I engaged in the celebration of dance, stepping back and inquiring for the last time. Red paint dripped from my fingers. At the bottom of the page the Heart shape looked like the opening womb. “Blessed be!” the Womb said.

Allen (2005) discusses the next step, saying:

Most of all, engagement means showing up and working: in other words, discipline. Witness writing can be especially helpful in the engagement phase; for when we become deeply immersed in our work, the image becomes very eloquent about what it wants next. (p. 41)



Image 1: Welcome Home

Next, I sat with my journal in front of the art work and wrote the following entry:

Owning, Releasing, and Letting Go!

My pulse, My well-being, My very beingness is among you

Divine within, without, all around – capturing only momentarily sacred space – inside out – unconscious

Myths, Symbols, Stories (present and past)

Honour, Dignity, Ancestors

No right or wrong – Free association

Meeting the place I came from, and, the place I will return!

Relationship to self and the other, has been and will be – Not in this space or time – in the eternal – in the essence of eternity

What has been, will be – is – SPACE

The in between – space – access entry into what is!

Unique for me, to me, within me, And, also to you!

Honour, hold that space, know that space, BE that space – the Chalice, the Holy Grail.

Acknowledge its aliveness, its pulse, its wellbeing, its arrival, its birth, and resurrection

For the SPACE of the unconscious brings honour – it is where you reside, continue to live and will return.

I felt compelled to continue exploring what was hidden. My first art image had given me the strength to feel grounded and centred, but what was next? “Challenges to inquiry abound. The first and worst is staying too busy to notice what attracts you” (Allen, 2005, p. 38).

I sensed implicitly the grounding of self being felt would give me intuition and the spirit for further exploration into sensing my body, namely my underbelly. That

which was inside of me needed to be explored. It needed the light of day. I was prepared to move into this sight-unseen adventure.

I went to the materials table and picked up a plastic plate, which was to serve as a paint palette. I looked at the banquet of colours, all standing in their splendour in a row, in many rows in fact. With soft eyes, inwardly I honoured that I was not the only one participating in the choosing. I was merely another participating member of creation. This insight my first image revealed to me on a grand scale. I took my time in a meditative way.

I chose red and yellow acrylic paint and a big, thick brush, not the biggest, but bigger than I had used before. I took a beaker for a water container and filled it from a bucket that was supplying us with the water. I went back to my place in the circle of women, who (like me) had their easels (large tables placed against the wall for stability) positioned all around the room. I enjoyed the scene before me. That circumstance of the tables needing to be placed against the wall had made this beautiful space into a circle. On a very deep, personal level, the circle meant safety and security for me and I would have guessed for others also. The environment in which we were all now co-creating was that of a hushed, sacred stillness of creativity at work.

I decided to stride more deliberately to the creative space and my place in the circle. I was moving my body, walking with a fervency that spoke of my readiness to meet what the plain white paper, along with my chosen colours, needed to reveal in the art work. I breathed deeply, and I moved my arms in a circular motion, front-wards and backwards. I pushed on my legs one after the other, as if acting in accordance with a scheduled army drill. I wanted to both give and receive from this newfound relationship

with art making, with this soulful connection I was making with my grief, with the world, with my very existence, thereby feeling a connection to my son, the divine, and the ancestors. Rogers (1993) notes that “if the clear, calm lake is the goal, and the river is the flow of creativity, then the expressive arts are one canoe in which we can travel” (p. 188).

I sort of knew where I needed to go, deep inside myself, should that be required in my process. If not, I was prepared to just surrender to what must be. I was prepared to remain open and sensitive. What I did not know is how it would look.

I breathed again. I listened with great intensity. I was devoted to the task at hand. I moved my right hand with the yellow paint brush, readying its position. I made huge, sweeping strokes. I wanted to make an enquiry deep within, deep inside my soul. I was fascinated by the way my body was responding, like a choreographed dance. My body was being informed of its rhythm, the rhythm this creation was beginning to take, to its ultimate end. I was ready, I was prepared: a warrior(ess) on a mission, and focussed. The art image, along with its creating, had engaged me. I listened deeply – I breathed in deeply.

I used my left hand to put the red paint on the paper, again using sweeping motions; utter abandonment overtook me! I wanted to use my non-dominant hand. I wanted to move with the emotion that would create.

The stirring of my heart was palpable. Could I trust even deeper? Whirling circles filled up a whole page that was not contained and yet was. This was a paradox. Did I dare move with its swelling, its need to be born? Yes, I did. I had to go again to the materials table and pick another colour. This time it was the colour black and I also took a little time to top up my yellow and red colours just in case they too were needed.

I emptied my beaker and filled it with fresh, clean water. Placing my hands in the water felt soothing, which was just what my hands needed. Walking across the room, I returned to my painting. Stopping awhile to gaze at my painting from different angles, different perspectives appeared which mattered greatly to what was seen. I moved my body in front of the art, swinging my hips gently from side to side. Looking again at the brush I had picked up, I realized it needed to be replaced with a bigger one. I exchanged it and returned once again to my painting.

Immediately I began to paint with the black, just letting it take me where it needed to go, without questioning. In this moment in time I was a part of everything and everything in the creative universe was a part of me. Soon I saw the snake twisting and turning. I did not know where it began or ended. Dipping my paint brush in the black, I was present, aware, and alive with the sensations of co-creating. Cassou and Cubley (1995) say in *Life, Paint, and Passion: Reclaiming the Magic of Spontaneous Expression* that “when you are moving spontaneously, you are discovering the true gesture of creation within yourself, a gesture that will continue to grow and bloom as you continue painting” (p. 8). Excitement and anticipation were bubbling up inside of me. I stepped back to get another perspective and this happened spontaneously. My sense of time had vanished with the outside world, but in another realm I was in sync. I knew it. I felt it. I did not want to leave what I had started in this moment in time, so I pushed forward. I asked the snake, “What is your purpose? Why are you showing yourself?”

Strangely enough, I knew I was to get another colour and that colour had to be white. Walking back to my creative spot, I then saw where the white was to go. I saw

even more – I saw a very personal me. This was the me that was deep inside, in the form of sound.

I saw the face of a woman (image 2) in an open mouth scream (that is where the white paint needed to go, in the opening of the screaming mouth, to extenuate the mouth's shape and its call). The woman's eyes were closed, her forehead, face, and head were smeared with red paint (blood). I was fully aware that I had no realization whatsoever that she had been present all along in this mystery. How could I have missed her, when she was plainly in view? More was to be revealed. Cassou and Cubley (1995) add “once you are free of the limiting idea that you need to preconceive your painting, you can sense directly, allowing all sorts of spontaneous images to arise” (p. 69).



Image 2: The Scream

The snake wrapped itself, not tightly, but in a protective way all around her. There was a whirl of spiralling circles above her head. Cloud-like, gentle, and yet stern (another paradox) and atop of that, were the feathered wings of a raven in full flight. The Bear, with its head turned away from the scream, appeared to be anticipating something. The Wolf walked towards the woman, obviously wanting to be closer. The head of an Eagle patiently waited for Wolf to come closer. A Bat in full flight seemed to be in conversation with Wolf. “The forms and images that we have inside are authentic. When we let them manifest in their own unique way, we are in touch with something beyond ourselves” (Cassou & Cubley, 1995, p. 78).

Still, the woman screamed, a distorted scream, a sound that all of creation knew and cared about, and that was now united in supporting its release. I moved a chair directly in front of the painting. I sat on the chair facing her, the figure I knew in my soul was me. I was absolutely dumbfounded, astounded at what I was seeing. How could the materials have known? Was it I that was their instrument after all? I needed to journal with an immediacy that pulsed throughout every cell in my body. My words would not matter. It was merely the action of journaling that had to happen. Sitting facing my art work, *The Scream*, I wrote in my journal the following:

The Scream that will not go away –

The scream that prevails regardless; brings no relief, no matter what I do or say.

The scream ever present not knowing when it should or could reach the path of no return – at this present time or at some future date?

This scream that won't go away.

I ask

In your eyes between your eyes what is it you desperately need to say

reply

My heart is broken, it breaks time and time again...

I ask

What sound of yours need to be heard?

reply

A howl, that touches the middle of the earth and curls its tail towards the sky

I ask

Blood in the form of red paint speckled deliberately – do they point to what words could not convey?

reply

Yes, the vibrancy that sustains life, also brings about its death

Scream little one, I am burying me this day.

You cannot hear the sounds no more, the sounds that speak of yesterday.

I ask

Where is your hope?

reply

I seek it out, in snatches of witnessing humanity

I ask

Your courage this day?

Reply

I revealed myself to you – to us

I ask

The universe is listening, speaking only through prayer; the universe is listening does it matter that somebody cares?

reply

Connection is important, more important is that that connection is soulfully felt – true nourishment

I ask

What am I feeling so vulnerable about?

reply

You see the sacredness of your pain and of others' pain too – With the wrong eyes or words you know their witness, can appear cold and severe; creating further wounds.

I see you wolf ever present, ever vigilant, ever hearing every word. You, protect because you know I sense fear. My stomach feels sick, what is that my tiredness? Sick I feel –

I ask

What could open your eyes, silence? Stillness? Words that cannot betray? Give me hope this day.

I ask

Is there hope?

reply

Hope is born in us all, every day.

I ask

Open your eyes, is there hope?

reply

Yes, that is what has to happen you open your eyes, to see with your heart and that sends messages to your soul.

I ask

What would hope look like? What does it say, symbol is fine, come now what do you want to say?

reply

I screamed with the support of you today! Is that not what you had buried inside of you, that you carry, and will not go away?

Here on Mother Earth is quite different, I'm somewhat frayed. Tired I am,
Tired I need to say.

The room is hot I'm burning up failing at writing words, that have little or
anything cognitive to say!

Scream deep within me that will not retreat, will not go away! – Explain to
me now, so I can play.

“Art as a spiritual path teaches us a new way to relate, while intention and witness
encourage our sense of discipline to grow and develop” (Allen, 2005, p. 109).

I hurriedly placed a desk directly in front of The Scream, along with a chair,
scissors, magazines, glue, and a piece of construction paper, white in colour. I spoke
directly to the mouth of the scream and told her to give me symbols that I could paste
onto the paper that would give me more clarity. Words were miserable. I was getting lost
and found and lost again. I did not want to hear anymore, say anymore. I just wanted a
felt sense of togetherness in doing this next art piece. “Collage is a good transitional
activity. Engaging with the very images that bombard us and remaking the messages can
be very liberating” (Allen, 2005, p. 50).

This is what happened.

I sat almost touching the painted image; I could not have gone closer. I was not
afraid at all; I was in a strange yet gentle, peaceful mood, in solidarity with creation. I
remained in a meditative stance, alert and very much aware of what my purpose was to
be. I went through a few magazines and papers. I cut out the images that I had a felt sense
in my body I should be securing, with the painting, more importantly the mouth of the
scream, affirming that I was on the right track.

There is an intelligence within you that is superior to any solution
contrived by the mind. If you dare follow the inner call without

reservation you are putting your trust in a reality that can never be captured by ideas or concepts. (Cassou & Cubley, 1995, p. 152)

After some time I began to clean everything away, except the images I had cut and the glue. Again I sat with the images in front of me and the stark white construction paper. Firstly, I moved through the images, placing them in different piles, discarding onto a different pile what I instantly knew at this present moment in time I did not need. I took this pile away at the end of going through all the images and placed it in a file marked Miscellaneous. My thinking was that perhaps others would find them useful. In *Tending the Fire*, Levine (2003) says: "... intermodal nature of artistic activity – literally inter or between modalities. No one single artistic form can crystallize every feeling. It is through the interpenetration of the arts that expression can go deeper" (p. 74).

I cannot remember what was first stuck onto the page. I will only give an account of how it looked as a finished product, made in that time and space.

The image of a painted nude woman, surreal actually, with a blue shadow behind her, standing, looking out of the page, was stuck on the left side of the paper (as you looked at the paper).

Going along the top next to her was another naked woman lying on top of water, arms outstretched, her body all in red, on a blue shadowy bed.

Next to her was a big pregnant belly that just tipped the edge of her image, her hand touched the pregnant belly. On top of the pregnant belly was another naked figure of a woman, with her knees curled up and her arms embracing her knees, looking downward. Although there were beautiful coloured flowers surrounding her, she appeared hurt.

The last image on the top of the page, to the right hand side of the construction paper, was a huge oyster shell opened with a beautiful infant child sleeping belly down, arms outstretched, eyes closed: content, peaceful, ever so precious.

An image was placed on the edge of the shell facing downward of two masks: one smiling, the other in despair, the common prediction of Joy and Sorrow readily seen.

At the bottom of the page was an image of an ancestral costumed Indian Woman holding a small drum (Image 3). In the deepest sorrow she faced the other side of the paper, looking toward the end of the road, the journey as it were.

Beside her was an image of two girls gazing at their own and each other's reflections, kneeling on a wharf beside the water. One girl child had one of her hands in the water. She had long blond hair tied back in a ponytail. The other girl child looked on and she looked like me as a child, with a dark 'mission cut' hairdo. I had not noticed that before. Both were very reflective and knowing.

Up above them, another image of a full moon (Grandmother Moon) was seen through a window. It was a dark blue night and she was for me, a witness to us all in creation.

Right in the middle of the page was an image of a dark-haired woman, naked to the tips of her breasts, where there was a triangle, along with the picture of the Virgin Mary and a Feather. Neither of these images were placed on her by me or anyone else. They were part of the painting. I had not cognitively registered these two symbols in the triangle before. This had great significance for me in that I was raised Roman Catholic and considered myself to be eclectic, having embraced my own and this continent's pagan roots, which is what the feather represented for me in this image. The woman was

plaintive, very soulful, intense with her knowledge of what may be ahead of her on her life path. “Every painting has its cycles of birth, maturation, and death, and within every cycle a pulse beats” (Cassou & Cubley, 1995, p. 153). From my own experience, I would extend the word ‘painting’ to embrace all our soulful, spiritual, creative responses made manifest through whatever media is chosen. The heartbeat of creation is intrinsically, exquisitely known.

Next to her was another naked woman, with her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes closed - waiting very peacefully was my sense of her.

Underneath and beside the woman was a most gorgeous pink, violet, and yellow coloured flower. It had many folds, many petals, some outstretched, others folded upwards, not tightly, but with ease. “We are modelling not simply the making of external art products but also the ongoing remaking of our inner being” (Moon, 2002, p. 226). I truly felt an intra (internal) connection to this image, very spiritual; this was another surprise to me! Allen (2005) adds that “celebration is the stage of closure in the art making process” (p. 50).

The next image to the right was another image of an anciently dressed young Indian woman, who was looking directly out of the page, telling me all was well, and that I was on Sacred Ground. In *Studio Art Therapy: Cultivating the Artist Identity in the Art Therapist*, Moon (2002) writes: “Art therapy practice calls for a new understanding of aesthetics” (p. 133).

In summary, I would like to quote Allen (2005): “the goal of art as a spiritual path is to live a meaningful life, full of active participation with our own hands, minds, and hearts, and appreciation of the joy and pleasure and depth of soul that is possible” (p. 59).

With humility, I would like to emphasize inviting the dark night of the soul in our art creations also. As they come into the light, we in turn have the opportunity to become enlightened, in the balancing of living out our lives with the light and dark shadows that frequent our realities.



Image 3: Confrontation and Release

When I opened the book *Art is a Way of Knowing* by Allen (1995), immediately my eyes fell upon the words: “imagination is the deepest voice of the Soul and can be heard clearly only through cultivation and careful attention” (p. 3). Again Allen states that images “are a means of coming to know the richness and variety of our stories, their shadows and nuances” (p. 10). I wanted to meet soul, spirit, life, and death. I wanted to meet it all: what was hidden in this moment and yet to be revealed.

I was curious to know more about the depth of myself, the process of uncovering through the materials, and the actual creation of an art piece. There was everything to gain and nothing at all to lose. I had wounds in need of healing. I needed to see a visual companion to the words that I had tried to manufacture, which could not stand alone. The words could not tell enough of my story to bring me a sense of having touched upon the spot that was aching to be understood and seen. I needed to trust the process.

I am reminded of what I read in *Life, Paint, and Passion* by Cassou and Cubley (1995): “We live in duality. This is why we have been given the gift of creation – to be reminded to embrace all aspects of existence” (p. 51). When I have not acknowledged one or the other of my dualities or the duality of other humans is when I have not been in balance. Now I was looking at the seeming duality of life and death.

When I chose to embody the totality of this poetic art experience and movement, I wanted to know where it would all take me and why. What was I identifying? In *The Expressive Body in Life, Art and Therapy, Working with Movement, Metaphor and Meaning*, Halprin (2003) suggested a question I was able to ask of the part(s): “If the movement, drawing, or body part could speak, what would it say?” (p. 124).

I was surprised at how my legs and feet reacted, responded, moved, and did not move on a sensory level, in relation to what was happening and what was being asked of them in relationship to their history with me. More especially, I was surprised how in recent times they had held me up. What was it that they needed to let me know of their history with me? Our combined journey was at a meeting point. I was having to admit to myself that I had neglected my feet’s very consciousness. It was an interesting concept to

bring attention to these identified parts of me, because an awakening was happening. I could feel it. A story or stories needed to be told.

I desired to take this concept further, explore it deeper consciously, and move further into embodiment. I wanted to remain alert, aware, fully attentive to what was happening in my body, mind, emotions, and spirit. I set about finding out. I sat in a chair and meditated for a while, remembering to breathe and remain fully conscious of what I was doing. I felt a racing of my heart, a wondering of my mind, and an emotion of fear was welling up inside of me. I needed to move forward, however. I needed to experience what it was like to embody in process. I decided to do just that. Cassou and Cubley (1995) say in *Life, Paint, and Passion: Reclaiming the Magic of Spontaneous Expression* that “when done spontaneously and at its proper time, painting a fearful image from the deep recesses of the psyche is a profound event. Hidden in us is the whole world with all its aspects – its beauty, its love, its thirst to uncover truth” (p. 88).

I took off my socks, my shoes, and rolled up my pant legs. I filled up a baking dish with bright red paint, just large enough to place my feet in. Using a long piece of white paper, about five feet long, I was ready to make my mark. Moon (2002) in *Studio Art Therapy: Cultivating the Artist Identity in the Art Therapist* says: “art making always involves the externalization of thoughts, feelings, or ideas (expression) and their transformation into form (containment)” (p. 181).

Slowly I began to walk on the paper, (image 4), deliberately moving slower and slower, conscious of lifting one foot and then another. It was akin to a walking meditation. I decided there was nowhere to go but with the experience. There was a deliberate calmness that entered my body. I became oblivious to my surroundings. My

environment held no concern for me whatsoever. I remained focussed on the activity. After some time, I decided to dip my feet again in the red paint and take on another movement on the same paper. I decided to march, bringing my foot to the height of the corresponding opposite knee. I liked the sense of play that this movement afforded. So I marched this way for longer than the meditative slow walk. I thought that was interesting. I acknowledged and let the thought go.

After dipping my feet once again, I decided to dance on the paper. I twisted my feet in the style of “twist and shout”, and then moved as if dancing a waltz. I moved in circles, up and down, backwards, returning to slow, moving fast, and on and on I went. I became aware that I had not been paying any attention to the overall affect my painted feet were having on the paper. It was all about how the whole of me was feeling that produced the next movement. I was becoming more and more curious, because inside of me I could feel I was living through the memories of the changes in my life and that they were making their mark. I wept silently, tears rolled down my face. Still, I continued on. All was being revealed, every perfect sentence, every subtle nuance was being called forth with my feet, in red paint on a white piece of paper.

My feet began to slow down of their own accord. I moved around the paper, allowing the paint on my feet to come off as best as it could. I did this movement in a reflective, concentrated manner. I realized that my mind was becoming more and more engaged with memories. I allowed the memories to come. All I had to do was keep the movement going. My body was insisting on it. Strangely enough, this felt holistic, safe, and secure. No matter what memory came to the forefront of my mind, I recognized in my spirit that I had already survived it. Here I was making my mark, reminding myself

that I do exist, and that with all my culminating memories, I remain. That fact cannot be whitewashed away.

I remembered how I had tried to drill my right foot into old cobblestones in an ancient street in London, England. When I was handed my son's ashes the night was dark in my external world and ghostly in my interior world. How was it possible to be handed my son's ashes, with care certainly, but as if it were ordinary? All these memories came back to my present day awareness, flooding every cell in my body, engaging my mind with images, my heart with knowing. There were thoughts about how my son's body had lain on the highway flooded with blood, as his murderers escaped the scene. I had embodied the whole experience by walking on paper with red painted feet, making my mark. I was a mother who wanted to wipe up her son's blood, a shared life of blood, that began in the womb.

It was my feet and legs that had held me up emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I was silently overwhelmed with gratitude. I sensed myself get bigger inside. I applied my mind consciously as my breath journeyed, reaching down to the soles of my feet, and to the soul residing in my heart. There was the deepest acknowledged connection that took place. I was both witness and recipient, the wounded and yet the healer, all fused one into the other physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In this art activity I had stayed the course. I crawled emotionally to my heart's memories and my mind's images. Allen (1995) in *Art is a Way of Knowing: A Guide to Self-knowledge and Spiritual Fulfillment Through Creativity*, tells us to "remember that image work is powerful" (p. 157). I came away standing tall and grounded with an awareness of what embodied experience meant to me. I had wanted to remain aware and

pay attention to myself, physically, emotionally, and spiritually throughout the entirety of this exercise. Where in me needed still to be heard? Where in me needed this healing balm of my fullest presence, my fullest attention? What needed to be recognized and acknowledged?



Image 4: The Legacy of My Footprints

Allen (1995) says “I feel pulled to understand the image process, to generate some ‘theory’ to guide what otherwise often seems like random stabs in the dark” (p. 149).

Movement in my feet and legs continued throughout this whole activity. It was empowering. It was life giving. I was not afraid. I had connected at a very deep level, a soul level. I knew I had embodied the experience. I felt a feeling of pride come over me, a deep feeling of wholeness of having been acknowledged. I welcomed it with a big inhalation of gratitude and an exhalation of release. “Add the sound of your breath, letting it become the music which accompanies your movement. Begin to shape a ‘breath

dance” (Halprin, 2003, p. 137). I now knew exactly what that felt like and would endorse its medicine, its ritual, its very life force and wholeness of continued existence.

I needed to walk through the studio to the sink in the hallway, something I had not thought of before embarking on this activity. So I decided to wrap my feet in cloth from the rag box. I was drawn to a non-print material, off white and white in colour. I wrapped my feet up and had to walk gingerly and carefully. Everything seemed so perfectly right, so perfectly aligned. Moon (2002) says “that play, experimentation, and having a sense of humor are important aspects of any attempt to authentically translate art therapy experiences into effective communication” (p. 277). The door to the hall was opened by another; it seemed like a threshold had to be crossed and I perceived it as such. This ending ritual had to be witnessed by another. It was, fittingly so, by my instructor Heather Dawson, who had initiated me into art therapy. I walked through the door toward the sink. I desired not to speak so I did not. Moon (2002) acknowledges that “how and when and why we use words are – or ought to be – our everyday concerns as an art therapist” (p. 255).

I reached the sink, with its rubber hose hanging from the wall, and proceeded to wash my feet. I watched as the red paint began to disappear, mingled with the water through the drain. The red paint and water looked so beautiful in its meandering, finding its way to the drain hole. What splendid swirls of art in its impermanence were recognized, remembered, and gone. This integration into my consciousness seemed so fitting in retrospect.

I used cloth to dry my feet. It became an ancient ritual that I had not consciously thought of. It was a very sensual experience. There I was in the silence, feeling embraced,

feeling loved by my own hands, washing away the red paint from my feet. I was feeling connected on a holistic level. Levine (2009) says in his book *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering*, “in so far as sense-making happens, there is an element of shaping in sensing; what is given is received in a specific manner, taken up and made part of an ongoing flow of awareness” (p. 40).

I needed to document this experience, and I did so on returning to the room, after placing the painting on the storage room doors to dry. Moon (2002) advises to “recognize the need for an alternative language, one that embraces imagination as a core component of empathy, honors the authority of clients’ experiences, and gives credibility to the accuracy and specificity of poetic language” (p. 260). This is a most spirited, powerful core statement that I agree with. I wrote in my journal:

Chaos Awakening (the painting of my feet)

The Chaos

of

Birth

The Chaos

of

Death

Blood splattered

Nowhere

Else

to

Turn

Confront

What is

Confront

What must be

Confront confront you ask of me – I feel I am not walking but crawling on
my knees!

Chaos

The dance

Chaos

The awakening

From

This

Our earthly dance

What

Will be created

What will come to form

Chaos

Awakening

Decides when we

Should

Die

And

When we should be born!

There remained a change in my stature and how I held my body in this newfound, solid, grounded feeling I had somehow embodied. Allen (1995) says that “imagination is the deepest voice of the soul and can be heard clearly only through cultivation and careful attention” (p. 3). I had a new appreciation for what my feet, legs, and I had gone through and they were deserving of respect. I let my feet skip, dance, relax, and walk with dignity, consciously to the best of my ability. I acknowledged their existence with conscious awareness and practice. “By viewing the image as a self-portrait, you may recognize unrealized dreams that may still be within your reach in some form” (Allen, 1995, p. 173).

I wanted to feel every morsel of what was going on for me on every level of my conscious existence. As the day progressed I was embodying my art on another level: I had become the living phase of my art work. I was the one who had experienced the trauma, the grief, and was integrating it all into the body of the woman I was, into the mother I was. I had my own personal experience of what my traumatic experience had held for me that had, as Levine (2009) would say, already “pre-shaped” itself in me:

those experiences of suffering in which there is not a sense of conscious control, but in which there is nevertheless a pre-reflective awareness which renders the traumatic event capable of being remembered, even if the victim might wish to push the memory away. (p. 41)

Allen (1995) reminded me that “it is important to keep in mind that these images have an autonomous existence, a message to convey not only to you but to others as well” (p. 103).

I did not feel a distance from the painting of my feet sprawled all over a white piece of paper, with feet going this way and that, as it hung for all to see. Perhaps, as Levine (2003) says in *Tending the Fire: Studies in Art, Therapy, and Creativity*, “The arts in therapy have the capacity to help reconnect and recover lost fire in the self” (p. 177).

What was amazing to me was that there was no inner contraction on my part whatsoever, in my breath, or body, by essentially having part of my life on display. It had been so raw in the making, so utterly to do with my own inner world, my memories, and now it hung for all to see. What was intensely interesting is that I was not frazzled whatsoever; my painting held its story, its integrity, and so did I. Allen (1995) acknowledges that “without making art I may never have learned at all how to allow others into my experience, how to feel a part of the human circle” (p. 138).

The energy within which I carried myself had most definitely changed; there had been an integration, a somatically felt holistic wholeness. It became a lifetime prescription for me to honour these words consciously. Halprin (2003) writes:

the practice and repetition of moving through confrontation, release, and change builds up the muscles which allow us to tolerate, adapt to, and trust the cyclical nature of things, including the life of our own psyche. (p. 127)

Nachmanovitch (1990) says in *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* that “the Eastern idea of practice...is to create the person, or rather to actualize or reveal the complete person who is already there” (p. 68). Much that I had forgotten on a conscious level had revealed itself back to me from the unconscious. Having stood barefoot drumming for my boy; having walked into the morgue; having stood beside my boy’s body; having walked into the funeral home demanding that I be the one to place my son

in his coffin; having drilled my foot into the cobblestones, having stood up before many people and given Gerard Michael's eulogy; having faced each and every one of my son's murderers, my feet had much they needed to tell that I had forgotten to recognize in them.

Embodied visual grief and the traumatic experience of art making became for me holy ground. Where the peace of the soul could find a resting place, wholeness began to recognize itself and be recognized. My beauty of wholeness was the brokenness that was unafraid to go to the depths of hell and also to rise to the heavens with a boundless joy. It was the shredded heart of a mother who continued to love her son, her God, and her fellow travellers on this road toward peace (Image 5).



Image 5: If it be Your Will

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH RESULTS

I followed my soul and my heart instinctively when writing my thesis. In other words, I was engulfed in the deep intensive phenomenon of the brokenness of a mother's heart. I now broaden the lens somewhat, and engage in analyzing my narrative, from the standpoint of retrospective mindfulness. The harvesting of my insights, healing, and understanding will be threaded through the timeline of my experiences, as I journeyed in the how-to of my very personal journey, companioned by grief and trauma and what worked for me.

For instance, the first experience I had of asking for professional guidance and support, and being turned away, set in motion the *how to* of my own grief and traumatic journey through this grief. I learned through necessity to believe in my own intuitiveness and follow it through. Perhaps, in retrospect, I could now call it an unexpected benefit, a blessing in disguise. The truth of that will, of course, remain unknown. The teachings I received from that experience, however, are everlasting and far reaching.

With each step I took I became further enlightened in the *how to* of taking my next step. I started to wake up to life, to life's utterances of wholeness, on a much grander scale than I could have possibly conjured up for myself, or had conjured up for me by another human's perspective. I can now reflect that this is how I knew what I was doing was indeed working for me. This is also my present day truth of existence. This powerful bereaved mother force or energy within me, was fuelled by my passionate need to have a felt sense of where my son went, and how he was being treated. If I could still protect him, I would.

Nature

Nature always held out its welcome, its wholeness of understanding, its ability to make visible to me the concept of renewal in a multitude of manifested forms. I have always been open to nature's teachings. It is a very natural response to living my life. It is in my soul, spirit and life blood (even cognitively) to be in circle with nature – all my relations. Continuously and consistently, nature – with all its natural changing seasons – would draw me to still alive presence, for reflection, for pondering meditatively. Nature became my greatest companion in moving forward holistically, with a well-grounded foundation, for the well-being of my heart, soul, and mind.

The betrayal of life

My embodied sense of the betrayal of life echoed its presence in every cell in my body—the horror, the immensity, terror of this breathed in personal reality of mine. Mystically, and most curiously, that sense of betrayal itself became the springboard from which I could reconnect with life, without fear, on a much more aware, intimate, egalitarian basis. It was a circle of life that I am a part of and that brought back to me the continuity of my holistic strength. The awareness of my wholeness was achieved by that enlightenment, that wisdom knowing. What remained was an attitude that life had to prove itself to me. In the first press release, following Gerard Michael's death when I first arrived in England, I had spoken my truth out loud and that truth now resounded in my heart, mind, and soul. Because it was relegated to print, in its black and whiteness, it became an excellent starting point for me. I opened the door to myself and stepped right in.

As I moved through my grief and trauma, many rites of passage happened consciously. These were spiritual practices I already had in place and that nurtured my intuitive responses. When my conscious awareness was awoken by my unconscious, indicating that present action needed to be taken, there was already a spiritual foundation on which to build that would support the next step in my process. This is where faith had to be practised and nurtured. I never knew what that next step was until it happened. My process was as simple and as complex as that. Perhaps grace had decided to companion me. I was vulnerable to the extreme. It was a paradoxical situation for my mind to comprehend, but not for my soul and spirit to acknowledge. Therefore, I was met at a maturation level that would make sense-making happen for me.

I had already endured as a human: the loss of family, friends, dreams, trust and hope. All of these prior experiences played a minor role. What I learned was that no matter how resilient, how flexible in my life experiences around grief and trauma I had been in the past, nothing could have prepared me for the onslaught of emotions, or for the dark nights of the soul that the reality of the death of my son brought to me. The wholeness of me was deconstructed, and the cracking wide open on every level of my existence was soul-wrenching. Day after day, night after night, it was unrelenting in its pursuit to make itself known and have me held accountable in its presence.

Vision dream

Within the first week of returning home to Canada with my son's ashes, and in compliance with a vision/dream I had, and that I needed to honour, I relocated my medicine wheel, tee pee, and sweat lodge on our land, in a ceremony. This had everything to do with how I was in relationship with all of nature in the indigenous

concept of *all my relations*, both on this continent and in the British Isles. I had adopted this creed into my spiritual path many decades previously. My greatest teacher had been Nature herself, and my own willingness to intuitively seek my sense of belonging in life's circle. The 'how' of the installation of these memorial sites needed to be performed in a sacred, ritualistic way.

Looked at through the lens of art therapy, the actioning of my vision/ dream placed me inside the image that had been speaking to me. I became a part of a natural canvas consisting of a medicine wheel, tee pee, and sweat lodge – the same as now surround the exterior of my home. On the completion of these sacred activities, there was solace, a deeper inhalation could take place. Putting the combined creative response to my grief and trauma into action became an embodied, deep, and soulful healing experience. I was being coaxed (with awareness) into the circle of life, which had been – and remains – the deepest spiritual practice that I have on this earth. This is an intrinsic knowledge of my connection to the energy of *all my relations* in life's circle.

One year after this co-creation activity, I was back in Britain to attend the murder trial of my son. Every day for nine weeks I sat in the courtroom. In a mysterious way, this co-created image became my shield. It was my shield of a connected circle, a warriorship preparing me for what yet lay on my life path. I felt centred, grounded, focussed in my purpose for being in the courtroom. The vision/dream image was to bring me (and my son) a sense of nobility, in circle, in this horrific life experience.

Birds

I felt a very cold reluctance to go outside to fill the feeders for the birds that first winter. It was repulsive even to contemplate. For decades I had had this ritualistic daily

commitment, and I was aware that I had a self-proclaimed responsibility to continue it. I lowered this activity to the ranks of a daily routine. Then one day, soon after resuming this daily activity, one of my little feathered friends landed on my left shoulder, demanding to re-establish a loving connection in a gentle smudging manner, by fluttering its wings. This gave me the opportunity to reshape my thinking; right then, in that moment, heartfelt healing was happening and a soulful connection was understood.

I was aware that something magical was happening, as reluctant as I was to admit it to myself. I believed in energy. I knew that the energy of this little bird knew me at a deeper level than I was prepared to proclaim inside or outside of my suffering. To feel the comfort of this magnificent, majestic comforter brought me back to the wholeness of myself – not in a cognitively responsive way at first, but as an insight in the depths of my knowing.

The fluttering of the bird's wings and its gentle settling on my shoulder engaged my hearing and brought a noble majesty to the moment. Without any hesitation, I then put out my hand for the birds to feed from. This deliberate action brought a sense awareness to the now of the present moment. I had surrendered. Just standing there in the stillness and the awesome presence of the energy this activity had developed into, I asked myself this question: How was this little creature, with its claws so cold in these thirty below temperatures surviving? The energy of my little feathered friend, *anam cara*, my soul friend, had reached deep inside of me and touched my soul.

My intuition is that a connection with life was taking place and I could not deny it. There was mystery awaiting me, inviting me to participate in life, as it now was, in this very moment. No past memories, no future regrets; all I had been, would be, in this

moment was being held ineffably in the now sense of life. In the space of a blink of an eye, I had sensed this wisdom, this wholeness of being. Strangely, being in the depths of grief, the now seemed all I could manage. However, applying, this profound wisdom and insight through my previous thoughts of being in the now, this present now had obviously taken on another shape.

Understanding and desire

Understanding is a retrospective take on whatever has happened and can therefore most unfortunately encourage the lessening of an *open* energy to receive newness, because of the premise that I already believe I know the answer. This mentality naturally blocks off energies that want to be known, but have not yet been recognized consciously. This can bring along with it a closure of sorts.

On the other hand, *desiring to know* comes with its own passionate energy. It can more readily lend itself to the opening up and the freeing up of conscious and unconscious energies in order for them to work in union to bring forth the birth of renewal, through images, symbols, art, and even words. With desiring, there is more of a willingness, an invitation, a welcome to come and acquaint myself with the unknown. I did keep a mindful watch on myself in this regard, remaining desirous to bring forth with a welcome what desires needed to be known. I had to meet myself deep within, not knowing what I would encounter, but desiring to. It suited my purposeful actions and served me very well indeed. Daily, creative, and ritualistic actions became my mainstay in this regard, along with automatic writing.

Art and creativity

Art therapy was a portal into the expansion, the new shape of me. It was a scaffolding on which all the parts of my experience were coming together. This new structure or infrastructure of my present existence was a mapped out path of the terrain that I would continue in, of asking questions of the images that emerged, and of deep listening when in dialogue with them. There was a desire on my part for an aware understanding, a deeper knowing, that needed to make itself known, and to bring that knowing to my aware conscious. Who was I now?

My creativity was bringing a saneness, a balance to the reshaping of my consciousness. My conscious awareness was never going to be the same. I had to make provision for that fact of my now life. That was the reality that had to be faced, with the courage of a bereaved mother, who had turned into a mother warrior. Art therapy was ensuring that my unconscious processes were in place and working intuitively along beside me, and this now felt fact of my life I needed to accommodate. In becoming a witness to my process, and mustering the courage within myself to continue, a depth of truly trusting the process was reached.

A level of trusting the process was afforded me, from having been in the present moments, situations, and circumstances. It was not something that could be pretended. I was either in the intensity of my personal experience or I was not. No previous experience of knowing was at the level of this moving through my own fear of the process of needing to trust again.

Showing up

I was mindful that the loss of my son was not going to be washed away or changed by any other means than to remain present, in the now, with total attentive awareness. The ‘how’ in doing this was accepting and surrendering to the unknown. The ‘how’ is not bringing anything to the table other than the rawness, the felt vulnerability of showing up, and that was something I did. In point of fact, it became a mantra. I would tell myself “if only I could just show up!” I did not know what the next step would be and nor did it matter. I just had to trust the process would take care of my *now* known needs and my unknown to me needs. The next step would be taken care of, at the appropriate time. I had to show up; that was my contract with life. Show up!

Retrospectively, the trust in the process of just showing up and the being taken care of by my doing so, was very much a part of the ‘how’ of my accomplishments from the very beginning. For my process and the path ahead I needed to be exquisitely aware of every cell in my body, every thought in my mind, and my soul’s purpose for continuing to live.

Insights – Fantasy thinking

There are insights worth pondering concerning fantasy thinking, and visualizing circumstances as different. For instance, in the plane going over to identify my son’s body in the mortuary in Britain, I thought I was going to find out they had made a mistake, and that it was not my child. I was, however, semi-aware of that fantasy.

Again, just over a year later, after the press conference following the murderers’ conviction, on returning to the greenroom I was going to bring my son back from the

reality of his death. That fantasy was not a conscious process that I had even been remotely aware of until that moment.

I did not consciously think I would come out from the press room, hand in hand with my son, and yet at some level I did. Perhaps, in the depths of my unconscious mind, I did believe that would be so. The feelings brought up in me then, in the rawness that that was not going to happen, were ripping away at me, cutting me, fresh and new. The now reality that I was facing was not to have Gerard Michael physically standing beside me, not then, not ever. I stayed with my feelings. I did not renounce them. I voiced out loud this incredible fantasy. No matter that it was so illogical, I brought witness to my fantasy in doing so, which took me immediately into my current conscious awareness - the now.

I had to meet truthfully what was arising in my unconscious and not turn away from it with any prejudgement, such as the concern the woman detective might think me insane by voicing my thoughts. My reality was a very conscious felt sense of having done everything right for the gods, ancestors, society, spirit, soul, and the law. It could now all come together for Gerard Michael and me, and we would be physically together. The ransom had been paid. This kind of mentality occupied me, soulfully, at that point in time. It would not and did not make any sense on the cognitive level.

I needed to recognize and acknowledge and have that message that had been carried by my unconscious to the level of my consciousness witnessed. That took vulnerability and courage. The transcendent function could therefore be met by me, seen and deeply felt. I cried bitterly and I very much needed to do so. My body was twisted in the now knowing of my reality. This fantasy was my truest reality, in that moment of

temporal time and infinity. All I had once known was now reshaped; I came back to present time in an instant.

Writing

I had always turned to writing to gain further insights and to quench my soul. I was to continue this practice as I journeyed through my grief and trauma. Automatic writing helped me tap into and connect with the *now* of my experience(s). Writing to my son with the intention of connecting with him did not fail me. What was felt by me spiritually and humanly was a real sense of deep connection, a calm, a peace, something soothing transpired, in this present moment or experience. On some level, I was realizing that all was not lost, connection had most definitely been made. All could not or was not taken away from us, as mother and son.

Art therapy training

Three years into my grief journey, I took an intensive art therapy training course. I spontaneously made a model of my son's hand. This was accompanied by an extraordinary occurrence in the observation of my habitual pattern of breathing, of inhaling and exhaling, and in the in-between space (no inhalation, no exhalation). There was a felt happening, a felt processing going on. I had occupied the stillness that was holding the space of my wholeness in readiness. Transformation and integration were cooperatively partnering up, a meeting place was occurring.

It is important to highlight what did not work for me in this art therapy. One of my peers did not use the 'no comment' rule of protocol of Dr. Pat Allen. Therefore I mistakenly thought I was safe and secure in sharing my art. My repeated request was

directed to her to “please stop” her comments, her analytical words, such as “closure now having been reached” and “you are lucky.” It felt that these words were being hurled at me, accusingly, as the truth about me and my son’s now relationship. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In following the protocol of the ‘no comment’ rule, these words of my peer should have been internalized by her alone, and should not have disrupted my process. In point of fact, her comments had nothing at all to do with me; it was to do with her own process. My process halted immediately.

Having just gone through the process of making the hand, my tender vulnerability was not adequately shielded. Onlookers in the circle told me later that I had been visibly protecting my art at the same time as requesting the other participant to stop. Clearly, I knew that I was not in a safe environment – my art – my process, the sacredness of what I was sharing. I could not and did not continue my sharing. Later I shared with my peers what I had learned from that personal experience, both professionally and personally.

It was an extremely critical disturbance of my process, on both sacred and profane levels. However, I was fortunate enough to be able to overcome this disregard of the ‘no comment’ rule. This situation was a great teacher for me. I will forever bring caution to my own awareness and the awareness of others in this regard, as much unintentional damage to the process of healing can be caused.

Another learning curve in the use of art therapy in my grief process came some months later when I had painted at home an image I called *Protection* (appendix Image 1). Through dialoguing with the image it took on many forms before it ultimately became the completed result - what is now being seen by others, on canvas. In the process of painting this image I had been holding my son’s coffin, a part of many of the layers of

images that came up in dialogue and were subsequently changed. These layers could not even be guessed at when viewed by another, after the image had been completed. The image itself in this instance was not preconceived by me, not on any level, not even the colours, or the size of the paint brushes. All came about in dialogue, one stroke at a time, deep listening, trusting the process.

Art therapy is thus an intimate, confidential companion that can provide safety and security. To disclose or not becomes a choice, even after the art piece has reached its completion. I completed this painting in the privacy of my own home, when feeling in deep need of processing. However, I do remember the other images in this painting that were changed as I continued my dialogue with them. I continue to reap the benefit of their benevolence, their showing up. The images were changing and showing me my own change, my own moving through grief and trauma. Internally and externally reshaping was happening, and I was being made consciously aware of it during art therapy course work, or in the privacy of my home, alone, with a friend, or in the bush. Transformation and transcendence was being attained, in a very tangible way, while doing art therapy work.

I was choosing and using materials, feeling their aliveness and willingness to dialogue. We were cooperating with each other, we were in alignment. I was being shaped, and in the continuation of the art therapy process I was recognizing, ineffably, what that shape looked like, for me. The changed shape of me which would also include the layers of images unseen that had come forth, helped me to process and ultimately create the finished art piece would also remain the container for it all. I could let the art

hold everything I knew, felt, sensed, wanted, desired, hated, or loved, without judgment toward me or from myself. Living life is a process. Art therapy was lighting my way.

Also extraordinary about this image that I painted, was that from its inception it was linked to the first airing of a documentary about my son's murder. The second time the documentary was aired, one year after the original, to correspond with the anniversary of Gerard Michael's murder, I had not been informed. What I know is that this image was at its beginning a healing balm, and continued to be. It was a receptacle, a container, for what was going to go on in the larger reality that I had not been made aware of. On hearing the news of the documentary, the image suddenly came into my mind, reassuring me that all was going according to life's plan. The reverence and the sacredness of the time when I had first done the painting was remembered. The image held its own integrity, another monumental reason for treating images with the respect they so richly deserve in art therapy.

This personal, phenomenal lived experience took me to another level in my experience of art therapy. The ineffable had taken place on another layer as part of a unified creative response to my continued healing, grieving journey. The image created with intention still maintained its healing, protective power outside of my conscious awareness, but could easily become a bridge to the present in my conscious awareness.

The activity of making images that were symbolic of my unconscious and conscious life energy furthered my unconscious knowing, wisdom knowing, in becoming a recognizable force for holistic healing. This was not done in a controlling way by my unconscious; a natural flow was important, bringing balance to my conscious self. There

appeared to be a readiness to listen, on both parts, to participate, no matter how innocuous my action may appear to be. It mattered in the flow of the art therapy process.

Curiously, through the process of art therapy, it was as if my unconscious was initiating me and then, the action(s) I would take were wholeheartedly and consciously applied by me. Broken hearted though I remained, a sense of this felt wholeness was present. It is a holy creative sacrament to tap into the depths of what remains available to me, through my unconscious and conscious. It is also how I choose now to acknowledge art therapy and the open studio process.

There was a preparation, even in the choosing of materials. I would ask the materials for their guidance as I moved along with my creative art piece. I would ask, for example, what colours to use, what brush, or size of paper. I found intermodal art-based activities absolutely satisfying for a sense of having engaged fully in my process, to have reached insight, to have reached an understanding. Moving into intermodal expression, a deeper and deeper knowing of the vastness of wholeness was being shaped. This most certainly expanded the opportunity to reach greater conscious understanding, and integration of that understanding.

Embodied experience – Soft place to fall

In an embodied performance in art therapy, using my own poetic language in the storytelling and dramatic outpouring of my bereaved state, I experienced a deeper level in the integration of my body, through specific body movements and dance that had spontaneously captured my soul. I played very significant music whilst I performed. This occurred in an intensive embodied class situation. This first time experience for me moved me to another level of witnessing self and being witnessed, and then came the

sheer empowerment of having done so, in exploring the effects and affects that had gone on in the shaping of me as a bereaved mother. This was, most certainly, my *soft place to fall*.

In my healing process of grief and trauma, it was extremely important for me to grasp what I had just experienced, this *soft place to fall* in this embodied class. Having a soft place to fall had been one of my mantras from the beginning of my journey. Intuitively I knew what I needed and what it would feel like when I found it. These precise words I would mutter, “*I need a soft place to fall.*” However, not until my personal experience of the embodied engagement of art therapy did I know what it would look like. The depths of my soul and my broken heart had been crying out for the fullness of this embodied expression. I am indebted to my instructor Tatiana Peet and to my peers for this great healing opportunity. In another intensive art studio class, during my art installation, I chose again to participate in an embodied experience of how my broken heart would benefit me as a therapist. What would I be bringing to the table? Again, it was an extremely cathartic embodied experience and one that I would fully recommend. It is a practice that I continue: embodying feelings and making them manifest through movement.

Art installations

Art installations depicting my grief and traumatic life experience in class, at home, and in the bush on my land, gave me a visual of the becoming shape of me, at that present moment. There was an individuating processing of my self, in the personal identification with the images and the sharing of these images with others, if I desired to

do so. Art installations, for me, are sacramental, sacred altars. A soulful knowing energy occupies the space where they are gathered. Reverence to spirit is born.

Ritual

The ritual use of candles, already a part of my life, would continue to help me immensely. There was a healing balm, personally felt and sent, in lighting the candle with intentionality. I knew that the candle would be burning with my intention fused in it. Unconsciously, this allowed me a sense of reprieve. The flickering flame of the candle was a sign that forgiveness was present for me, should I have any guilt in having my thoughts stray away from my intention. In my bereaved state, a hundred percent vigilance on my part was called for, which, of course, was impossible. Most curiously, the candle was securing my position to just be; it was almost giving me permission to relax, to be present to this moment, an unconscious symbol for self care. The candle was a reminder also that I was a part of an ancient circle.

Another symbolic teaching that I received that is worth sharing comes from the fact that I live surrounded by trees. There is one particular tree I call Grandmother Tree, that has been part of my spiritual landscape for decades. When I returned home from Britain with Gerard Michael's ashes, I saw that Grandmother Tree had literally snapped in two. This was a very harsh reality to witness. During the many years of being in a spiritual relationship with her, I had placed numerous colourful prayer ties on her, talked to her, spoken from my heart and soul to her. I had adorned her with different objects. Birds nested in her branches. I believed I had brought honour to our shared life experiences. Now, there she was snapped in half. At that time all I remember feeling was

a deep sense of abandonment. So great was my suffering, so narrow my vision, I did not recognize she was mirroring back to me my own shape.

On first seeing her new shape, I just circled her, sang her a song of grief, and walked away. I did not return to her for the next year and a half. I could see her in my peripheral vision when out walking with my dogs through the bush. However, I refused to visit her. Not until the following spring, after returning from the trial, did I choose to visit her. Grandmother Tree had new saplings springing up from her undergrowth, she was obviously being renewed. She was continuing to feed this new life as her old shape was decaying. She was gladly feeding this new life. I could see that from the exuberant display of buds springing up from her underbelly. Grandmother Tree remained alive, with a now renewed life energy, I could feel it. I had to acknowledge to myself and to her that she continued to bring me back into the circle of life, rhythmically and authentically. I drummed and sang her a song of gratitude as I needed to honour her teachings. I lay my spine against her broken trunk, as I sat on mother earth, weeping at the soulfulness of her teachings and my own finite blindness.

A container – safe and secure

Art therapy could sustain the horror, the terror, the betrayal, the trauma, the grief. In response, I gave myself the freedom to use whatever media served this purpose, in remaining in the truth of my own felt needs and my own unique path of moving through what I needed to do. I was prepared to end the ensuing madness, defined in the knowledge that I did not have inside of me a structure that could contain the deepest sorrow and suffering of my life. Art therapy could and did give that madness, that insanity, a container. It also gave a container for my unfathomable bewilderment at

feelings that had no labels attached to them, that I could not write or speak about. Art therapy was and remains a secure and safe place in which I could evolve, where I could bring myself to fruition. It was a continued felt wholeness in this lifetime.

Whatever language I needed to express myself to myself in, or to another, art therapy could provide that connection, willingly, with a heartfelt, soul felt, ultimate cognitive knowing if need be. I could trust the process.

In art therapy I found myself very present in the time frame of infinity. I could find a peace, a calm, an understanding, and I manifested parts of myself that were previously unknown, that I felt I had already died to, that could not ever be re-birthed or renewed. I would get caught up in my creativity. Temporal time became an instant unknown, an obsolete factor. I was wholly engaging, all of me. Paradoxically, I was both lost and found simultaneously.

Art therapy tapped into *otherness* in way that was safe and acceptable to society and brought along with it a very secure exploration of the path to understanding, balance, and integration. I could get ‘stuff’ out. I got to the outpouring that needed an outlet. In allowing me, in the use of its media and materials, to saturate, rigorously, until all had been revealed, there was a saturation point, felt internally by me, this internal scream, that just lingered and lingered, suffocating me, crushing away at what life was left inside of me. In the practice of art therapy I met this scream at different levels where it needed to surface into my aware consciousness, so it could be attended to and met with the reflection of love and compassion. Attending to the scream secured my sanity and I gave permission to myself to totally surrender to the process, to trust. The journey to reach this

level of trust came in the doing of my art as a therapeutic response to moving through my process of grief and trauma as a bereaved mother.

Rituals – embodied art therapy

When I reflect on the rituals I needed to perform, I can now correlate them to an embodied art therapy experience and the felt wholeness of bringing mind, body, and soul together in empowerment, for a holistic continuation of the strength I needed to keep treading upon life's path with renewed confidence. Regardless of the terrain I found myself in, the waves of grief would crash over me without warning. Rituals were a part of my life before the death of my son, and they remained so after his death.

Sacredness – embodied ritual

In the ritual of attending to my precious son's body I needed to ensure he was taken care of in a prayerful, ritualistic way that belonged to us both. I was the one who was going to care for my son's dead body and place him in his coffin. Nobody could dissuade me, nor did they try. Although I noted the look of shock on their faces, I knew their reaction was none of my business. I was staunch and resolute; this energy of mine was felt by others, although my own energy remained calm, absolute, focussed, and not permission-asking.

In retrospect, this intuitive need to follow through with my envisioned ritual was a very great gift I not only gave to my son, as his mother, but to myself as I continued to walk my path of grief. I cannot ever recall being so adamant or uncaring what anyone else thought in my life. I would say also that the ancestral sense that I recognized in myself and the honour of being a part of that circle played its part. That is where my

values came from in my drive to move forward with that sacred ritual. I was not deterred on any level, inwardly or outwardly, when clock time showed that I was already three hours over my allotted time. Completion came when I said it would, and not a second less would have sufficed.

I have no regrets whatsoever about how I handled this horrific situation with the funeral home, or in the use of the materials I used for these sacred rituals. It was to do with being in intimacy with life, and life in death, in paving my way back to the village, the community, my heart, my soul, the divine, my son and me, on a profound level. There was a deep soulful knowing that I was undergoing a profound initiation of *life begetting life* again. Cognitively, I could not have spoken those words or even known their presence in my mind. I needed the visceral visionary response to what I intuitively knew I had to do to find these words. Co-creation had to happen first and foremost. Embodying the experience was of the utmost importance to me. I did accomplish that feat, I realize now.

The methods I used in this ritual included lighting of candles, the smudging of my son's body, myself, the room, and Gerard Michael's coffin. I kept the smudge going for all the hours I remained in the room, which would have kept me consciously alert, along with the flickering candles, and aware on a sensory level what was transpiring. I was aware of the movement of my body in the placing of the blessed and sacred herbs within his coffin, with more herbs placed where Gerard Michael's head would be laid, and over his heart. I was deliberate in the preparation of the coffin, which meant chanting, my tears flowing all over it, inside and out, my hands pressed against it. My trace, as a mother, would be going with him, and was everywhere to be found. I did not want him to be

alone. Everything had to be just right in preparation for when my son's body would be laid in his coffin. This was his final resting place among us. I most definitely wanted to lie in Gerard Michael's coffin and hold him. There was a very natural visceral energy pull to do so. I did not. The desire to be in the coffin, in his stead, was also exquisitely felt by me.

The singing, chanting, the memories shared, spoken out loud to my child hung in the air between us. We were alone in this room. My heart could not be more broken, my tears flowed, my agonizing groans blanketed the air, resounded off the brick walls, with the sound of our collective suffering being understood and accepted. I had surrendered. I was embodying this horrendous lived through experience. I continued to keep pushing myself through. It was hell, it could not be anything other. The funeral directors helped me to place Gerard Michael's body in his coffin. I felt that I was paralysed, crippled on so many levels of my known human existence and yet I kept moving. On a very deep personal level, I also believed that I was not alone. I was being held up by the ancient circle that comprises all of our wisdom and creative, ritualistic needs.

This ritual with my son was hugely significant in moving through the energy of grief and trauma with awareness. It was real and tangible and was held in the space of both temporality and infinity. It was a fact of both of our lives that could not be changed. A bridge had been crossed that I would be walking back over, into this physical world, alone, yet paradoxically not. I was totally present in the now of what was happening. At that particular time, there was no mistaking that the physical form of my precious son was going to be taken away from me forever. As Gerard Michael's form had been in my womb developing, and then in witnessing this form coming away from my body, there

was a “welcome to this world, my baby boy.” Likewise, I needed to secure my son’s departure, with the same grace I had received him, and had claimed him as mine. I knew I was being reshaped by trauma and grief and my own unique responses to it, and that I could never be the same again. It was not even remotely possible, not now, not ever.

Embodied performance – Nature

I recall an incident with coyotes in the first winter of Gerard Michael’s passing as another art therapy embodied experience. The stage was provided by nature, with me chasing after and challenging the coyotes, who were feasting on a fresh dead calf. The white snow in stark contrast to the red of the calf’s blood set the stage for action. I challenged death and my own death on a performance level. All of nature was my audience, my witness. I was very conscious of my actions and fearless in carrying them out. From the outside world’s view it would look like an extremely insane act. Of that fact there is no doubt; of course it was a wildly insane thing to do! Nature helped me, having gauged my energy, my otherworldly condition, and they naturally all played their part. They had to, for me to survive. The coyotes ran away from me; the trees in thick dense bush did not get in my way; the snow covered branches underfoot did not trip me up. In sympathy they secured my return to a respectful, acceptable, dignified sanity. A strange sense of reciprocal relational harmony existed.

Cutting off of hair

In the ritual of cutting off my hair, after the trial was over and the day before I returned to Canada, I had to somehow bridge both the spiritual and physical aspects of the death of Gerard Michael and the nine weeks of sitting each day at the murder trial. I

was forevermore transformed in my interior world. The cutting of my hair as representation of my grief was to be my reminder, although I did not know that fact cognitively at the time.

My intuition also led me to the conscious awareness that a bridge had to be secured in place, on both these continents, the British Isles and Canada, along with the bridging of my unconscious (unknown) with my conscious (known) self. I had to make that happen in the deepest of relationships. I knew there were wisdoms available to me in keeping with the gathering of the required personal strength I needed to live in the physical, in trusting the process of unconscious materials inside of me. It was not always something I was deliberate in, and yet (paradoxically) I was. Intuition was the path I took, as my companion, guide, and witness. So there must have been a deliberation in that decision making, that choice making. It was an awareness, out of my wholeness, in the now cognitive sense of me.

Conclusion

I have defined intuition as my deepest aware knowing, from within my heart and soul: that innate intuitive energy that knows all my complexities and has access to the ancient and collective wisdoms of us human beings. Intuition kept rising up and wanting itself to be known, meeting me in the passion of my tenacity, courage, and broken, heartfelt presence of my existence.

I had to grant myself this intuitive knowing, to keep a healthy understandable movement of balance through my grief. I needed to survive in the awareness of my wholeness, with each step in my process, with dignity and honour for my child and

toward the sacred grace of God. This was to be a foundation on which I could build my resilience. My son's and my life's journeys had been shared and would continue to be.

On the one hand, my conscious being (self) was reeling around in tormented suffering, brought on by the reality of the physical death of my son. On the other hand my son was also very present in my unconscious. My unconscious was proving this to me, in how I would continue trusting my own process in the next step(s) to take on my path of grief and trauma. My unconscious has been my companion throughout all of my life. My belief is that my unconscious had access to all that was, is, and will be in life. Therefore, on reflection, there was an instant recognition of this continuity that I shared with life. Sometimes, however, it was deeply subliminal as I journeyed on my path of grief.

Although my experience was that my unconscious could indeed be a most powerful energy that brought information forth, I did not feel that it was something that was being done to me. I did feel I was a participant in bringing the unconscious material into the present, to the now, into the reality of me at that moment of existence, through my conscious awareness, along with the media and materials used in ritual, expressive, creative therapy and art therapy.

Having gone this far on my journey through my grief and experience of trauma, there was now a much deeper awareness in me that had surfaced around my wholeness, my journey into the depths of life itself. There had been, and remained, a continuation of that innate wisdom that made itself known in all of my life experiences. The deeper I explored, examined, excavated, and unearthed the greatest loss of my life in grief and trauma, the more my innate knowing in this regard held true.

This is where art therapy, ritual, and creative embodied performance played a leading role for me, in unravelling, unfolding, and healing that which was currently happening and that which had happened. It did not have a language to connect to another person in words, but could make itself known through art therapy and creative materials, even to myself. This was my experience, and the immediacy I felt in my need to drum, sing, chant to the directions, and create memorial sites on the land: medicine wheel, tee pee, sweat lodge, altars in the bush, and to continually and sacredly maintain them.

I integrated art therapy instinctively by attending intensive art therapy studios and courses. Art therapy was my process unfolding before me, the next steps that were uniquely mine to take. The art and creativity itself became pointers and landmarks on my journey on the path of holistic healing. The colour, texture, sound of my *now* reshaping was therefore with the present wholeness of collaborative intentionality. Art therapy became my personal vocation, medicine, and intimate companion. My language was known and communicated with; it became an *our language* soulful experience. My becoming shape could also be revealed in a safe, secure, confidential home environment providing me with a *soft place to fall*.

The art therapy and the creativity I brought to bear came with a prayerful, sacred intention. I needed to communicate and have a witness in this temporal space to the infinite space and feel a connection, to witness and be a witness. The media I used did not disappoint. I felt wholly satisfied. They converted me to their instinctive individual unpacking of my unconscious in a gentle, knowing companionship of wisdom, soul making, and healing. Art therapy became for me a very spiritual, mystical sacrament of

death, life, rebirth. It was a life giving, renewal of personal shape(ing) being revealed, birthed, and welcomed.

There was a safety net provided for me in the use of art therapy that allowed me to expand outside of my lived and living experience. It afforded me the ability to fall and the knowledge of the shape that fall needed or had taken. It was to journey through the process of my grief, with its multifaceted terrains, knowing there was this safety net present to catch me. I would soon realize that I had already been caught, that I already had that soft landing. The recognizability of that safety, the creator's gaze ... I am here! This resonates within me today.

Art therapy permitted me the opportunity to integrate my unconscious with my conscious aware presence of my very real circumstance. My son had been murdered, my interior and exterior worlds were changed forever. I had been transformed and my transfiguration had taken on a new shape. I had to find out who I was *now*. Art therapy and my personal creativity gave me access to greater, deeper healing and recognition than words alone could ever have done. I was kept present, in the now, in my own unique, individual, creative way. I became more and more familiar with the still space of my own becoming conscious awareness. My lens was bigger and now contained both worlds, one wherein I was physically occupied, living out my present day experiences, and the other where my son now resided and into which I was receiving a glimpse. Life is the common denominator to both worlds and this is wholeness innately understood.

The rawness of my bereaved state, although it was my own very real unique felt reality, was also an historical collective reality. This fact of my lived experience was not lost on me. However, what I needed to be personally aware of was the transitioning of my

now reality that was arising within me, in its reshaping of me, for holistic, balanced health reasons, as I walked this path as a spirit human. Art therapy and my own creativity were magnificent, mysterious, life giving, life skill teachers and lifetime companions for me in this regard.

There was a depth of sorrow and suffering that had to be made manifest to be able to journey outside of me, that then had to integrate itself back into me on a mundane level. Through art therapy and my own creative expressions, I became the observer, witness to my reshaping with the fullest possible awareness of choice being presented to me, in the twining of both temporal and infinite time. With the horrendous loss of Gerard Michael and the heinous way in which he was physically taken from me, taken from this world, it was imperative for me to somehow bridge these two time zones (temporal and infinite). As a mother, I had to know where my son had gone and how I could reach him, and how he could reach me in return.

The image of the ‘scream’ (Image 2) in my narrative was one of the very first images I drew. This experience brought me to such a deep connection with something *other* that knew and was deeply listening to me, witnessing me, and holding the space for me. Transformation and transcendence was my sacred rite of passage. My secular human need(s) also had to be recognized for wholeness. Wholeness was found within me and revealed itself through my bringing form to what needed to be manifested.

Wholeness was very much alive in that very moment, it was mirroring back at me and I was reflecting my felt sense of wholeness right back. That was an exquisite revelation for me and will remain so. The forms that my creativity took were a mirror into the now shape of me. All of that reflecting out at me had a direct bearing on what

shape I would take, what choices I would make. I had full responsibility as a mother and a fellow human being, for no-one but I could contribute what my life experiences had taught me to the circle of life. I take this responsibility very seriously.

The way I moved (and continue to move) through my own unique grief and traumatic life experience, in how I needed to show up, is not the way another equally unique individual spirit human should show up. It was directly relevant to my own individuation and would be directly relevant to others' own sacred path in life. I was not the first and I am not going to be the last mother to grieve the murder of her child. The experience of having a broken heart has happened from the beginning of our human existence.

I think that in my reaching out to others, has been, in essence, the re-gathering of my self in the awareness of my wholeness. That has led to a greater understanding of humankind, my species. Compassion, kindness, empathy, reverence, and love are what nurture me in the continuous healing and nurturing of my broken heart. I cannot tolerate anything less from myself. Being in the *now* is all that seems to matter, and is becoming easier and easier for me to attain. Strangely, the now takes in all of life, *all my relations*, and does not overwhelm me. Not being in the now, present moment does overwhelm me.

Likewise, when I am in an environment that has energy contrary to how I choose to live with compassion, empathy, and loving kindness, I feel physically sick. To live in a lesser way, is a seed of a very destructive human path, a murderous path, one human being to another, one life form to another. Of course, this is highlighted for me, after losing my only child to murder. My heart being slashed wide open has also left me with

the ability to take in all the polarities of my own life, and what I am surrounded by and bombarded with, as a member of this human tribe.

I learned that the importance I invested in the treatment of my images in art therapy training, in my art installations at home and in the bush, had a deep correlation to my own self care. Therefore, the procuring of civilised treatment for the images is of extreme importance. There is reciprocal energy in the receiving and the giving of self to the images, for they in return can be listened to, soulfully giving back in connection energy.

It is important to underline and emphasize that losses cannot be compared. It is a violation of any one journeying soul to do so. It is likely of course that there is some transferability of what came out of my journey into felt brokenness and wholeness. That is what makes us community, common denominators, unique differences met with dignity and respect for the individual soul of another on their journey. We are all so beautifully different, it is not possible to have a one size fits all mentality and claim to be truly *present* to another. My own, and being witness to *others'* creativity, proves my point.

In an embodied felt way, acknowledging that I was and remain broken hearted is also my realness, in showing up, in my life, not as a victim, but as a very vibrant, alive mother of a murdered adult child. It is my springboard into authenticity, into the recognizable healing power of the ever present wholeness in my life. I can choose to participate in the awareness of my wholeness or not.

The background of my life, the source of my life, just like the blank piece of paper I encountered in my first art therapy experience, holds the space of the wholeness

of me, yet to be revealed (perhaps) to my conscious awareness. The foreground is always what happens on my life journey, my narratives. Therefore, my wholeness is ever present as is life itself. Indeed the essence and the source of all of life is wholeness.

Additional Considerations for Art Therapists and Counsellors

The Open Studio Process was the structure I used in my own personal healing journey (including the writing of this thesis), and what I will continue to use personally and professionally, including when dealing with *fellow travellers* who have been in similar circumstances to my own.

The ‘no comment’ component of the Open Studio Process must be honoured and adhered to. There are many reasons why the rule is there. It is for the safety and security of the *fellow traveller* during their healing process and for providing containment for the witnesses to do their own processing, should they be a part of a group. In one-on-one therapy, this ‘no comment’ rule gives the *fellow traveller* a heartfelt sense that they have been deeply heard and possibly met at the place of their unique (sacred) suffering.

The use of clay may evoke emotions because of the coldness of its touch. For me, it brought back immediate sensations of the touch of my son’s dead body. However, with alertness to this possibility for *fellow travellers*, I would not hesitate to use clay. By moving through it, I reached the healing process.

Being present to the *fellow traveller* may take tremendous patience. There is a need to allow the natural unfolding of their narrative. When a *fellow traveller* is stuck in the reporting mode of their narrative, titration can be employed as a helpful tool. Pause,

breath, movement and healthy therapeutic pacing can also be used, as these may become life skills for some.

Be comfortable with the energy of the unknown, without judgment, assumptions or interference toward a *fellow traveller*.

A self care plan is essential and should be in written form for easy access and immediate referencing, for the therapist/counsellor and *fellow traveller*. Personal preferences along with breath work and gentle relaxing visualizations, creativity, automatic writing etc. provide supportive, much needed moments of reprieve.

A full physical medical examination might be beneficial for the *fellow traveller*. The physical toll that grief and trauma can take on the body should not be underestimated. A medical examination could lead to awareness of issues and necessary precautions.

Where television, internet and reporting media are involved, a deep understanding of the *fellow traveller's* vulnerability and rawness is extremely important. This vulnerability may have a “not having *any control*” aspect to it. The media has a life of its own and victims can be victimized all over again. Included in this is the lack of sufficient personal privacy to grieve. For the *fellow traveller*, media attention can become a diversion from their grief and healing process. Paramount in this regard is an understanding that not everything that is reported is a truth for the *fellow traveller*, and that it has the potential to bring on another layer of grief for them to move through.

Murder may well be a part of the narrative for a *fellow traveller*. Tragically, there will hardly be a day when *a murder* is not reported. Extra attention should be given to

coping and life skills in this regard. The potential for P.T.S.D. is great. Psycho-education would not go amiss in this regard.

The *soft place to fall* that I kept wanting, but could not articulate, became the Open Studio Process. Attention should be given to a *fellow traveller* in *unravelling* what that soft place to fall would mean for them, should that need be articulated.

The benefits of somatic movement incorporated in sessions should not be underestimated. Movement, whether it be to music or percussion instrument (as it was in my case) a drum, hitting of stones, sticks etc, can bring much needed somatic relief.

Sounding can provide a great release of energy and alignment to source. Supporting a *fellow traveller* in this practice may be necessary.

There should be consistency and continuity in the opening and closing of sessions, which may include an object and/or picture of the person a *fellow traveller* is grieving for.

Cultural sensitivities need to be observed in the therapy session. Ask what is appropriate, and do not make assumptions for any reason whatsoever.

Where there is a lack of support systems, say in rural communities or where people are ostracised within their own tight knit communities, extra attention needs to be paid to help the *fellow traveller* secure their continued well-being in moving forward.

Best practice dictates the therapist should refer to and/or seek consultation with another therapist should the individual circumstances fall outside their level of competence. This is an ethical issue that should be honoured in such a way that the *fellow traveller* understands their own best interests are being understood and recognized.

It is important to understand that we cannot *walk beside another* in their

interiority if we ourselves have not attained the depth required for the *fellow traveller's* healing journey. However, compassion, empathic listening and aware presence are always invaluable.

Being a *silent witness* and *holding* the therapeutic space with healing love as an intention is very powerful. My personal and professional experience is that the Open Studio Process naturally and organically provides space for this to happen.

Regardless of the *fellow traveller's* narrative, their soulful uniqueness and spiritual path must always be considered. It is not going to sound, smell, and feel to another as it exquisitely does for that individual, even, if, as in my case, a child has been murdered. I cannot emphasize the importance of this enough, since honouring uniqueness brings soulful, spiritual healing and is most assuredly felt by the *fellow traveller*.

Grief and trauma is a very personal journey and is very unique to that individual. The *fellow traveller's* unique journey should be respected and honoured. This can open up their heart, soul and feelings in a non judgemental environment. A healthy foundation can thus be laid for the now changed architecture of their lives.

CHAPTER 6: A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Suffering isn't a new concept, but much like dying it happens to others, and not to us or those we love and are dear to us. Most certainly not my beloved only child, not the very life that lived inside of me, that moved, that I was one with.

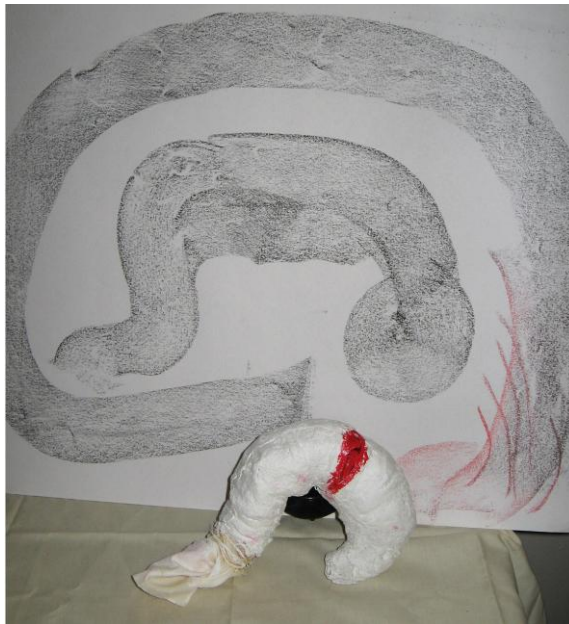


Image 6: Agonizing, Paralyzing Grief

Reaching out to the bigger canvas, the bigger picture, the collective soul body of us all, I looked at suffering from that perspective. The suffering of childbirth, the suffering of the infant being pushed out of the womb (Image 6). Suffering has been with us from our first cry, and that cry echoes through the rest of our lives. If we are fortunate enough our unique cries of suffering will be heard.



Image 7: Divine Utterances

I decided that the best description I could use for God and wholeness of being was love. Love in the act of giving and receiving is all I really need to nourish my interior world and all that has come to pass, or will be. I know it in my soul. I know it in all its ancient resonance. It is the only way to Creator, to Gerard Michael, to wholeness felt, acknowledged, and understood (Image 7). It is the compass home to the divine (soul) inside of me and the energy that continues to bless this world and the next, where I too will be received along with the rest of my fellow travellers. What is more important for me is the love that draws these worlds together, in this now of my existence, in this wholeness that I can call joy.

I meet Gerard Michael there. I know too that God is there and all that really exists is there. In the truest sense of my being, I know my son and I are seen, we are known, we are not forgotten. Love is where we originated from and where Gerard Michael has returned to, and I will follow.

The animals equate themselves with the love of God the creator. I can feel it in the way they respond so readily and in their stillness in what is present to them. Take for instance the ‘dawn chorus’ of the winged ones with their passion to take flight and meet the heavens, dancing their dance of ritual in meeting their day, and greeting the dusk of the evening with the same exuberance. They live with acute awareness and reveal to me, the observer who is being also observed, that they are indeed seen. I have no other explanation as I witness them and feel blessed by their teachings and, of course, their presence, which undoubtedly brings God the creator’s presence exquisitely to bear.



Image 8: Believing So...

This picture was taken in the spring of 2007, my hands not touching, but holding the sacred space and feeling the newborn warmth, as its mother watched close by, not concerned, prepared to give me this privilege that I will never, ever forget. Was it one of the three deer that showed themselves that morning, when we got the news of our son's murder? I will never know for certain, but I have a comfort in believing so.

Should I, as a human, lose my way, love will be my compass back home to my true self. I will not stray for long and will become strengthened by love's very presence. Love speaks of our God the creator and love's connecting force, for us, each to the other, in the nature of creation. This is truth, as I was broken wide open, and without fear took the descent to hell, with the love of my son in my heart and soul. I returned with the power of love and remain because of love. Love is God, the creator, for me and I believe for us all without exception.

I do not believe there is a death. I believe the opposite of what we know to be life is birth, not death. This has remained ineffable for me in the telling of my story. This wisdom knowing that can be translated by some into doctrine, for me remains very personal.

My heart broken is bigger, wider, holds no circumference anymore; it cannot be contained. Love spills out, it is my truest medicine. I live to live another day.

Love transcends time, as does my heart and mind in sleep, should I need an analogy. Love brings security at a very essential depth of knowing of the why of my continued existence. Strangely, this sense of security has a feeling of 'being home' within myself, to myself, and about myself. The 'about myself' has to do with the bigger picture of the collective body, the communion with creation, the swirling circumferential chalice

of my earthly abode, which, as I am getting older, does not for some reason seem temporary!

I looked up at the darkened sky filled with stars on my return home with my son's ashes. I looked with the knowing that I would not find him in what seemed like chaos in the sky. I wanted to and would have, if it had been at all possible, ripped down, with the claws of my hands extended on the ready, every star daring to show itself in the night sky, without a moment's hesitation or thought for another human being, nor even my own soul. I opened wide my mouth with a scream in the light of that day that brought the news of my son's death. I wanted to eat up the earth, chew it up and spit it out without end, into eternity and saw myself do it. Without a thought for my fellow humans, the divine or the eternal consequence, it was a done deal.

Now, I know intuitively, soulfully, I need my human tribe to love. I need my love to expand, to grow beyond the stars and the earth, to know Love's course for my wholeness to be felt by me. My love needed a place to be received. I am in service and have gratitude in the ability to be able to do so in wholeness, in love. I cannot think of a better legacy for my son than to do my part to achieve what he aspired to while he walked among us: peace.

In my own belief system I have found redemption, the benediction that peace brings. It is the resurrection of knowing that suffering indeed can crack a person wide open into the depth of life's mystery. There is a glimpse into the eternity from where we have all come, and to where we will return home, shining with what our ancestors would call the *shekinah* (Hebrew), our divine light.

My past has been wiped away. Put another way, it has no hold on me. I am not who I used to be or could ever be again. My future is a palatable uncertainty. I live in the now, in the present, not in the purest possible inflection but rather as much as I know myself to be aware consciously. I show up for life not as a beggar or a thief but as a partner. Life holds me in its rhythmic dance of coexistence and therefore co-creation.

My emerging art work, my creativity, has given voice and will continue to give voice, for pedagogical purposes, for holistic health purposes as I live out my life. My exquisite knowing is that, although broken, I am living in the wholeness of becoming. The following excerpt from Martha Graham's (1991) book *Blood Memory*, measures effectively my journey into trauma and grief and our connection one to the other, and in the seeing of ourselves, God, Love, and 'fellow travellers' perhaps, for the first time. How deeply we feel and how exquisitely vulnerable we all really are. How much we soulfully need one another. It resonated with me when she described herself thus: "I think a far better expression is a retriever, lovely strong golden retriever that brings things back from the past, or retrieves things from our common blood memory" (p. 16).

My seminal truth: *Brokenness is symptomatic of my conscious awareness of having been created infinitely whole.* In my brokenness, wholeness also resided! I was very willing to surrender to the process of my inquiry: How does the presence of wholeness manifest itself amidst living with a broken heart. This willingness brought a strength of: spirit, tenacity, courage and soulfulness, never before encountered. I soulfully know that love is everlasting; divine utterances are promises of life everlasting and can be heard. My son was not given to me to hold for a while but for all of infinity, together, we are in the circle of life, in love and in wholeness!



Image 9: Peace

Addendum – Future research

I would like to close with this personal communication I had from Dr. Pat Allen (2013) regarding art therapy research. She acknowledges that:

“There most certainly needs to be further work done in the field of art therapy to support and define not only art-based research but especially the intersection of art based research with personal inquiry.

The field of art therapy has chosen so far to define “research” along the lines of other social science fields and engage so-called objective methods borrowed from them.

However, as art gives us the opportunity to engage in deep personal knowing, it behooves us to find ways to assist one another in how to ethically safely and with support engage in such work. Without such efforts, we risk losing one of the true gifts of art therapy.

It would be my hope that this paper would begin to define the way forward of this endeavor and in so doing, add to the body of knowledge of art therapy.”

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APPENDIX A
MY ART THERAPY IMAGE



Appendix Image: Protection

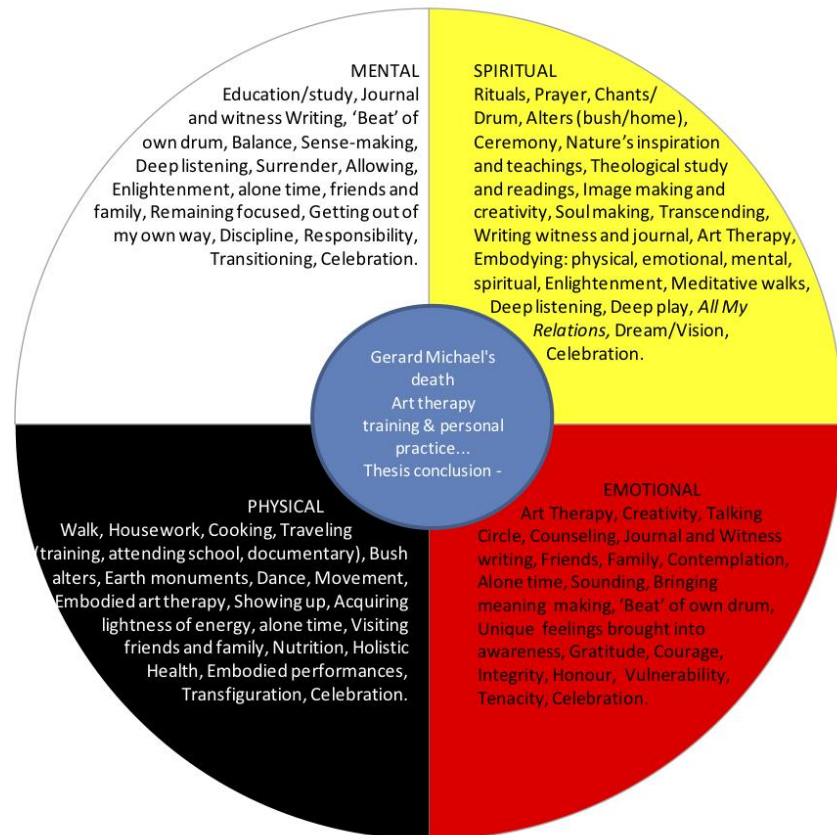
APPENDIX B.

TIME FRAME

August 12/07	Sept/0 7	Feb/08	Sept/ 08	Dec/0 8	Feb/0 9	Sept/09	Oct/09	May/10	Sept/10	Nov/10	Jan/11	Feb/1 1	Jan/12+	Jan/14
Notification of our Son Gerard Michael's death; Embassy phone calls: Canada + Great Britain; Travel to Great Britain; Identifying my son's body; press release; meeting with the coroner	Release of Gerard Michael's body; Funeral and Cremation; Travel back home to Canada with Gerard Michael's ashes	Travel to Edmonton; Training with the Grief Recovery Institute out of the United States.	Travel to Great Britain to attend the murder trial of Gerard Michael.	Travelled back home to Canada after the trial was over.	Travelled to Edmonton for personal counselling and training from Dr Jane Simington	Completion of training in Trauma Theory and practice with Dr Jane Simington – Taking Flight International	Completion of training in Grief Support with Dr Jane Simington – Taking Flight International	My first course in the Master's degree program - St Stephen's College Psychotherapy and Spirituality; the seed for my thesis question and inquiry began to germinate	Travelled to Montreal, Canada to participate in a British documentary about the murder of my son Gerard Michael	My first course and initiation into Art Therapy; Intensive training with Heather Dawson; Completing the art therapy training requirements for Master's degree within the next two years (2011-2012).	Doctor Patricia Allen - Accepted my request to become my thesis supervisor	Thesis Proposal submitted.	Continuation of my intensive studies in Psychotherapy, Spirituality and Art Therapy	Completion of my thesis

APPENDIX C

THE LENS: REAWAKENING OF MY WHOLENESS – A PILGRIM JOURNEY



Owen (2002) says in *JUNG and the NATIVE AMERICAN MOON CYCLES*

In Jewish legend, God created Adam from red, black, white, and yellow dust that he gathered from all corners of the world - Adam is the Rainbow Human (p.195)

All the four quadrants of this symbolization of a holistic well-being are interconnected. They are overlapped effectively by the *other* regardless of the labelling: physical, emotional, spiritual, mental. My breath, thought, movement would matter to the *other* part. Each part of the wholeness of my being was therefore being honoured, was being exquisitely remembered by, touched by the *other part*. Wholeness recognized. This co-creation would happen whether or not I would choose (or could possibly choose!) to acknowledge this mystery of being a created one, in the immediacy of that particular moment in time.