

ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

RECOVERING MY LOST HANDS: A HEURISTIC SELF-INQUIRY OF  
ART MAKING AND DISSOCIATIVE SYMPTOMS RELATED TO PTSD

by

JENNIFER DAWN STEWART

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I dedicate this to Chalo, may your holy amazements be many. To my children for bringing me endless cups of tea, rubbing my shoulders, and eating toast for supper. To Bobbi for her beautiful smile and unflinching support.

## **ABSTRACT**

My research investigated the relationship between art therapy and dissociative symptoms related to PTSD based on my own experiences. I am a Nursing Officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. I deployed to Afghanistan in 2010/2011 and was subsequently diagnosed with PTSD related to my military service. I chose to study my own art making experiences to understand how they were influencing my recovery from PTSD. I collected the data for this heuristic arts-based research from my art work and personal journals. My images reflect the sober realities of war; however, they also capture the creative healing journey that I have taken to recover from PTSD. My art making experiences have led me to understand that dissociation is both a pathological and mystical experience. Images of hands or lack thereof are an important theme in my research and I used the story of The Handless Maiden to further elucidate this significance. Hands may be viewed as the seat of a woman's soul or very Self; therefore, the symbolic loss of them is a great loss indeed. My research explored the reclamation of my lost hands and the discovery of my artist identity.

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*Figure 1.* Bound (Detail), by J. Stewart, 2013.

If you have a deep scar, that is a door, if you have an old, old story, that is a door. If you love the sky and the water so much you almost cannot bear it, that is a door. If you yearn for a deeper life, a full life, a sane life, that is a door. (Estes, 2001, p. 21)

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time there was a Miller who fell on hard times and so made a bargain with the Devil, promising him whatever stood behind his mill in exchange for untold wealth. The Miller briefly considered the beautiful apple tree that stood behind his mill and decided without a second thought to agree to the deal. The two shook hands and the Devil promised he would come to claim what was now his in three years time. When the deal was struck, gold coins began to spill from the Miller's pockets. The Miller ran home and shared his good fortune with his wife. Upon hearing the tale, the wife exclaimed, "You fool! It was our own precious daughter who stood sweeping behind the mill this morning!"

Hearing of her fate, the daughter entered into a life of prayer and contemplation. When the Devil arrived, he found the young maiden washed, dressed in white and sitting in the centre of a circle she had drawn in the dirt. The Devil was deterred by her cleanliness and so he ordered the girl's father to withhold water. After some time, the maiden became dirty and disheveled. Full of fear, she wept and with her tears she washed her hands. When the Devil returned and saw the maiden's clean hands he knew she remained untouchable. Frustrated, the Devil ordered the father to chop off the hands of his daughter and the Miller, afraid, complied. The young maiden laid her hands upon the chopping block and said, "I am your daughter, do with me as you will." This is the how the young hero came to find herself alone in the world and handless.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional Folktale. The Handless Maiden adapted by Jennifer Stewart. See Estes (2009) and Toyoda (2006).



## **Rationale and Intent of the Inquiry**

When one is injured psychologically it can seem as if the whole world is out of kilter. What was once up is now down. What was once a source of joy is now an irritation or worse, a thing to hate. One's sense of Self<sup>2</sup> is disrupted and the potential for renewal seems to be outweighed by the shadow of destruction. I am a soldier in the Canadian Armed Forces. I served in Afghanistan as a trauma nurse and as a result of my war experiences I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For the last four years I have been living with the very real and often very debilitating symptoms of PTSD. Luckily, I am more than a broken soldier. I am also an artist, a pragmatic student, and a lover of life. When the opportunity to research my own artwork presented itself, I did not hesitate for a moment.

The research that I am presenting in the following thesis is a reflection of the spiritual and psychological regeneration that I have experienced as a result of making art within the context of arts-based heuristic research. While I experienced many symptoms of PTSD, this thesis will look most closely at the symptom of dissociation which can be understood to be the experience of feeling disconnected from one's self and/or one's environment. The Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2009) will provide the framework and language required to discuss the restorative power of creativity within the context of art therapy. The language of the Expressive Therapies Continuum is particularly useful as it encompasses the physical, the phenomenological, the cognitive, and the spiritual. While all aspects of psychological healing are essential and interrelated, I will place

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<sup>2</sup> I capitalize the word "Self" in order to differentiate between the archetypal Self and the ego-self.

significant focus on the symbolic, archetypal, and spiritual nature of my journey. From my artwork, I have selected seven images where the theme of hands or lack thereof is a striking metaphor for the dissociated or disconnected state. Hands represent a woman's creative fire, and therefore, the loss of one's hands is a great loss indeed. In my research I explore an archetypal story that deals with the regeneration of hands and the reclamation of one's soul or Self. The tale of The Handless Maiden demonstrates that one requires her physical and spiritual hands in order to kindle the fires of creativity; and alternatively, the creative fire can provide the light by which to seek what has been lost.

In this introduction I will discuss the intent of my inquiry, provide a short autobiography, and define key terms related to my research methodology and research methods. I will also briefly introduce the theological warp and weft of my work. As a theological entry point I have engaged with a well known story of transformation: The Handless Maiden. This story provides rich imagery which has allowed me to explore my art work as a form of soul creation and/or reclamation of Self. Lastly, I will explain the organization of this paper and how my research material will be shared with the reader.

### **Research Questions**

The aim of my research is to investigate the relationship between art therapy and dissociative symptoms related to PTSD based on my own experiences. My research question is as follows:

*What is my experience of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD?*

My supplementary question is as follows:

*What are the spiritual implications of dissociative states as related to PTSD?*

Through my research, I hope to provide insight and information to mental health practitioners and Canadian Forces policy makers regarding the use of art making in the treatment of soldiers struggling with the dissociative symptoms of PTSD. The development of specific art therapy applications are beyond the scope of my research; however, I do believe that my work will provide useful information to art therapists who work with clients who experience PTSD and dissociative states. I also hope that my art work and related thesis can serve as an inspiration to all those who have suffered and wondered how to cope, how to heal, or in some cases, how to survive the day. My research is not a quest for certitude. Its purpose is not to seek secure and solid explanations or predictions of a phenomenon. Rather my methodology, heuristic arts-based inquiry, aims to enhance meaning, broaden and deepen ongoing conversations and illuminate that which may not have been noticed previously. Indeed, my research will ideally promote many new questions for future researchers and myself.

**Situating Myself Within this Inquiry**

When I think of myself, I think of a song. A rolling melody filled with both structure and mystery. I have called myself a soldier for over 17 years but I am much more than that. I was born in 1977 and raised in Saskatchewan. I joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1996 when I was nineteen years old. I received a Bachelors in Nursing (With Great Distinction) from the University of Saskatchewan in 2001. I have three children who are now twelve, ten, and eight years old. My research stems from my academic and professional curiosity; however, I am also inspired by my children who have been prolific

artists in the service of their own mental health. As I have suffered so have they. Their ability to create from their heartache and confusion has called me to do the same.

Like many soldiers I looked forward to the challenges of war. I had spent the better portion of my career preparing to lead others in disaster situations. I deployed to Afghanistan's Kandahar Air Field Role 3 Medical Facility in 2010 and 2011 as the Senior Perioperative Nursing Officer and Division Manager of a busy operating room and central sterilization core. I left my children with their father and dedicated myself to my military duties. In 2011 the number of Canadian soldiers injured and killed in combat declined significantly as Canadian troops began their withdrawal from the mission and American soldiers flooded into theatre to replace them. The following graph provides some insight into the casualty rates of newly arrived American soldiers that occurred during my time in Afghanistan.

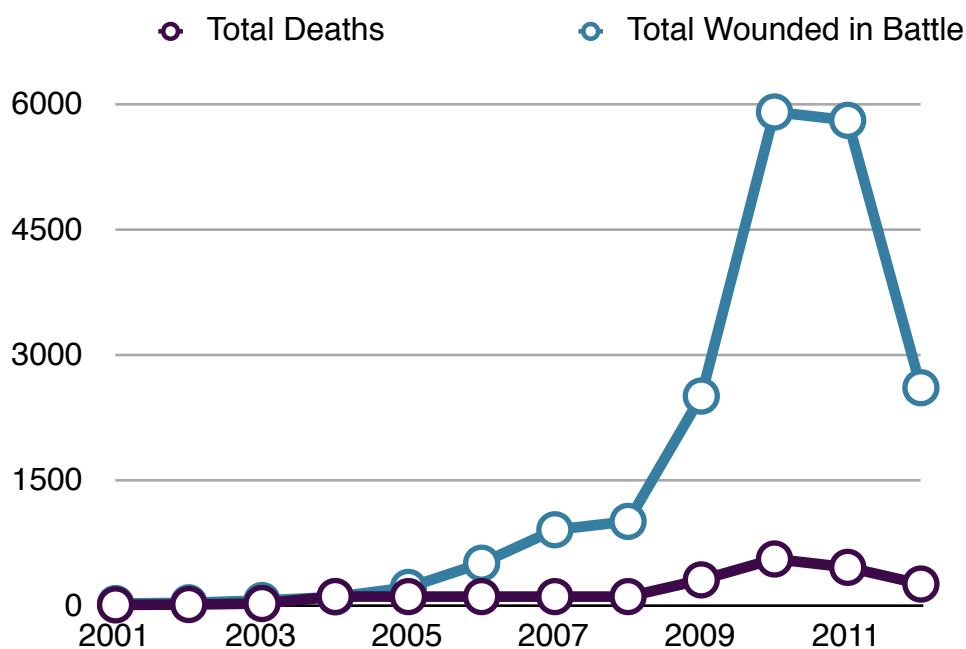


Figure 2. U.S. Department of Defense, Statistical I

I find this graph curiously comforting as it reminds me that not only did I gather a portion of this data for the United States Department of Defense; these numbers also represent real people that I cared for. This graph only represents American soldiers injured and killed in Afghanistan. It does not reflect the extensive war injuries of Afghan National Police, Afghan National Army, civilians or NATO allies including Canadians.

In Kandahar the work was endless and the war wounds were very disturbing. Children with severe burns, bomb sniffing dogs with bullet wounds, and soldiers with the loss of their limbs were common injuries at our NATO hospital. My war journal is full of many small sketches and water colour paintings that captured the terrible waste of human life that I witnessed daily.



*Figure 3. Collage of My Journal War Art by J. Stewart, 2010.*

The constant strain of rocket attacks on our encampment and the daily engagement with human suffering left me emotionally numb. While this numbness may have been the onset of PTSD I did not recognize it as such. I embraced the dissociative state for it allowed me to work like a machine. I was awarded “Top Captain” of my tour and recommended for immediate promotion to Major. I was effective, smart and likable; however, the fire inside was burning low. In my dissociative state I was extremely self-confident. Despite the immense pressures of war, my exterior calm could not be ruffled because my vulnerable self was buffered behind a thick protective wall. I felt I had discovered my true self but now I understand this was only because I equated my true self with no self at all.



*Figure 4.* Safely Sheltered in my Dissociative State by J. Stewart, 2012.

Before being diagnosed with PTSD in 2012, I had no language to describe or understand dissociation. During my deployment to Afghanistan, I felt strong and healthy for the most part. I believed that I was becoming more instead of less. A good example of this can be seen in my yoga practice. I had studied and practiced yoga for most of my adult life. Staying focussed was almost impossible for my busy mind and 10 years of practice yielded very little improvement. In Afghanistan, my yoga practice suddenly seemed to solidify for me. I easily cleared my mind of thoughts, feelings, distractions, and internal dialogue. I would flow smoothly from one pose to another, for hours on end, if I was not interrupted. At the end of each yoga session, I would lie perfectly still on my mat. My back would press against the floor and my arms and legs would be at ease. I would close my eyes and slowly dissolve into the miracle of meditation, or so I thought. I now realize that I was experiencing dissociation which mimics a meditative state. In my dissociated state I could enter into a place of great peace where suffering could not exist; and, I loved it.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.** Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental illness. It involves exposure to trauma often involving death or the threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence (American Psychological Association, 2013). For some soldiers the constant stress and strain of living in a war zone can result in PTSD. PTSD causes intrusive symptoms such as re-experiencing the traumatic event, vivid nightmares, flashbacks, or thoughts of the event that come unbeckoned and unwanted (APA, 2013). People with PTSD often avoid things that remind them of the event and may experience

intense anxiety or nervousness. The experience of feeling “on edge” all the time is known as hyper-arousal. Hyper-arousal often results in a low startle threshold (APA, 2013). For example the sound of an alarm, a child playing with bubble wrap or a popping balloon might trigger an extreme response in a person with PTSD.

People living with PTSD may have a hard time concentrating, feel irritable, or have problems sleeping well (APA, 2013). They may often feel like something terrible is about to happen, even though they are safe. Some people experience dissociative symptoms. Dissociation is sometimes experienced as a feeling of numbness and detachment. A dissociated person may feel like things around them are not real, feel disconnected from their body or thoughts, or have a hard time feeling emotions (APA, 2013). The above symptoms are a result of very normal brain functions that operate during dangerous situations in order to protect a person under threat or perceived threat (Perry & Pollard, 1998). For example, a soldier at war requires a high level of hyper-arousal in order to stay alert and safe. Indeed many symptoms of PTSD are extremely useful in a war situation; however, hyper-arousal, emotional detachment and the ability to go without sleep become liabilities in a civilian setting. To better understand PTSD it is useful to briefly explore the role that the brain plays.

The brain mediates threat with a set of predictable neurobiological, neuroendocrine and neuropsychological responses (Perry & Pollard, 1998). The two primary adaptive response patterns in the face of extreme threat are the hyper-arousal—the defense response of fight or flight, and the dissociation continuum—the freeze and surrender response. These alternative responses to trauma activate a unique combination of neural



systems and are highly adaptive. They both involve many coordinated and integrated neurophysiological responses across multiple brain areas such as the locus coeruleus, the amygdala, the hypothalamus and the brainstem nuclei responsible for autonomic nervous system regulation (Perry & Pollard, 1998; Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker & Vigilante, 1995). The autonomic nervous system (ANS) works independently from conscious thought. The ANS regulates functions such as heart rate, breathing, pupillary dilation and fight or flight responses. Therefore, it is important to recognize that trauma responses originate in a part of the brain that humans have very little control over (Perry & Pollard, 1998; Perry et al., 1995).

**Dissociation.** As mentioned earlier, the dissociative freeze and surrender response is a function of the locus coeruleus, the amygdala, the hypothalamus and the brainstem nuclei and is therefore not a conscious act of detachment or separation from self. Although the dissociative state is generally considered adaptive, issues arise for traumatized persons when they develop a low threshold for dissociating. Perry et al. (1995) call this a “sensitized dissociation pattern” (p. 278). A person with a sensitized dissociation pattern will often move very quickly to a “freeze and surrender” response when she or he experiences anxiety.

**Heuristic self-inquiry.** Every investigation requires a suitable starting point. Phenomenological inquiry offers an opportunity to deeply reflect upon the physical phenomenon of the art experience, which includes the art objects, as well as on the experience of creating them. The investigation of my own art objects and experience is a type of phenomenology called heuristics. Heuristic research is primarily focused on the self.

While many research methodologies call for objectivity, heuristic research requires the telling of personal stories. Moustakas (1990) notes that in order to investigate in the heuristic tradition, the researcher must have experienced the researched phenomenon in a “vital, intense, and full way” (p.14). My personal experience with PTSD and art making has allowed me to explore my research question from a very personal perspective. Heuristic research required me to allow my inner processes to “work on the question” without my conscious effort. In my situation, this meant delaying my thesis writing for over a year as I created a collection of paintings and allowed my research question to simmer within my subconscious. Upon completion of a series of paintings and a subsequent art show, I once again returned to my research question in order to identify my experiences, name tacit meanings, and engage with the symbolism of my art work.

**Arts-Based inquiry.** Art has long been understood as a way to express emotion, as a form of entertainment, and more recently as a way of healing. For the purposes of research it is also important to recognize that art is also a “way of knowing and systematically studying human experience and other natural phenomenon” (McNiff, 1998, p.51). Arts-based inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that integrates the arts into research and reporting. “Art-based research grows from a trust in the intelligence of the creative process and a desire for relationships with the images that emerge from it” (McNiff, 1998, p. 37). Arts-based research has allowed me to tolerate ambiguity and return again and again to the images that I created in order to collect and illuminate knowledge related to my thesis question. This methodology has expanded my understanding by introducing materials to my creative expression. In arts-based research it is often assumed

that art works will be studied as individual entities separate from their creator. In other words, the art has its own message that a researcher can discover through a process of dialoguing with external phenomenon such as the images that I painted. The creation and study of my art work has allowed me to interact with something outside of myself; thereby, arts-based inquiry expanded my heuristic introspection with empirical observation and description (McNiff, 1998). By blending heuristic methodology with arts-based inquiry I have been able to carefully examine and report on introspective data. McNiff (1998) notes that introspection has an, “archetypal place in human understanding” (p. 52). Indeed, my methodologies have led me to see the archetypal quality of my own observations and consequently generalize many of my findings beyond my own experience.

**Archetype.** Jung noted that there are general patterns of thought and behaviour that have been expressed and experienced since the beginning of time in religions, myths, and stories (Sharp, 2001, p. 13). Known as archetypes, the presence of these universal themes or general patterns of thought and behaviour suggest that they may be hardwired into the human subconscious. Exploring art work and fairytales as a way of understanding the soul or one’s whole self inevitably leads to the exploration of archetypes in one way or another. Clarissa Pinkola Estes (2005) encourages people to explore stories and art as a way to discover their true nature. More specifically, Estes encourages women to discover the wild woman archetype, which represents the prototypical woman. The archetypal wild woman is steadfast across time and space. According to Estes, “No matter what culture, no matter what era, no matter what politic, she does not change. Her cycles change, her symbolic representations change, but in essence, she does not change. She is

what she is and she is whole” (p.8). It is this wholeness of Self that I have sought through my research and art work. It is this wholeness of Self that I have come to claim.

**Self.** The themes of soul reclamation, tending the fire of creativity and unification of archetypal symbols are all matters that will be explored in my research. Central to these themes is the concept of Self; therefore, a basic definition of this term will be useful to start. When I speak of Self, I am speaking of soul or the part of myself that is whole and capable of great creativity and intuition. I am speaking of the river beneath the river (Estes, 2005). Jung understood Self to be the archetype of wholeness which functions as the regulating centre of the psyche (Sharp, 2001). The Self is difficult to truly know; however, dreams, artwork, myths, and fairytales provide archetypal images of it. These images can be found in the stories of wise women as well as in the transformative deeds those who embody of wild woman archetype. Knowledge of Self can be gained by experiencing the tensions that exist within one’s self. For example, within myself there are two very different ways of being in the world. The first is a tightly controlled woman in uniform who strives for perfection and normative behaviours. The second is an innate and instinctual creature that cannot be tied nor bound. It is only by experiencing the tension between these two necessary aspects of myself that I have been able to move towards wholeness, balance, and deeper gratitude for my whole nature, my instinctual nature, my deepest knowing, the river beneath the river, the Self.

### **Organization**

I have organized this project into 5 chapters. Chapter 1 provides information regarding the nature and rationale of the research, includes a personal introduction, and de-

defines key terms. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review of PTSD and the use of art therapy in the treatment of dissociative states. I will explore theological literature related to the instinctive psyche and the reclamation of Self or soul via the metaphor of a woman's hands. As mentioned earlier, hands have been a predominant theme throughout my research and I have used the work of Sonoko Toyoda and Clarissa Pinkola Estes to illuminate my art work's spiritual importance. I will also review the literature related to my methodology. In Chapter 3, I will expand on my methodology and examine how the heuristic arts-based approach has facilitated my research process. My methods included the intentional creation of art work. The images that I have created are an important aspect of my results as they embody all that I have learned and experienced throughout the research process.

In Chapter 4 I share the results of my research. I have organized my art making experiences into four inter-related categories: kinesthetic and sensory experiences, perceptual and affective experiences, cognitive and symbolic experiences, and creative or transcendental experiences (Hinz, 2009). The results of my research are presented in conjunction with supporting artwork. In this way, I intend to clarify how the results of my research flowed from my arts-based methodology. In Chapter 5, I discuss my results and relate my findings to the materials explored in the literature review and in particular to the practice of art therapy. I expand on the theological theme of women's hands in relation to dissociation and disconnection. I look at the process of creativity as both a precursor to and product of a Self. Through careful explication I have come to understand that the motif of hands within my art work has significant metaphorical implications that have

helped me to answer my supplementary question surrounding the spiritual implications of dissociation.

In this introduction I have discussed the intent of my inquiry and provided a short introduction of myself in order to acquaint the reader with the context of my research. I have highlighted the relevance of the Expressive Therapies Continuum as a theoretical framework from which to explore the relevance of my research and its application to art therapy. I have briefly noted important theological themes such as the Self, the archetypal nature of hands, and the necessity of one's creative fire. Lastly, I have defined key terms related to my research and presented the general layout of this thesis. As a person living with PTSD, I have come to understand how important the creative life is to the healing process. The act of creation makes manifest a person's inner flame, no matter how diminished it might be. Art making provides the artist with integrative experiences, symbols of hope, and perhaps most importantly a way to connect to one's lost hands.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a contextual review of literature relevant to my research question and is organized into three main sections. The first section explores PTSD, specifically the symptom of dissociation. Recent literature offers new insights into the nature of dissociation. This review highlights research which supports the recognition of a dissociative subtype in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 (APA, 2013). The value of art therapy in the treatment of PTSD is reviewed with specific attention given to seminal researchers such as Collie and Wolf. I review the Expressive Arts Continuum and explain how art making supports spiritual endeavours.

The second section of this literature review further explores theological themes related to the creation of art work and the spiritual nature of the dissociative state. Writers such as Estes and Toyoda explore the ancient meaning of a woman's hands as a symbolic archetype for a woman's instinctual and creative self. The folk tale, *The Handless Maiden*, provides a beautiful and metaphorical map of my own healing process as I have sought for my own lost hands. Exploring this folktale via the works of Estes and Toyoda opens a rich vein from which to mine the symbolic and archetypal elements of my art making experiences. *The Handless Maiden* offers many metaphors such as the symbolic child which represents the soul and a woman's hands which represent a person's creative life. To explore the link between trauma and the soul (symbolized by the child) I turn to the work of Donald Kalsched. In unity with Kalsched's work, I explore the spiritual nature of dissociation and the importance of the liminal space. In recognizing the effect that trauma has on the soul or Self, it becomes clear that the work of healing must be a spiri-

tual endeavour. For me, this spiritual work has been bound in the liminal experiences of making and contemplating my art work over a period of several years. Lastly, I will elucidate the value of heuristic arts-based methodology. I rely heavily on the work of Sela-Smith, Moustakas, and McNiff as I demonstrate the efficacy of my mixed methodology.

### **PTSD and Dissociation**

PTSD is a complex phenomenon. Research methods and treatment options must therefore be adaptive and creative in order to explore and treat this disorder in all of its variations. To meaningfully discuss PTSD, it will be useful to clarify the language used to describe its symptoms. Positive symptoms are characterized by the presence of unusual feelings, thoughts, or behaviours, whereas, negative symptoms are characterized by the absence of experience. Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele (2005) propose that dissociative symptoms affect most aspects of PTSD. They note that the dissociative symptoms of PTSD are generally expressed as loss of memory (amnesia), loss of affect (numbing), loss of critical function (a cognitive action), and losses of sensory, perceptual or motor functions.

While standard treatments for PTSD, including psychopharmacological treatments, cognitive behavioural therapy, prolonged exposure, and behavioural treatments address positive symptoms of PTSD such as hyper-arousal, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and anger, there is no evidence that these treatments reduce negative symptoms—such as dissociation— at all (Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, & Spiegel, 2006; Feeny, Zoellner, Fitzgibbons, & Foa, 2000). Negative symptoms associated with dissociative responses are important to address because throughout the literature they are seen as a



benchmark for assessing PTSD severity and duration (Bryant et al., 2011; Collie et al., 2006; Feeny, et al., 2000).

Changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) reflect the growing body of research that supports dissociation as a very specific subtype of PTSD. The subtype applies to individuals who meet the full criteria for PTSD and also demonstrate significant symptoms of derealization and/or depersonalization (APA, 2013). Derealization is the perception that one's environment is not real and depersonalization is the experience of perceiving one's self as not whole, connected, or real. Dissociation is not considered a subset of core PTSD symptoms. Instead, the dissociative subtype reflects a form of PTSD with accompanying comorbid symptoms of derealization and/or depersonalization. It should be noted that inclusion in the dissociative subset appears to be relatively unrelated to the severity of PTSD symptoms. In other words, derealization and/or depersonalization are experienced by individuals diagnosed with mild PTSD as well as by those diagnosed with complex or severe PTSD (Wolf, Miller, et al., 2012).

Wolf, Miller, et al. (2012) use latent profile analysis to examine depersonalization, derealization, and reduction in awareness. Their research demonstrates that 12% of veterans with PTSD scored markedly high on symptoms of derealization and depersonalization. A similar study (Wolf, Lunney, et al., 2012) replicates similar results with approximately 15% of males and 30% of females from the veteran and military PTSD sample being assigned to the dissociative subset which was defined by depersonalization and derealization. This work has been extended into a civilian sample by researchers working

with individuals with PTSD and sexual trauma (Steuwe, Lanius, & Frewan, 2012).

Steuwe et al. use latent profile analyses to demonstrate that approximately 25% of their civilian sample could be classified as belonging to a dissociative subgroup, as defined by high scores on derealization and depersonalization.

Further support for the DSM-5's dissociative subtype of PTSD comes from an analysis of respondents in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Survey (Stein et al. 2013). This health survey encompasses 25,018 respondents in 16 countries. The study looks at the Composite International Diagnostic Interview which assessed DSM-4 PTSD and other common DSM-4 disorders, as well as tracks dissociative symptoms of depersonalization and derealization. The study found that dissociative symptoms were present in 14.4% of respondents with PTSD regardless of country of origin or national gross domestic product (Stein et al., 2013).

### **Art Therapy**

**Implications for treatment.** Symptoms of dissociation may interfere with PTSD treatments, especially trauma focussed therapies where dissociation might decrease one's ability to process trauma memories and related cognitions and emotions (Lande, Tarpley, Francis, & Boucher, 2010). The dissociative state is protective and works to resist the retrieval of traumatic memories thus hindering PTSD treatment (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Existing studies that have investigated PTSD treatments were not designed to address the issue of the dissociative subtype specifically; therefore, this is an area of study that requires further investigation. More work is needed to understand the influence of the dis-

sociative subtype on PTSD treatment response as well as the best practices for effective PTSD treatment for people with dissociative symptoms.

There is research which indicates that art therapy may be uniquely positioned to treat dissociative symptoms in soldiers who are experiencing combat-related PTSD. Art making allows for controlled desensitization to anxiety producing memories and experiences; therefore, art making can lead to a decrease in dissociative episodes (Collie et al., 2006). Johnson, Lubin, James and Hale (1997) looked at an inpatient program that specialized in combat-related PTSD to determine which components of treatment were the most effective following a single session. They determined that of 15 standard treatment components such as cognitive behavioural therapy or music therapy, art therapy offered the greatest benefits to the soldiers with the most severe PTSD symptoms. Nanda, Gaydos, Hathorn and Watkins (2010) reviewed the empirical literature on the therapeutic implication of artwork for veterans and observed that images might be necessary for the symbolic processing involved in creating meaning.

Collie et al. (2006) outline the theoretical rationale for using art therapy as a treatment for PTSD and clarify what they see as comprising best practices for the use of art in the treatment for combat-related PTSD. Collie et al. (2006) also review related literature and descriptions of art therapists' and psychiatrists' clinical work with people experiencing PTSD. They recommend a three-stage approach for art therapy treatment of PTSD. The goals of the first stage are of particular interest to the study of dissociation as they include the reduction of arousal symptoms, the development of emotional self-efficacy, the reactivation of positive emotions (reduction of emotional numbness), and the

creation of emotional safety and social bonds. As van der Kolk (1987) notes, “One of the most urgent tasks facing therapists of traumatized individuals is the re-creation of a sense of human interdependence and community” (p. 155).

**Expressive Therapies Continuum.** The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) offers a useful structure for organizing and presenting my experiences of making art. Some of my art making has resulted in highly kinesthetic (physical) or sensory experiences. Kinesthetic experiences include action, rhythm, movement and the release of energy (Hinz, 2009). Sensory experiences include the awareness of tactile, olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and visual information. Kinesthetic and sensory experiences require basic brain functions and are therefore considered the simplest modes of information processing. A more complex level of information processing can be found in artistic experiences that are emotional (affective) or perceptual. Hinz (2005) states that, “Information processing occurs in a more sophisticated manner at the Perceptual/Affective level; it requires that clients use visual imagery to represent their internal experiences” (p. 79). A person who experiences an overuse of affective functioning may be unable to perceive structure in the world or within oneself. In this situation, using art to strengthen the perceptual function may allow a person with overwhelming emotions to create order out of chaos. Alternatively, a person who focuses solely upon structure and form may be unable to fully experience emotional states. In my experience, this type of imbalance is common in soldiers because military culture favours stoicism over emotional expression.

Rational thought and symbolic reckoning are considered to be the most complex functions of the brain (Hinz, 2005). Cognition is a left brain function and finds its polar

opposite in the right brain's capacity for symbolism. Cognition encompasses problem solving and analytical thought; and in contrast, symbolism is concerned with mythic thought and intuition. While cognition is required for symbolic thought, over reliance on cognition can diminish or block a person's ability to comprehend and contemplate the mysterious symbolic nature of the inner world (Hinz, 2009).

Ideally, each way of processing information would find a natural balance with its polar opposite as well as within all levels of the Expressive Therapies Continuum. In a healthy person, cognition is informed by perceptions and emotions, emotions are affected by the natural rhythms of the body and so on and so forth. Beyond kinesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, and cognitive/symbolic levels, the Expressive Therapies Continuum also recognizes a creative level that can occur at any single level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum, or represent the integration of functioning for all levels (Hinz, 2009). Hinz notes that, "The healing dimension of the Creative level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum has been defined as inventive and resourceful interaction with the environment leading to creative self-actualization" (p. 171).

The Expressive Therapies Continuum is integral to the organization of my findings. Throughout my research significant focus is given to the symbolic or spiritual aspects of my art making experiences; however, it should be noted that this type of deep symbolic reckoning followed years of work at the kinesthetic/sensory and the affective/perceptual levels. Due to cognitive, perceptual and sensory impairments related to PTSD, working holistically within the Expressive Therapies Continuum was initially a major challenge for me. The framework provided by the Expressive Therapies Continuum gives

structure and language to what is, for all intents and purposes, an extremely complex and varied arts-based healing process.

### **Art as a Spiritual Endeavour**

A predominant theme encountered in the literature about creative expression is that creativity is a spiritual endeavour. Rubin (1999) acknowledges that art therapists have a broad variety of approaches to incorporating spirituality into their practices. The transpersonal nature of art therapy is not a new idea. Malchiodi (2002) points out that the traditional purpose of art since the genesis of humanity has been to cultivate the sacred dimension. Art heals by reaching into the depth of the human soul. Pat Allen (2005) and Shaun McNiff (2004) believe that art is a spiritual path or practice. Pat Allen (2005) states, "I am a transdenominational soul and art is my prayer, my ritual, my remembrance of the Divine" (p. 2). This statement resonates with me for it speaks to the feelings of connectedness that I sometimes experience when I engage in art making. Shaun McNiff notes that, "[R]elationships with others are the physical and spiritual basis of creative energy. Nothing is further from the truth than the popular notion that we create alone and in isolation from the world" (McNiff, p.216). Whether people create in a group setting or in the quiet of their home, creativity ultimately calls us to be in relationship with something other than ourselves.

The Expressive Therapies Continuum also acknowledges the spiritual nature of art making. The search for meaning and purpose takes place when symbolic processing is integrated with problem solving skills from the cognitive component. Hinz (2009) states, "Individuals produce images of self-discovery and spiritual searching at the creative tran-

sition area between the two poles of the Cognitive/Symbolic level” (p. 210). In a similar vein, Stephen Levine (1997) writes that the creative act is a way in which we might move beyond narcissistic self absorption and into a place of grounded self knowledge or self-restoration. “Whether this ground be called the ‘unconscious’ or ‘God’, it is clear that what has taken place is an integration of the personality on a deeper foundation. It is a movement towards wholeness and unity” (Levine, 1997, p. 23).

Themes of wholeness, connection and integration abound when the topics of art making and spirituality are merged. Sonoko Toyoda (2006) and Clarissa Estes (1995) are both Jungian psychologists who explore archetypal symbolism pertaining to feminine spirituality and creativity. Estes and Toyoda also recognize the spiritual nature of creativity. Toyoda’s work as a Jungian psychologist has led her to view the symbolic loss of a woman’s hands as the repression or destruction of a woman’s spiritual self-expression. Hands represent a woman’s creative life. In my own artwork, I have seen the themes of hands and handlessness expressed repeatedly. These themes were such a predominant feature of my research that I was drawn to the work of Toyoda on the same topic.

**Hands as a symbolic archetype.** Toyoda (2006) recognizes the autonomous and intelligent nature of hands. With two hands we can accomplish many things. Often one hand works while the other passively supports, a cooperative symbolism. Toyoda suggests that using one’s hands increases the sensitivity of the psyche as well as connection to our spiritual natures. “The hands are aware of more than what we are conscious of. When you get lost, you may ask your hands to show you the way” (Toyoda, p. 101). Estes (1995) notes the mystical nature of hands as well:

If you study creche scenes from the Mediterranean, more often than not you see that the hands of the shepherds and the Wise Men, or of Mary and Joseph, are all extended with palms facing the Divine Child, as though the child were a light that could be received up through the palm of their hands. (p. 441)

Our hands are a type of sensor that allows us to receive as well as transmit. The touch of a hand can soothe, calm, comfort, and heal which is something that I have experienced often as a nurse and as a mother. “Hands are what we make things with, how we hold our children, how we get along in the world” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 291). There is deep mystery associated with the hands; not surprisingly, there are very old stories that explore their loss. Toyoda uses the traditional tale of The Handless Maiden and other similar folk stories to explore the symbolic meaning of women’s hands and the wound of losing them. Toyoda links women’s hands to women’s creativity, personal agency, and spirituality. She writes, “Women of today who have lost their feminine spirituality and creativity can be regarded as women who have lost their hands” (Toyoda, 2006, p. 9). Estes views the loss of one’s hands as an essential aspect of spiritual growth.

If, in our modern societies, the hands of the ego must be sundered in order to regain our wild office, our feminine senses, then go they must in order to take us away from all seductions of meaningless things within our reach, whatever it is that we can hold on to in order to not grow. If it is so that the hands must go for a while, then so be it. Let them go. (Estes, p. 440)



Whether we let our hands go or unintentionally lose them, as we will see in the tale of *The Handless Maiden*, the loss is painful and necessary. How long we journey before we reclaim our hands, that is a different story all together.

**The Girl Without Hands.** In the tale of *The Handless Maiden*, also known as *The Girl without Hands*, a poor miller makes a pact with a stranger—the Devil, in fact—in which he promises to give the evil one whatever is behind the mill in exchange for wealth. Later the miller learns that it is his own daughter who has been promised in that moment. The daughter waits for three years for the Devil to come and claim her as his own. She washes herself, dresses in white and stands in the centre of a circle which she draws in the earth. The girl succeeds in warding off the Devil but this is accomplished at the expense of her own hands which her father, under the authority of the Devil, dismembers from her body. Toyoda (2006) notes this tale, and its ubiquitous variations, often include the daughter obediently submitting to the severing of her own hands, saying, “I am your daughter, do with me as you must.” Toyoda states, “This typical scenario of a father and his obedient daughter suggest that most women in modern society accept masculine values without questioning them” (p. 20). In a different take on the loss of one’s hands, Estes (1995) notes that this sacrificial dismemberment often marks the beginning of an important spiritual journey for women. Estes attends to three stages of transformation: the black or dark dissolving stage, the red or sacrificial stage, and the white or resurgent stage. In this story the father’s poor bargain with the Devil represents the dissolving stage, the loss of hands represents the sacrifice, and in the next part of the tale the girl strikes out on her own which is a symbol of her awakening. This cycle will be repeated

many times in a woman's life: a falling away and a rebuilding with the materials that are left behind.

Not all women, including myself, initially recognize the loss of their spiritual hands. In my own experience, as a very young woman I chose to accept the patriarchal ethos of military life and in doing so I unknowingly placed my spiritual hands on the chopping block of male convention. Over-identifying with male power, I allowed my spiritual hands and my woman's intuition to be diminished. For many years I walked in the world, confident and yet always aware that I was very vulnerable. When I was faced with the chaos and destruction of war, I had few internal spiritual resources with which to bind my psychological wounds. When women recognize their amputation, they are imbued with great power and great sorrow. There is power in realizing one's capacity for endurance and the lessons that will come. There is sorrow in the realization that one has been cut away from immediate self-healing and self-comfort; and yet, there is hope. "In the act of losing her hands, the woman makes her way into *la selva subterranea*, the underworld initiation ground" (Estes, 1995, p. 438). This grueling journey into the underworld is a psychological and spiritual journey that allows women to eventually practice a deep instinctual knowing about all manner of things.

In one version of the story, after the young woman's arms have been severed, she asks that they be strapped to her back and in this condition she sets out to seek her fortune in the world. The girl becomes a wanderer with all her earthly belongings carried with her. This wandering represents a further descent into the underworld where she meets many characters that assist her in her journey. The young wanderer leaves her parents and

gives herself over to the guidance of a white spirit which is an emissary from the wild soul. Estes (1995) notes that it is important “for a woman’s individuation process that she have spiritual good sense, or be assisted by a guide that does” (p. 448). The girl is led by the white spirit to a King’s orchard where each perfect pear is numbered and accounted for. The pears are not numbered out of greed but rather as a way to know when someone has arrived and eaten in the orchard. The orchard that the girl discovers is not an ordinary orchard, but an orchard that symbolizes one’s subconscious (Estes).

The gardener informs the King that someone has eaten a pear in the night and so the King comes to sit with the gardener and his magician in order to determine who that person might be. As the moon rises, the three men keep watch and soon they catch sight of the unkempt girl moving through the trees. They see a branch bend low and offer a pear to the hungry girl. The King recognizes the value of this young woman and promises to love and protect her. A marriage is made and the King and his new Queen are happy together. This is a short time of rest for the young woman for her spiritual journey is not complete. For their wedding, the King gives his new Queen a pair of silver hands to wear. Mythically, silver prostheses are very powerful (Estes, 1995, p. 462). Silver hands represent the wounded healer and the handless Queen’s increasing ability to function in the underworld. These silver hands can never replace the Queen’s own hands but they are valuable nonetheless and will be a treasured reminder of all the Queen’s travails (Estes, p. 463).

It comes to pass that the King must leave his bride who is newly pregnant. When the handless woman’s child is born, the good news is sent to the King by way of a mes-

senger. The messenger falls asleep and the Devil changes the letter to read that the royal child was born a monster. The Devil's interventions lead to a death sentence for the young Queen and her baby. In the tale of *The Handless Maiden*, Estes suggests that the Devil may be an overlay of a much older story where, instead of the Devil, the character causing confusion would have been an old crone.

[B]ack in misty time, it is a good bet that this sort of story originally presented the crone playing the part of the initiator/trouble-causer, making things difficult for the sweet young heroine so embarkation from the land of the living to the land of the dead could occur. Psychically, this is cohesive with concepts in Jungian psychology, theology, and old night religions<sup>3</sup> that the Self, or in our parlance, the Wild Woman, seeds the psyche with perils and challenges in order that the human in despair drives herself back down into her original nature looking for answers and strength, thereby reuniting with the great wild Self and, as much as possible thereafter, moving as one. (Estes, 1995, p. 452)

Whether the threat comes from the predatory Devil or the well meaning Crone, the effect is the same, the Queen's life is once again about to change drastically. The old Queen Mother refuses to have her daughter-in-law murdered; and so instead, she sends the handless woman and her child far into the woods. Toyoda (2006) notes, "The second journey is the same as the first one with respect to her helplessness. However, this time our maiden is not alone but carries her very dependent infant on her back" (p.26). The

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<sup>3</sup> Estes uses this term to indicate Goddess-centred religions that value the ancient and vital wild Self.

creative act of giving birth is not enough to fully reconnect the handless woman with her severed feminine Self. Despite becoming a mother, the woman remains helpless. Once again the cycle of black, red and white plays out and the handless woman must continue on.

The story of *The Girl Without Hands* has several endings. Toyoda (2006) shares a version of the story where the young Queen is taken care of in the woods by a helpful spirit in white for seven years. During this time in isolation the woman's hands grow back and she is able to nurture and care for her baby. Another common version of the story has the Queen dropping her baby into frigid waters. In both versions, the baby may represent the woman's soul/child, or Self. Kalsched (2013), also a Jungian analyst, notes that the inner child, "often stands symbolically for an affective inner core of the self that is experienced as both innocent and sacred, and that we have every reason to think of an image of the human soul" (p. 53). In the story, the young woman thrusts her stubs into the water where her child has fallen and something mystical occurs. The Queen's decisive act is an act of self reclamation and her hands are fully restored. In all versions of the story the young woman remains in her forest home, quiet and protected, for seven years in order to fully integrate her returning creativity and instinctual nature. Of this important aspect of the story, Toyoda (2006) notes, "In order to recover these lost members, women need to restore their harmonic relationship with nature, and they also need to be alone so that they can look deep within themselves" (p. 33).

*The Handless Maiden* is a story of endurance which explores the many cycles of a woman's life. It is a story about becoming robust and sturdy, becoming something sub-

stantial. It should be clearly stated that the harm done to a person is never acceptable just because it eventually strengthens them. The idea that trauma occurs to create personal growth is ridiculous. The loss of innocence can be a gradual process that can take place through the normal processes of life and eventually leads to the awakening that not everything in the world is beautiful and good. That said, traumatic events as seen in the story of *The Handless Maiden* have a way of dramatically quickening the descent into the psychic underworld where one can seek the wild Soul if it has been lost.

**Spirituality and PTSD.** The sense that, “something” has been lost is common for soldiers returning from war (Hatanaka, 2013). Whether this is a loss of self, loss of innocence, or a loss of meaning, this theme is captured in the literature relating to veterans and PTSD. Several researchers have explored the relationship between PTSD and spirituality. Fontana and Rosenheck (2004; 2005) note a correlation between seeking spiritual services and PTSD in veterans who experienced a loss of meaning in their lives. Although Fontana and Rosenheck make no definitive recommendations, their work clearly indicates that greater consideration of existential questions must be incorporated into PTSD treatment options. Larry Decker is a licensed clinical psychologist and student of Sufism. He has worked with American war veterans for over 20 years and writes on the importance of finding personal meaning in traumatic experiences as a way to recover from combat trauma. Decker (2007) notes that, regardless of the pain soldiers suffer or perpetrate, war provides a sense of purpose and meaning. In my own war journal I recalled my first night shift in Kandahar when a man died as a result of his extremely traumatic injuries:

The patient coded [his heart stopped] and I went running for the crash cart. We revived him with internal defibrillation [electric shocks directly to the heart] and continued the surgery. The patient crashed a second time and again I went running for the cart. All night we worked but he died anyway. I wrapped his head, bound his toes, closed his eyes and started to clean the blood soaked [surgical] theatre in a ritual that I would eventually learn well. But on that first night, I was in wonder of that crimson death room. Even though he died, and I knew many more would, I still felt proud of my work. It mattered. (War Journal of Jennifer Stewart, 2011)

Is it possible to discover meaning in the mundane world after war? Decker believes it is possible. “What is the value of trauma if, as therapists, we simply attempt to restore the veteran’s pretrauma beliefs? The experience of trauma has provided the veteran with the possibility of moving beyond the interactive self to a basis in an innate/transpersonal self” (Decker, 2007, p. 34). He notes that spirituality and war have an important commonality. Spirituality moves people, “beyond the mundane, beyond the ordinary” (Decker, 2007, p. 35). Spirituality, like war, also takes us out of our everyday lives and into the extraordinary. War and spirituality encompass two poles of awareness, “both with their degrees and types of meaning: the mindless, adrenaline-filled, horrible violence of war and the powerful, cosmic, transcendent force of spirituality” (Decker, p. 35). However, dualistic thinking does not serve the traumatized soldier and Decker encourages his clients to think of war and spirituality in terms of unity. “From the mystical per-

spective, all possibilities are present within every moment of our lives and thus immanent and transcendent spirituality also simultaneously exists with the tragic horror of war” (Decker, p. 35). It is from this perspective of unity that I seek the spiritual elements of the dissociative state.

In order to discuss the spiritual aspects of art making and dissociation it will be useful to briefly explore the concept of liminal space. Kalsched writes and lectures on psycho-spiritual approaches to understanding human development. His work contemplates the liminal space which unites two opposing realities by creating a third space that participates in both realities and yet also transcends them.

Are we material beings with occasional intimation of another world of spiritual reality, lying just the other side of the veil? or are we spiritual beings, suffering through a material existence? The question poses a false dichotomy. Clearly we are both. And that is why we attempt to live in that potential space where the true story resides - between the worlds with one eye open, looking out, and one eye closed, looking in.

(Kalsched, 2013, p. 45)

The word liminal comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning literally, "threshold." Liminal spaces may be experienced as ambiguous because art making creates a space that is both real and mythic, timeless yet bound in time. In other words, art making facilitates liminality and in turn, liminality is a place where one can reconstitute one's self.

In William Bridge's (1980) theory of transitions, he also recognizes the liminality of shifting experiences. The transition process requires developing new skills for negoti-



ating the perilous passage across the "nowhere" that separates the old life situation from the new (Bridges, 1980, p. 14). Bridges calls this nowhere space the neutral zone. Although Bridges does not refer explicitly to the mystical nature of the neutral zone he does brush up against spiritual concepts. The neutral zone is a place of disintegration and reintegration that may appear to be a place of destruction however, it is truly a place of renewal. Bridges describes it this way:

Chaos is not a mess, but rather it is the primal state of pure energy to which the person returns for every true new beginning. It is only from the perspective of the old form that chaos looks fearful—from any other perspective, it looks like life itself, as yet unshaped by purpose and identification. (p. 119 -120)

Another way of understanding the liminal space was presented by Carl Jung who developed the term “transcendent function.” Miller (2004) writes extensively on Jung’s model for psychological growth via the transcendent function:

The transcendent function has to do with opening a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious to allow a living, third thing to emerge that is neither a combination of nor a rejection of the two. It has a central role in the self-regulating nature of the psyche, individuation, and the Self’s drive toward wholeness. (p. 5)

Miller notes that liminality is the, “archetypal wellspring from which the transcendent function emerges” (p. 106). Alternately, the transcendent function is what allows us to access the liminal space where we encounter something deeper and more numinous than

our everyday understandings (Miller, p. 116). Learning to exist gracefully within a liminal space has allowed me to create symbolic visual metaphors that resonate with many meanings. One insight of particular importance has been my ability to reconceptualize the dissociative state. My art making experiences have led me to understand that dissociation is both a pathological and mystical experience.

While the liminal space may be seen as a place of healing, Levine (1997) proposes that it is also a place of authentic living. Levine's writings make use of Winnicott's theory of transitional space and Heidegger's study of authentic existence in order to demonstrate that disconnection from the world—a movement into the inner life—is pathological if it disallows full and authentic experience of the world.

[H]ealthy psychological experience takes place in transitional space; it is only in illness that we wall ourselves up in an interior world. And, similarly, it is only in the flight from illness what we deny the very existence of interiority and take refuge in a “real” world outside us.

(Levine, 1997, p. 32).

If suffering of the soul comes from separation between the self and the world, then being-in-the-world is an essential aspect of healing. To be in-the-world as an embodied being means using our creative capacities to imagine ourselves more deeply. Our creative life is the bridge between our Self and the world and Levine calls us to remember that we are always “on” this bridge. If we were to attempt to pass on one side or the other we would surely fall (Levine, 1997, p. 41).

**Dissociation: It is the symptoms that save us.** As demonstrated earlier in this literature review there is strong empirical data which acknowledges the psychological and neurobiological aspects of dissociation as related to PTSD. In exploring the question, “What is my experience of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD?” I am called to explore the spiritual significance of dissociation. Dissociation is an experience that can be measured and assessed and therefore it may be viewed as a physical manifestation or symptom of trauma. Another way of looking at dissociation is to see it as something that the psyche *does* to protect the soul. Dissociation may be the fragmentation and compartmentalization of trauma memories into segmented neural nets in the brain; however, the psyche, in its wisdom, very likely mediates this process (Kalsched, 2013). One might ask, “What exactly is being protected by the psyche?” I believe it is something sacred and worthy of protection: perhaps, the innermost part of ourselves that carries the core of potential wholeness, aliveness or creativity. It is the part of ourselves that wants to fully embrace and experience life. Kalsched recognizes that, following trauma, the innocent core of a human being can often be “rescued” by the sophisticated defense system of the psyche. There is definitely a remarkable “intelligence” within the human mind that facilitates the splitting and dissociation mechanisms which serve to protect a person from that which cannot be comprehended by the psyche’s normal symbolic process (Kalsched).

As mentioned earlier, in myth and artwork, dissociated aspects of the Self may be represented archetypally by the image of a child and this has been especially true in my art making experiences. Kalsched (2013) notes that in traumatic situations, “the child—a

symbolic carrier of the animated soul's life—is pushed back (by the psyche's defenses) from between the worlds where it was alive and at play, into the unconscious where it is trapped and imprisoned” (p. 60). The image of the child is not only present in the story of The Handless Maiden and within my art work, it is also found in all quarters of the world. For example Rank, Richter, and Lieberman documented 70 myths where the soul/child<sup>4</sup> is banished or exiled in order to save its life (Rank, Richter, & Lieberman, 2004). Perhaps the most familiar example of this type of story would be the infant Jesus and his flight into Egypt.

### **Methodology**

In the following section I review the literature related to the mixed methodology of my research. The methodology that I used was a heuristic arts-based process. I explore the value, validity, and nature of heuristic research. In order to clarify the essence of heuristic inquiry, I draw parallels between my methodology and the tale of The Handless Maiden. I rely heavily upon key heuristic proponents such as Moustakas and Sela-Smith. I review the work of McNiff, who writes clearly on the topic of arts-based research, and explore how this methodology strengthens the validity of my research. Arts-based research offers opportunity for information gathering that falls outside the scope of Moustakas' highly narrative approach; and therefore, was a supportive methodology for my thesis question: What is my experience of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD?

### **Heuristic Research**

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term soul/child throughout this thesis to indicate dissociated aspects of myself.

Braud and Anderson (1998) note, "many of the most significant and exciting life events and extraordinary experiences—moments of clarity, illumination, and healing—have been systematically excluded from conventional research" (p. 3). In an attempt to capture my own extraordinary experiences and healing, I turned to the writing of Moustakas on heuristic inquiry (1990). In reading his work, I recognized my own intuitive process of research that I had been using throughout my Masters of Psychotherapy and Spirituality program. Moustakas offers a philosophy of learning that encourages the researcher to engage fully in the research process. In examining my research intentions, it became clear that my inquiry necessitated a qualitative rather than quantitative paradigm. Qualitative research exists along a continuum of approaches varying in focus from conceptualizing to experiencing the chosen subject (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Deeper examination of experiential-based methods further narrowed my choices to phenomenological systems. An additional consideration of my research question is the dimension of self-inquiry. Not all research styles are conducive to the researcher also being the sole participant—heuristic inquiry being a clear exception.

The word heuristic refers to a process of internal searching through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas observes that the "heuristic process requires a return to the self, a recognition of self awareness and a valuing of one's own experience" (p. 13). It is necessary that the researcher have a personal experience with the phenomenon being researched. Sela-Smith (2002) writes that heuristic methodology could be used in any science and in any research endeavour where the inquiry is on the cutting-edge of new territory being explored. "When there is no idea

of where the researcher or the territory is going (i.e., there is no paradigm established for the field), then exploratory discovery, rather than testing hypotheses, is the goal” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p.58). There is a small but growing body of research that investigates how art supports the recovery of soldiers experiencing PTSD; however, very little of this research focuses on dissociative symptoms. Heuristic inquiry has allowed me to lay the groundwork on which other researchers may further develop and test their own hypotheses.

### **Validity in heuristic research.**

The general goal of heuristic methodology is to “come to a deeper understanding of whatever is calling out from the inside of the self to be understood” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 64). The personally entrenched question of the researcher acts as the primary guide and therefore validity is found within the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1990).

Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching . . . present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? This judgment is made by the primary researcher, who is the only person in the investigation who has undergone the heuristic inquiry from the beginning. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32)

The idea of validity in heuristic research is unique because the intent of heuristic inquiry is not to prove. Like so much of the human experience, my results cannot be scientifically proven. My findings will simply be the truth of my internal encounter with myself. I

firmly embrace a core belief that the human experience—my human experience—holds deep value and significance.

### **The Heuristic Process**

Moustakas (1990) acknowledges that heuristic research must take place free from methodological impediments in order to be authentic; paradoxically, he created a methodological structure for researchers to use as a model. Moustakas offers little direction on how to “leap into the unknown self” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 77); however, the tale of *The Handless Maiden* provides examples of surrender in abundance. As I share Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic research process I will demonstrate that the tale of *The Handless Maiden* is a blueprint for heuristic research as much as it is a framework for Self reclamation; indeed, the two are but different sides of the same coin.

Heuristic research begins with engagement. This occurs when the researcher engages in a deep inner search to discover a passion and an intense interest for a research subject or question (Moustakas, 1990). In the story of *The Handless Maiden*, the severing of the girl’s hands brings about a deep question, a profound experience and a door. A significant concept in heuristic research is that of tacit knowing. Tacit knowing begins with the observation that we know more than we can tell (Polanyi, 1969). “The tacit dimension of personal knowledge is that internal place where experience, feeling, and meaning join together to form both a picture of the world and a way to navigate that world” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 60). The ever changing landscape of tacit knowledge informs a person’s internal frame of reference. Each new life experience is both weighed against tacit knowledge as well as adds to it. Tacit knowledge is ordinarily unknowable to conscious

awareness (Sela-Smith, 2002; Moustakas, 1990; Polanyi, 1969). Sela-Smith proposes that feelings are the door and heuristic inquiry the key when it comes to exploring tacit knowledge related to the Self. She notes that in order to participate in heuristic inquiry researchers must be willing to “use feeling to enter into the tacit dimension, and allow intuition to make connections in the structures of tacit knowledge” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 63). Ultimately, the engagement process is the new awareness that there is knowledge to be discovered from within the uncharted depths of the self. This may be a discordant or dissociated aspect of the Self that is longing for integration or understanding.

The next phase of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990) is immersion. In *The Handless Maiden* this phase is illustrated by the girl’s resolve to strap her severed arms to her back and set out on her own. She knows not what awaits her and so she must leap into the flow of life without a safety net. The immersion phase is a time to live the research question. “Something amazing happens when a researcher surrenders to the call . . . . When the question has been properly formed, it appears to have a power that draws the image of the question everywhere in the researcher’s life experience” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 65). Like much of the heuristic process, immersion cannot be planned or controlled. McNiff (2008) states, “[I]n the creative process, the most meaningful insights often come by surprise, unexpectedly, and even against the will of the creator” (p. 40). Sela-Smith warns that without true immersion, the research will lack integrity. The question must feel, “alive within the researcher” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 66).

Incubation is the next phase of research and is a time of creating new meaning, feelings, and behaviours (Moustakas, 1990). In the tale of *The Handless Maiden*, I under-



stood the incubation phase to be the hero's time of renewal and rest within the orchard and within her marriage to the King.

Incubation is the period when additional input is stopped because living with the question has provided all the information that the unconscious processing part of the self needs to sort through, consider, review, and reorganize new ways of thinking, being, seeing, and understanding, to create meaning and form an answer to the question. This stage begins without planning. (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 67)

Moustakas (1990) notes that the incubation phase remains within the purview of tacit knowing and intuition. Deliberate planning, thought, and effort will not pay dividends in the incubation phase; instead, incubation occurs as the researcher retreats from focusing deeply on the question and allows inner workings and intuition to expand her/his knowledge of the question (Moustakas).

Illumination follows as the researcher reviews all the data acquired and is receptive to a new awareness of something that has been present all along but hidden from the researcher (Moustakas, 1990). The handless maiden experiences several periods of illumination during her heroic journey; each opportunity for illumination draws her closer to her true Self. Ultimately her new awareness becomes a conscious understanding. The illumination phase, "may bring new experience, new interpretations, new meanings, or it may correct distorted understandings" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 67). This phase of research offers the opportunity for dissociated aspects of the self to integrate. Sela-Smith states that illumination cannot be planned; rather, it occurs spontaneously all at once, or as in

my situation, over a period of time. It is a deep reorganizing of information at a tacit level, so much so that it is made manifest in the conscious mind. I part from Moustakas' linear framework at the incubation/illumination phase, as I believe the periods of incubation and illumination are cyclical and flowing. In *The Handless Maiden*, incubation and illumination can be seen as periods of rest and moments of descent into the depths of the psyche. It is only from this place of depth that true illumination may occur. It must be acknowledged that the descent takes time and is fortified by long periods of incubation.

Following the illumination phase, a period of explication occurs (Moustakas, 1990). This is when the researcher consciously examines new understandings. What occurred in the deep subconscious must be solidified in conscious thought. In the tale of *The Handless Maiden*, this manifestation of awareness occurs when the young Queen gives birth to a child and again as she rescues her soul/child from drowning. Moustakas states that explication, "usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed [in other] creative form" (p. 32). An arts-based heuristic approach called me to return to the artwork I created during the immersion phase in order to garner deeper meanings. As McNiff (2008) notes, images are a source of integration and deep knowing at conscious and subconscious levels of awareness. Moving tacit knowledge into ordinary awareness increases the likelihood that lasting transformation will be achieved.

Finally, Moustakas (1990) discusses creative synthesis as the last phase of heuristic research. The creative synthesis is the external evidence of transformation. The regeneration of the Queen's hands provided me with a worthy example of this final phase of

the research process which necessarily reveals the researcher's new knowledge to the outside world. Creative synthesis occurred for me in the interaction and identification with the tale of The Handless Maiden as well as in dialogue with my works of art. Sela-Smith (2002) notes that a creative synthesis cannot be scheduled or preplanned; it must be born in its own time.

### **Arts-based Research in Heuristic Inquiry**

How does one explain the process by which our hearts and minds produce images without our conscious consent? Arts-based research is a way of investigating the "magic" of creation. It involves the use of artistic processes as the primary way of exploring and understanding experiences (McNiff, 2008). Leavy (2009) notes that, "Arts-based research practices are a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation" (p.3). Arts-based research makes use of the full spectrum of creative intelligence and communications in order to generate accurate, original, and intelligent information about a phenomenon (McNiff, 2008). According to Allen (1995), art is a way of knowing. Interaction with one's art work stimulates a desire to understand it in a variety of cognitive modes; and in this way, information can move from tacit knowing to conscious awareness (Levine, 1997; Sela-Smith, 2002).

Issues of validity, authenticity, and trustworthiness in arts-based research are an ongoing focus of debate. Leavy (2009) asks, "How can we evaluate knowledge constructed with these methods?" (p. 15). Arts-based research has necessitated the renegotiation of scientific standards of evaluation. Traditional concepts of validity and reliability

are challenged as “arts-based practices produce partial, situated, and contextual truths” (Leavy, p. 16). Leavy suggests that resonance, understanding, multiple meanings, dimensionality, and collaboration are the hallmarks of vigorous arts-based research. Furthermore, she suggests that research success can also be linked to the purpose of the research and how well the methodology “facilitated research objectives and communicated research findings” (p. 16). Leavy also identifies emotions as providing an important benchmark for validity in heuristic research, and suggests this is also true of arts-based research. Emotions are an important part of the artistic process; therefore, emotions provide valuable data to the researcher on the authenticity of the results (p. 19). The literature review also serves an important function in arts-based methodology by adding, “multiple voices into the project, providing context and creating inferences” (Leavy, p.20).

Throughout each phase of the heuristic process, the intention of self-transformation must be alive and embedded in the methodology (Sela-Smith, 2002). An arts-based approach fosters transformation by providing ready access to the liminal space, the “not knowing” place, the underworld initiation ground, or the bridge that connects the inner and outer worlds. McNiff (2008) states that, “art-based tools and ways of knowing take us out of our habitual responses to things” (p. 37). By placing previously separate entities together, creative discovery can occur. Merging my scientific understanding of dissociation with my spiritual questions has allowed me to understand my art making experiences in a new light.

In arts-based research, an art object can expand upon the knowledge of its creator. The art object is an external manifestation and may be studied as something separate

from the artist. Finding a balance between introspection and empirical data is essential if the artist-researcher intends to create useful connections that will serve self as well as others. McNiff (2008) notes that the processes of making art, as well as interaction with external art objects, helps to dissuade artist-researchers from excessive self-immersion. Art objects can impart their knowledge in a variety of ways such as interacting with the art object as if it were alive. For example, an artist might write a poem in the voice of her/his artwork or participate in a written or verbal dialogue with an art object. Active engagement with images throughout the heuristic process allows the images to reveal their true and often times shifting meanings (McNiff, 2008).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

In this chapter I have reviewed the significant literature related to PTSD, the dissociative subtype, as well as materials which speak to the value of art therapy in the treatment of PTSD. I have explained the Expressive Therapies Continuum as a framework for understanding my research results as well as a construct that supports the belief that creativity is a spiritual endeavour. The second section of this literature review explored the theological themes related to the creation of art work and the spiritual nature of the dissociative state. I delved into the tale of The Handless Maiden and with the help of writers such as Clarissa Estes and Sonoko Toyoda, I explored archetypal symbols such as handlessness and the dissociated aspects of Self (soul/child). To explore the link between trauma and the soul (symbolized by the child) I turned to the work of Donald Kalsched. The spiritual nature of dissociation and the importance of the liminal space is found throughout the literature and was highlighted in this review as it has played an important

role in my research process. Lastly, I provided a review of literature pertaining to heuristic arts-based methodology. To illuminate the heuristic process, I superimposed the tale of The Handless Maiden over Moustakas' six phases of research. My mixed methodology is firmly situated in the creative process. I relied heavily on the work McNiff and Leavy to demonstrate the efficacy of my research process which has allowed me to notice, understand, and appraise my experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will explain how heuristic arts-based methodology shaped the design of my research. I used the six phases of heuristic research (as formulated by Moustakas, discussed earlier) in conjunction with arts-based inquiry to explore my art making experiences. I will demonstrate the importance of my images as external allies in the research process. The findings generated by my research are presented in the format of seven dialogues. The dialogues take place between myself and my artworks; these conversations are the creative synthesis of my year long exploration of my research question. Lastly, I explore issues of consent and self-care in the context of heuristic inquiry.

#### **Design**

I am the sole participant of the research question which explores my experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD. My research involved reviewing my art making experiences over a period of two years during which time I was actively experiencing dissociative symptoms related to psychological injury (PTSD). The images I present are both the product of my art making experiences as well as the data that I collected via the research process. The art making experiences I focus on in this study occurred between April 2013 and April 2014; however, I have also included three images that were created prior to the submission of my research proposal as they are so poignantly connected to my research question.

My images were created in my home as well as in a closed art studio. I often worked in the company of other artists while in the studio setting or with my children close at hand while working in my dining room. In the spirit of arts-based heuristic re-

search I set out with a question: What are my experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms? I had a vague instinct that dissociative symptoms had a spiritual nature; and therefore, I intended to explore how spiritual matters were illuminated via the artistic process. These questions became the cornerstones of my inquiry. I did not attempt to create a rigid plan of exploration because I knew that this would not serve my self-reflective process. Indeed, I had difficulty creating a reasonable timeline for the completion of my work. It was as if I were the handless maiden setting out on my journey and I asked myself:

Where are you going?

I will know when I get there.

When will you be back?

When I find what I seek.

What do you seek?

A deeper life, a full life, a sane life.

The heuristic process demands a certain level of ambiguity and arts-based processes require a certain level of trust. I knew that I could not work nor research from a place of external obligations because I understood this would negate the validity and authenticity of my inquiry. My creative research process allowed me to follow my intuition in order to notice, understand, and appraise my experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms—each understanding and discovery arriving in its own time. The one parameter I set for my research timeline was the presentation of my artwork, completed or not, on May 2, 2014 in a public exhibition. In retrospect, this goal seems



counterintuitive to the heuristic process; however, at the outset of my research it seemed like a valuable objective to strive towards. I held a two day public exhibition of my artwork, on the assigned date, which was attended by over 300 people. Presenting my artwork to my community, colleagues and friends was an important aspect of the artistic experience; namely, the development of an artist identity or, in the parlance of this thesis, the recovery of my lost hands.

**Engagement and immersion.** My research methodology naturally followed a heuristic process. I began my research with a deep inner search to discover a question that I was passionate about. The search was often artistic. I created artwork with the intention of discovering what my thesis question might be and how I might incorporate my deep curiosity about PTSD into my research. These inquiries were the first indication that my methodology would involve an arts-based approach. Following the engagement phase where I developed my research question, I entered into a phase of immersion. I painted almost daily for a year. I wrote poetry and spent countless hours looking at the images that I created. I lived with the images. They surrounded me in every aspect of my life. I made brief field notes related to the creation of each piece as I worked. The majority of written materials created during the immersion phase are found in my journals. During the immersion phase I also reviewed art images that I had created while writing my thesis proposal in 2012; I felt a deep affinity for these images and understood them to be apposite to my thesis question.

Moustakas (1990) presents a linear framework where one phase of research follows another and culminates in a creative synthesis. In some ways, the artwork created

during the immersion phase seemed to be a type of creative synthesis; after all, it was creative and I had synthesized it. Presenting my artwork at the exhibition felt like a finale and so the idea that I had only begun my research was deeply confusing. I wanted to call the artwork my creative synthesis; however, some deeper intuition told me this was too easy, too shallow. During the immersion phase, I re-read Moustakas' writing on heuristic research and had difficulty comprehending the process of creative synthesis. It was only after I had completed this phase of the research that I fully understood that the key element of creative synthesis is not that one has created something new. Creative synthesis requires that the researcher has, "mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32). At the end of the immersion phase, I understood that I knew very little about my paintings and even less about how to describe and share my experiences.

The art work I had created in the immersion phase was data. Beautiful data created with pain staking effort on my part. During the immersion phase, I recall dragging myself out of bed when I wanted nothing more than to never stand again. I recall sitting on chairs when I wanted to melt into the floor and, perhaps most importantly, I recall never giving into the urge to obliterate the canvases I was creating. These were some of the struggles I faced as I attempted to live my question as Moustakas suggests. "[T]he researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). In choosing an arts-based approach I lived my question not only in my conscious thoughts and dreams but also in my artwork. In choosing to view my artwork as data I positioned myself to know more about the richness of my paintings. I was correct

in doing this for it was only with tacit knowledge and months of solitude that I was able to translate my artwork into a genuine creative synthesis that provided me with a deep personal awareness.

**Incubation and illumination.** Following my art exhibition in May 2014, I stepped away from my research and cultivated a period of incubation. Moustakas (1990) notes that heuristic research is a lengthy and demanding process. I found this to be true. During this time I did very little externally observable work related to my thesis. I spent time talking with others and reflecting on my experiences of the previous year spent making art. I spent time in nature and generally avoided the thesis writing process; I was waiting for an insight or an internal understanding that I was ready to move forward. When that insight arrived it was very welcome and very powerful.

Once one begins the passionate search for the illumination of a puzzlement, the intensity, wonder, intrigue, and engagement carry one along through ever growing levels of meaning and excitement. A unique, temporal rhythm that must take its own course and that will not be satisfied until a natural closing occurs and a sense of wonder has fulfilled its intent and purpose. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 55)

The illumination phase of my research began when I discovered the tale of The Handless Maiden and connected the story to metaphors and images in my own artwork. A light went on and I felt a sense of excitement about my thesis writing and research. A cyclic period of incubation and illumination began as I explored the theme of hands from a metaphorical and archetypal perspective. I spent time reading, revisiting my images, and

recalling my experiences of making art. I also spent time retreating from my data for days or weeks only to discover, unexpectedly, some new insight which would re-engage me with the research process.

**Explication.** As I entered into the explication phase, the theme of handlessness continued to present itself. My art making experiences during the research process were extremely varied. To further explicate my holistic art making experiences, I spent time relating the Expressive Therapies Continuum to my field notes, poetry, journal entries and artwork. The explication phase expanded my awareness of how I had synthesized greater wellness through a sustained art practice; of particular interest was a notable decrease in dissociative symptoms. While my research is not seeking to prove causality between art making and reduction of dissociative symptoms, it is an area that deserves attention in future research. McNiff (2009) states that in a research project our “subjective perspectives work together with many other points of view and techniques which expose the objects of inquiry to precise examinations that do not take place in our everyday interactions with them” (p. 54). During the explication phase my subjective experiences were broadened and enriched as I continued to interact with my artwork as well as the literature presented in my literature review. As I studied the tale of The Handless Maiden and related this story to my personal experiences with dissociation and art making, I began to see the archetypal qualities of my own struggles.

**Creative synthesis.** The last phase of my research was the creative synthesis of the data which was gathered in the first five phases of the heuristic process. Creative synthesis began as I entered into imaginative dialogue with my artwork to clarify my find-

ings, curate my data, and connect my experiences to the Expressive Therapies Continuum. I selected seven images based on the artwork's ability to best represent my diverse experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms. I chose these seminal images by viewing my artwork in an open space. To each image, I had attached accompanying field notes, associated journal entries and other associated writings such as poetry and music. I then spent time with each image, reviewing the corresponding writings, considering my theological themes, and most importantly, my instincts about what should be included and what should be excluded. This process allowed me to determine which images were the essential storytellers of my research journey.

By blending heuristic methodology with arts-based inquiry I have been able to carefully examine and report on introspective data presented in my journals, poetry, and artwork. In arts-based research it is often assumed that art pieces will be studied as individual entities separate from their creator (McNiff, 2009). When I realized that my art work was not the creative synthesis of this research, I was freed to study and interact with my paintings and artwork in a way that moved beyond the initial creative act of making them. Arts-based inquiry expanded my heuristic introspection with empirical observation and description (McNiff, 1998). McNiff (1998) notes that introspection has an "archetypal place in human understanding" (p. 52). My methodologies have led me to see the archetypal quality of my own observations and consequently generalize many of my findings beyond my own experience. My transformation was caused by faithfully experiencing each phase of the heuristic process. The creative synthesis process allowed me to complete and then comprehend my transformation.

The external evidence of my transformation was my ability to re-engage with my images to gain greater insights into the human condition. Artwork that I originally understood in very literal terms (e.g. this is a picture about a nurse taking care of a patient), are now imbued with archetypal symbolism and metaphors of healing. Allowing images to stand in their own right has been an important aspect of my arts-based research methodology. Given this, it is important to note that the images included in this thesis are not intended to act as an illustration of my written thoughts and neither is the text of this thesis offered as an explanation of the images. In the spirit of arts-based research, I understand my artwork to be in a process of becoming ever more substantial—much like myself.

### **Consent and Self-Care**

My research proposal was approved by the St. Stephen's College Research Ethics Committee (REC). St. Stephen's REC's decision-making process was informed by the "Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans" and the University of Alberta's "Policy Regarding Human Research". My research involves the act of self-disclosure and the revisiting of traumatic material; therefore, the REC diligently reviewed my self-care plan, ensuring I had access to mental health services.

Prior to commencing my research, I considered the potential for harm through public exposure of my personal information as well as the potential for temporary exacerbation of PTSD symptoms. Temporary exacerbation of PTSD symptoms related to creating art or reviewing trauma-bound materials was expected and managed by way of self care and regular psychotherapy. Working with images allowed me to move beyond the physical sensations of emotions and, ultimately, into the work of meaning making. My

images have invited me to engage and seek out multiple meanings and understandings of my lived experience. An essential element of arts-based research is an unyielding trust that art can help people move through the most difficult of challenges. As such, I began my research process with a trust that the images I created would help and not harm me.

Harm would include extreme mental or spiritual distress, the onset of self harm ideation, increased risk taking behaviours, and/or prolonged and sustained increase in PTSD symptoms. I was aware of these potential harmful sequelae throughout the research process; however, these types of behaviours did not occur. On the contrary, I found that my research developed my self awareness and increased my self esteem by providing meaningful work. When I was in the midst of my worst PTSD symptoms, I was unable to safely practice nursing or act as an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Without this important work to do, I felt aimless. Creating artwork and researching my illness gave me a sense of purpose when I needed it most. Lastly, my research has allowed me to document and celebrate the significant strides that I have made in my recovery.

In an attempt to avoid harm related to my research experience, I attended weekly appointments with a highly skilled registered psychologist whose field of research and practice includes trauma and PTSD. Self-regulation and self-protection were also an essential aspect of ensuring that the materials I was researching did not harm me. Self-regulation practices included monitoring my sleep patterns and my ability to engage with my children in a loving and supportive manner. Other examples of self-regulation practices included mindfulness, prayer, exercise and journalling. In effect, self-regulation was built into the heuristic process which demands a great deal of self-reflection and self-

awareness. The heuristic process is self-paced; therefore, taking time to step away from troubling images or disturbing memories was completely acceptable and useful.

### **Summary of Methodology**

Heuristic arts-based inquiry allowed me to explore my research question in a creative and authentic manner. Time spent moving slowly through the heuristic process has generated important data related to my experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD. The images created throughout the research process are the products of my art making experiences. Each artwork is a physical manifestation of my struggle for wellness and contain the seeds and stories of my own healing. My images were also external objects that I conversed with to develop my creative synthesis and the results of my research. Throughout the heuristic process, I have carefully attended to my mental health and have used my research experiences to integrate dissociated aspects of myself. In the following chapter, I share the results of my arts-based heuristic journey. The work is an authentic arts-based presentation of what I know to be true about my experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD.



## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary question guiding my inquiry was, “What is my experience of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD?” My secondary question has been, “What are the spiritual implications of dissociative states as related to PTSD?” A confluence of external events led me to these questions. I went to war and experienced rocket attacks, physical assault, moral trauma, the constant destruction of human life, extreme stress, and exhaustion. My experiences affected me deeply and I became mentally ill. I sought out art as a way of knowing and healing; and somehow, despite my suffering, I had the wherewithal to document my journey artistically and in written word. My experience is utterly my own; and yet, themes of reclamation and transcendence abound, making my experiences wholly universal. The following dialogues are intimate portraits of my inner life; however, they also capture the intricacies of the Expressive Therapies Continuum and are congruent with current research related to dissociation. The theological themes presented in my literature review are evident throughout my results, particularly the theme of hands.

Each dialogue is presented in its original form with minimal editing for readability. The corresponding images are included with the dialogues to provide context and enhance the meaning of the written words. Following each dialogue, I connect my findings to the Expressive Therapies Continuum, to my literature review, and to theological themes such as handlessness and the liminal space. Following an in depth discussion of my results, I will explore the potential applications of my research findings to the practice of art therapy. I will discuss the limitations of my research and explore some of the

strengths and weaknesses of my methodology. Lastly, I will share the additional questions that have arisen from my research experience which I believe deserve further exploration.

### **Dialogues**



*Figure 6.* “Unbelievable” by Jennifer Stewart, 2012.

#### **Dialogue with Figure 6**

**Jen:** Hello my little angel. You were one of the first images that clearly captured my suffering versus the suffering of others. I want to honour you and thank you for arriving when you did.

**Image:** You're welcome. You're beautiful and I am too, despite the way you have painted me.

**Jen:** I remember the night that I created you. I was trying to spend time with my children but they seemed so hard to connect to; I was emotionally dead. I took out some art supplies and suggested we spend some time making pictures. I began to paint with water colours, distracted and disinterested in what I was doing. Your little face arrived so quickly and unexpectedly. You looked so sad, hurt and lost; completely overwhelmed by what you had seen. I felt a tenderness for you and I started to cry tears of sadness.

**Image:** My eyes are closed because I can't bear to look. I am very tired, I am covered with blood and I am very alone. I am you, Jennifer, but you don't recognize me at first.

**Jen:** You're right, I didn't recognize nor understand your significance. Perhaps a part of me did but I did not want to name you. I am glad I kept you. I destroyed so many of my art pieces when I was very ill: however, you survived.

**Image:** I am a survivor and I know you kept me because I am very special. I am an image of the Self; battered and bruised. I have always been within you.

### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 6 (Unbelievable)**

This image (Figure 6) was created in a dissociated state. It illustrates my fragile state of mind and my vulnerability. It hints at the lost soul/child and the trauma that I have witnessed. The art experience began with no specific response or outcome expected. In effect, I was doodling with water colours. The materials I chose were non resistive—very fluid—and this fluidity increased the likelihood of an emotional response (Hinz, 2009, p. 32). Hinz notes that low structure and lack of complexity in art making

experiences lead to affective functioning and symbol formation (p. 34). Figure 6 is an example of an art experience that evoked a potent symbolic image and stirred feelings of sadness and tenderness. Recall that Van der Hart et al. (2005) state that dissociative symptoms of PTSD are generally expressed as loss of memory (amnesia), loss of affect (numbing), loss of critical function (a cognitive action), and losses of sensory, perceptual or motor functions. Creating a piece of art while in a dissociative state is a type of triumph of the spirit; a triumph that is born of the liminal space. In my experience, dissociative states mimic the liminal space. It is very possible that the two states brush up against each other in the psyche; however, in the end, they are not the same thing. From my experience, it appears that they can co-exist; the liminal space appearing as an oasis on the landscape of depersonalization and/or derealization (dissociation).

The liminal space is necessarily linked to the transcendent function. Miller (2004) notes that the essence of the transcendent function is a “confrontation of opposites, one from consciousness and one from the unconscious, from which emerges some new position or perspective” (p. 4). What causes this maturing and transcending functioning is beyond the scope of this research. Perhaps it is something divine or perhaps a biological drive towards wholeness; ultimately, its source may be unknowable and this seems appropriate for such a numinous experience. In the creation of Figure 6, I recognized that I had unconsciously created something important. “Your little face arrived so quickly and unexpectedly . . . I felt a tenderness for you and I started to cry tears of sadness.” The capacity to have compassion for an externalized image caught me off guard and I recognized the moment as sacred; however, this brief moment of insight did not lead to signifi-

cant introspection. I was highly dissociative which resulted in a depression of cognitive abilities which are required for the contemplation of metaphors and symbols (Hinz, 2009; Van der Hart et al., 2005). The severity of my PTSD, in particular my dissociative symptoms, impaired my ability to comprehend that Figure 6 was a self-portrait as well as a prognostication of the work I would do to recover my lost soul/child. Fortunately, this image held these secrets until I was well enough to discover them.



*Figure 7.* "Self-Portrait" by Jennifer Stewart, 2012.

**Dialogue with Figure 7**

**Image:** You were killing me; trying to destroy us both.

**Jennifer:** I am so sorry.

**Image:** Don't bother; what is done is done and I have the scars to prove it. I am the black of descent and the red of sacrifice.

**Jennifer:** I barely recall your creation. I pressed thick sticks of pastels onto canvas and made your eyes dim and haunted. You were an ugly thing and so I scratched out your eyes and etched my pain onto your face.

**Image:** I was your reflection. I came to show you how ill you were becoming. You cast me aside. Someone you loved pulled me from the rubble of your basement and asked you to look at me again.

**Jen:** I could not see your value or your message. You were a thing to vent upon.

**Image:** Now I am here with you. Now we see each other.

**Jen:** I do see you and I accept your scars, your pain, and your tiredness. I enshrined you in a thick black frame so that you would be protected. Now you sit in a place of honour. I want to share a journal entry I made at around the same time I created you in August 2012.

I can't stand this anxiety. I want to rip it out. Scratch my flesh, slice my arms, gouge out my heart. I want it out. Out Out Out. Ragged torn flesh; I am ragged torn flesh. Gouged out eyes, I am wild eyes, terror. I want it out. I'll paint it out! I'll scream it out! I'll cut it out. I will. I am a scream. That is what I am. A scream.

**Image:** Those were hard days when you barely lived in your body because it was such a painful place to be. What else do you recall of the experience of creating me?

**Jen:** I know I was experiencing terrible emotional pain and my body was wracked with anxiety. I was using self-harm ideation to help me to dissociate on a daily basis; creating you helped me to dissociate and escape my anguish. You were my first purposeful attempt to externalize my desire to self-harm. When I look at you now, I am filled with compassion; however, when I created you I was filled with a deep shame.

**Image:** You've come far and recovered what was lost and then some. I am proud of you.

**Jen:** I am proud of me too.

#### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 7 (Self-Portrait).**

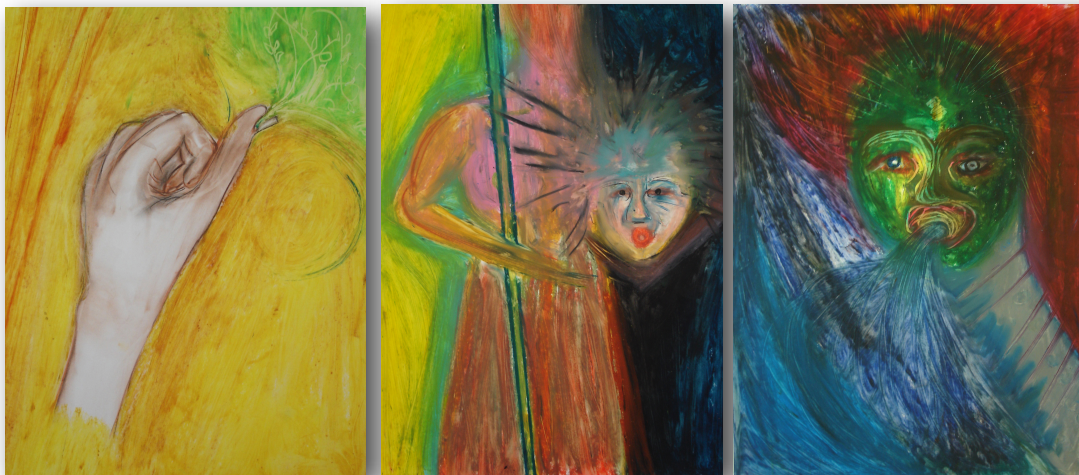
All the images included in my research can be viewed as a form of communication between my unconscious and my conscious mind. Figure 7 is the product of an art experience where cognitive functioning was impaired by the dissociative state; and therefore, at the time of its creation, I did very little meaning making around this image. Figure 7 was inspired by my feelings of self loathing and crippling anxiety. The aggressive use of oil pastels provided an opportunity to express energy; namely anxiety and rage, onto a canvas. I held the oil pastels directly in my fingers as I created. This direct contact with the art medium increased the immediacy and intensity of my efforts and decreased my ability to ponder or contemplate the expressive experience. Hinz (2009) notes that, "Extreme emotional involvement is manifested through distorted form or lack of form in an image" (p. 108). Figure 7 is a distorted self-portrait that I had scratched with a sharp object to simulate self-harm. It was a frightening experience to see my identity so disfig-

ured and unrecognizable. I gave the image to my children for their Halloween haunted house. My sketches and associated writings demonstrate the dire straits of my internal life at the time of Figure 7's creation. Despite the disturbing nature of this image, I am now aware that its creation was an important step towards Self-reclamation. Perhaps the two most compelling aspects of this art making experience were the deflection of self harm behaviours from self to canvas, and the image itself which helped me to identify my increasingly fragile mental health. Like the handless maiden I was undone, wandering alone in the world and in desperate need of guidance and sanctuary. Creating an image that reflected my impoverished self set me on a journey to discover what was truly the matter with me and how I might recover.



*Figure 8.* “Planting Seeds: The Green Thumb” by Jennifer Stewart, 2013.





*Figures 8-10. "Untitled Triad" by Jennifer Stewart, 2013.*

**Jen:** I smile when I see you [Figure 8] because you were such a delightful piece of wisdom. You are a direct representation of a dream that I had in March, 2013. I created you as part of a three piece installation. I was at the beginning of my thesis writing process and uncertain of what the heuristic process might look like or how I might explore my research question in an arts-based fashion. Figures 6 and 7 are in keeping with the art I was creating at the time but you came to me as a symbol of hope: a foreshadowing of what was to come in my life and in my research and that is why I would like to create a dialogue with you as opposed to your sister images (Figures 9 and 10).

**Image:** I am the lost hand, the fecund thumb, and the planter of seeds.

**Jen:** I was plagued with bad sleep and bad dreams; your arrival in my dreamscape was utterly noteworthy. I was suffering greatly when I dreamed of you. This is a poem I wrote the same week you were created.

I want to write a poem

but I'm hollow.

I want to howl a sadness

but I'm hollow.

I want to slash my face

but I know that cutting only leaves me

hollow.

Despite my obvious distress, there was room for you to squeeze through the darkness.

**Image:** In the image beside me, Figure 9, the woman has no hands and her head is tucked under her arm. She is a warrior divided. I represent her lost hands, her lost creativity, her lost passion and lost agency.

**Jen:** I drew you from memory. An exact replication with attention to every detail included the thumb nail on the hinge. I wanted to remember you always. I knew you were a message from deep within but I had no idea how prophetic you would be. Who sent you—was it my soul/child?

**Image:** (Laughing) Do you recall all the images you created that seemed to have a guardian standing watch over you?

**Jen:** Yes, I love each one.

**Image:** The thumb dream is a gift from your spiritual guardian. You have many but you cannot believe it.

**Jen:** It's hard to believe in angels.

**Image:** Perhaps the angels are within. What do you recall of my creation?

**Jen:** I remember wanting very much to capture the feeling of this amazing dream. According to my notes, you were made first, followed by the other two images on the same day. As with Figures 9 and 10, I pressed oil pastels hard onto the surface of heavy weight

paper. I worked like this until the tip of my thumb became raw from rubbing. I sat back and looked at the image. I felt amazed that I had created something magical; I sensed it was a talisman for what might come. At the time, I noted that the hand was not attached to anyone. I have created a found poem based on the notes my psychologist took as I spoke about you in therapy following your creation.

Under that thick callus,  
 on the tip of your thumb,  
 there is a secret.  
 Pick the callus and unhinge your nail.  
 Dig out the dry bits and  
 suddenly  
 I am erupting with green magic.

**Image:** Yes! That is my voice. Your voice too!

### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 8 (Planting Seeds: The Green Thumb)**

One's physical hands play an essential role in the creation and maintenance of a creative life (Estes, 1995; Kalsched, 2013). Prior to the creation of Figure 8, my postwar art work was completely absent of hands. In a review of over 50 pieces of art work created between June 2011 and March 2013, not one hand is portrayed. Following the creation of Figure 8, the image of the hand became a central motif. It was as if the dream of the fecund thumb had broke open a dam and the image of hands began to flood out of my subconscious via my artwork. Miller (2004) notes that according to Jung, the unconscious organizes and presents materials that can elucidate the future and serve people as a

unique guide to discovering their life's purpose and meaning. Jung believed that the unconscious, "contains all the material that has *not yet* reached the threshold of consciousness. These are the seeds of future conscious contents" (as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 18). In my dialogue with Figure 8, the image clearly states, "I am the lost hand, the fecund thumb, and the planter of seeds." The seed that was planted was the idea that hands were somehow central to my research, which in effect, meant that hands would become central to my recovery from PTSD. Metaphorically, hands are the agent through which I made my art. My hands led the way and I followed.

Figure 8 was a clear message of hope in a very dark time in my life. While the image sprung from my unconscious by way of a potent dream, the creation of the ensuing artwork was a cognitive process that required memory, attention to detail, and artistic perspective. In the language of the Expressive Therapies Continuum, I was engaging in left brain cognitive and perceptual modes of art making. This is a distinct difference from the art making experiences of Figures 6 and 7 found in the first two dialogues. Working with detail and precision allowed me to keep anxiety from triggering a dissociative state; which in turn, allowed me to interact with my dream image in a cognitive and symbolic manner. Symbolism is concerned with mythic thought and intuition which is considered one of the most complex functions of the brain (Hinz, 2005). When I created the image of the green thumb (Figure 8) I was not capable of or interested in exploring the mythical nature of the hand motif. I did not understand that it was I who was metaphorically handless. What I did understand at the time was that hands were for working, I was ready to do the hard work of recovering my lost Self.

Estes (1995) points out that meaning and purpose in one's life cannot be sought out nor gained without real risk to the seeker; assistance on the journey is almost always essential. In *The Handless Maiden*, the young hero gives herself over to the guidance of a white spirit which is an emissary of the wild soul. Estes observes that it is important for a woman to have spiritual good sense, or be assisted by a wise spiritual guide (1995, p. 448). The dialogue with Figure 8 indicates that my own soul's wild emissary or spiritual guide is alive and well. Indeed, images of guardians or angels watching over me was a common theme in many of my artworks over the last three years.

The experience of creating the *Green Thumb* (Figure 8) was a welcome change from the heart wrenching images I was typically working with such as flash backs which featured mutilated bodies or dead children or artwork which attempted to portray my overwhelming anxiety and anger. The *Green Thumb* was so important to me because it was not the stuff of nightmares; rather, it was a gift from my unconscious, or perhaps a wild emissary from my Self, which provided hope and inspiration for better days to come.



*Figure 11. "Repairing the Damage" by Jennifer Stewart, 2013.*

### **Dialogue with Figure 11**

**Jen:** You were the first oil painting I ever created. When I look at you now, I see each struggling brush stroke I used to create you. I remember my despair as the paint moved hopelessly in the wrong direction and I had to start again and again: attempting to create an image from the chaos of oil paint that I had applied too thickly to my canvas. You exist on a large 48"x36" surface. I am so happy to sit with you for this dialogue.

**Image.** I am a silent painting. I am as quiet as a moment of concentration. What I have to say is mostly captured in each brush stroke.

**Jen:** I am not surprised. You were a very physical experience for me. In the program for my art exhibition I wrote,

It is no surprise that this image of surgery found its way onto the first canvas that I created in this series. Many of my flashbacks associated with PTSD came in the form of short, disjointed images. The majority of the flashbacks I experienced were of relatively benign surgical scenes peppered with extremely disturbing images. The every day events of surgery were no longer scenes of professional interest; they had become the harbingers of anxiety and chaos. Working with oils evoked the sensation of tacky blood drying on my gloved hands as well as the emotions associated with operating in situations that were beyond my direct control. Creating this image was very uncomfortable for me. As I developed this piece I criticized my work, calling it unnecessary, self-indulgent, ugly, and pointless. Despite the resistance I experienced while creating this painting, I faithfully worked on this image almost daily for over 6 weeks. My work space was often in a state of chaos; I was covered with paint and my materials and brushes were in constant disarray.

**Image:** You painted this image wearing surgical gloves.

**Jen:** I did. For the longest time you represented all the blood and work of war. Your meaning was very literal. I did not recognize your symbolic images for nearly a year following your creation. When I looked at you, I saw a surgical scene and nothing more. I finished painting you and set you aside; I did not revisit you for over 10 months.

**Image:** I am here now.

**Jen:** I am here too. I now see you as a self-portrait. The hands are large; larger than life because I am painting with deep intention. I am asking the question for the first time of a painting, “What is it like to paint from a place of dissociation?” You arrived to answer me.

**Image:** Yes, I came to tell you: This is what it will be like; using your hands to literally muck about and discovering that you cannot abandon your hands. *You cannot abandon your hands.* You cannot abandon your creative life and you certainly must not abandon your search for the soul/child buried deep within. Every picture you paint will be a self-portrait of one type or another. Each painting will take you deeper into yourself—if you let it. This work starts with the hands and not the head.

**Jen:** That’s true.

**Image:** You were so tired and disconnected while you painted this image that you did not recognize yourself as the nurse in the background.

**Jen:** Yes, it took nearly a year to recognize that I had painted my dissociated self onto the canvas. Thank-you for being so much more than just a snapshot of my war experience. You held me when I could not hold myself.

**Image:** You’re welcome.

### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 11 (Repairing the Damage)**

My dialogue with Figure 11 highlighted two important aspects of my art making experience: the vital role of the sensory component of the Expressive Therapies Continuum and the importance of focussing one’s intention by way of a question. The question I had begun to ask was, “What is it like to paint from a place of dissociation?” I believe



that setting my intention clearly in my mind allowed my artwork to reflect the answer. The answer was clear: “This is what it will be like; using your hands to literally muck about and discovering that you cannot abandon your hands.” This reply highlights the role of the sensory component as described in the Expressive Therapies Continuum. The Sensory component represents the simplest form of information gathering and processing. Sensory information processing is how babies first learn about the world. Hinz (2009) states that adults who are most capable of employing sensory information, “rapidly, deeply, and without conscious thought are those that are described as having extra-sensory perception or good intuition” (p. 60). My art making experience of painting Figure 11 would not be described as purely sensory as pure sensory experiences contain very little cognitive overlay. I created a very recognizable form (Figure 11), nonetheless, the sensory qualities of my art experience were profoundly important to me in ways I cannot fully name.

Hinz (2009) notes that, “sensory involvement is indicated when a person is so caught up with cognition that he or she has lost the ability to feel sensations and emotions (p. 68). This statement describes me very well, for as I began this image, I was living very much in my head where I felt the most self-control. Pure sensory experiences were far too overwhelming. Creating an image that required concentration allowed me to stay in my head if that felt most safe or alternatively, muck about in the oils when I felt capable of managing the chaos and frustration that oil painting can induce. Working with oils occasionally induced a dissociative state by aggravating my anxiety, increasing my stress, or triggering trauma memories. Alternatively, the sensations of working with oils pro-

vided me with very tangible sensory experiences that kept me located in my body. The smells of oil painting, the mixing of colours, and the occasional taste of paint that seemed to inevitably find its way into my mouth, all served as anchors that kept me oriented.

Upon reflection, I now understand that my motivation to paint prompted me to acknowledge and reconcile difficult emotional states that were impeding my artistic work. While I preferred to avoid sensory experiences that triggered dissociative states, my desire to paint my image was even stronger. My creative decision making process was taking place at an unconscious level. I followed my instincts about what would best serve me artistically and spiritually. I never stopped trusting the artistic process and it served me well. Working at the Sensory level ultimately increased my capacity and awareness of my emotions and the symbolic aspects related to my artistic expressions.



*Figure 12.* “Bone Woman” by Jennifer Stewart, 2013.

We all begin as a bundle of bones lost somewhere in the desert, a dismantled skeleton that lies under the sand. It is our work to recover the parts. It is a painstaking process best done when the shadows are just right, for it takes much looking. La Loba<sup>5</sup> indicates what we are to look for—the indestructible life force, the bones. (Estes, 1992, p. 26)

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<sup>5</sup> La Loba is one of many names for the Wild Woman archetype.

## Dialogue with Figure 12

**Image:** Don't get me wrong, flesh is a fine and necessary thing; however, it is the bones that give us structure and form. I am joyful and grounded. I know when to surrender to descent and when to rise again. I am black and red and white. I cannot be destroyed. I am Bone Woman.

**Jen:** I painted you over a one week period during December 2013. I felt driven to complete you and spent every moment possible labouring to bring you into this world. You symbolized a true turning point for me. I had been painting for nine months in oils and I had gained confidence and technique through my hard work and dedication. I painted you in my home studio. It was an extremely positive experience. You were an image with many facets: and yet, in the exhibition program I chose to write darkly about your content:

Death was an energy I contended with almost daily in Afghanistan. Horrible deaths that took their toll upon my body, mind and spirit. This painting was created in the surrealist style and allowed me to acknowledge that despite returning home physically whole, I was wrapped in a shroud of despair. I was in the hands of death and my thoughts were uncharacteristically filled with my own destruction. I was self-harming and suicidal which filled me with deep shame. In my darkest moments the ground beneath me seemed to be slipping away. As in many of my paintings the theme of disconnection and dissociation feature prominently in this image.

**Image:** Yes, that seems like a reasonable explanation of my presence but it does not tell the whole story, does it?

**Jen:** It was a wonderful illustration of trauma and dissociation but you are more than an illustration.

**Image:** Yes, much more than an illustration of dissociation. Now we can have a conversation!

**Jen:** (Laughing) I welcome you Bone Woman, indestructible life force who dances with death—gracefully. The experience of painting you was surreal; you leapt from my mind’s eye to the canvas with ease. I felt a competency as I worked. I felt like a painter, a true artist, drawing on my skill and my imagination to create. I was finally stepping into the flow.

**Image:** It is not death holding you, it is life. I am a message from your deepest Self to keep working. You were “getting better” and it would have been easy to stop your descent and your self discovery; however, I knew you had far to go. You had not recovered your hands and you had not yet recovered your Self. You were on the right track, digging up bones in the desert.

**Jen:** My art practice assisted me in truly owning my artist identity. That felt very important for me. Let’s talk about the hands in this painting.

**Image:** They are cradle, cup, and cocoon. They are holding hands, holding your pain, and your potential.

**Jen:** Potential. Bone Woman is potential. I will write you a haiku:

When there were no feet  
 There were holding hands and bones  
 buried deep within.

**Image:** I will write a haiku for you:

The promise of black  
 Horizon of sacrifice  
 The white flag will fly

**Jen:** Your haiku speaks of the retrieval of my intuitive self. Whatever was covered over can be found again. Whatever has been hidden can be dug up. I am learning to rely on my inner senses. What is the promise of black you speak of in your haiku?

**Image:** A promise that you will know more.

**Jen:** Creating this image gave me a sense of accomplishment. Many people find this painting unsettling. I never have. It isn't loaded with negative emotion. It is loaded with story and potential. It calls me to seek Bone Woman.

**Image:** Seek your intuition. It is in your bones; it is the marrow of your life.

### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 12 (Bone Woman)**

This dialogue strongly supports my understanding that images can have many meanings. Initially Figure 12 was an image of forlornness. As Kalsched (2013) notes, if one is to have any chance of recovering real hope again, one must abandon hope as one knows it—false hope. The false hope I held was that I would suddenly and magically wake up one morning and be well: free of PTSD symptoms. My old joie de vivre would

be returned and I would be the “old me” again. While I was creating Figure 12, I was focused on the technique and style of the painting. My ability to perceive was crisp. Line, colour, form, size, and direction came together with ease—a sign of my increasing ability to describe my inner world (Hinz, 2009). As I focused on the formal elements of my painting I evoked a sense of inner wellness. I had no desire to decipher the meaning of my image; however, through dialogue with Figure 12, an important message was revealed. What at first appeared to be obvious symbols of doom—the red sky, the barren ground, the skeleton, and the shadows—were in reality an invitation to ground myself. An invitation to go deeper into my wounded psyche and rediscover my intuitive and creative self.

The language I chose to describe Figure 12’s creation indicates a type of gestation period. I stated that, “I had been painting for nine months in oils,” and that I had laboured to bring my image into the world. I was struggling to bring forth a new personal paradigm where I felt competent and capable as an artist. Estes (1995) notes that, “to give birth is the psychic equivalent of becoming oneself, one self, meaning an undivided psyche” (p. 466). Like the Handless Maiden, I was giving birth to “a new little wild self” (Estes, p. 467). I was aware of new possibilities and potential within myself but I was still handless and vulnerable. My new sense of artistic competency gave me courage and energy to continue painting, explore my research question, and seek greater self awareness. My increasing self awareness allowed me to understand that with earnest hard work, time, and perseverance I would eventually learn to manage or overcome my PTSD symptoms.



Figure 13. "Bound" by Jennifer Stewart, 2014.



### **Dialogue with Figure 13**

**Jen:** I invite you to tell me about yourself.

**Image:** I will tell you this: I am many things for you. I am an illustration of sorts. I showed you your handlessness, hung on a branch like a dress in the breeze. I envisioned the reclamation of your hands. I portrayed your mask coming undone and the rebirth of your intuition, your ability to discern, to listen, to sort, to build energy and ideas, to stay with yourself and to act in accordance with your own deep knowing. I warned you that there are many pitfalls in a woman's journey and lastly, I gave you a glimpse of your soul/child, alone and waiting for your call. I showed you all this and more. You painted me piece by piece, floating in the liminal space.

**Jen:** You are a storyteller. You hold my story so beautifully, both where I have been and where I am going. I quoted Rollo May in my journal on the day I started creating you.

Good art wounds as well as delights. It must, because our defenses against the truth are wound so tightly around us. But as art chips away at our defenses, it also opens us to healing potentialities that transcend intellectual games and ego-preserving strategies. (May, 1985, p.172)

I suppose all my art has been chipping away at my defenses and allowing me to dig in the rich soil of my psyche. The seduction of painting drew me into an unknowing alliance with you; I am impressed with your stealthy insights. The images I created which seemed the most literal, are now full of symbolism. Conversely, the images, such as yours, that appeared the most symbolic are now the more literal purveyors of information.

**Image:** That is true. I illuminate and illustrate. I point the way.

**Jen:** As I came to the completion of your image I wrote in my journal, “I am starting to see the evolving beauty of each piece. There is a beautiful symphony of healing taking place. I did not recognize it at the time but now I see the changes. Step by beautiful step.” In my journal I wrote repeatedly about being my own healer and I embraced the idea that my dissociation had been my ally all along. I also wrote extensively on the symbolic nature of the hare which features prominently in the bottom left corner. I noted that while the hare may be skittish while bounding through the moors, she moves confidently in the underworld, sensing her way forward and relying on her instincts.

**Image:** Hare represents your ability to purposefully experience the darkness. The willingness to experience the blackness means that you do not need to dissociate to cope with painful emotions or flashbacks.

**Jen:** That is true. It took me five weeks to complete you. I noted in my journal that I had not experienced a significant dissociative episode during the entire month of March, 2014. I also noted that I had just enough energy to paint one more painting and then I would be finished the series. I knew instinctively that I was near the end of my art making experiences and the tempo of my research was changing. I had no more time to sit with you and so I set you aside. There was a sense that I had accomplished something very great in your creation, both artistically and therapeutically.

### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 13 (Bound)**

Figure 13 was created with deep attention to meaning and content. I began this image with a very kinesthetic experience. I closed my eyes and created a scribble drawing on the canvas. I then studied the scribble drawing and outlined shapes that I per-

ceived. I was immediately struck by the image of the hand, the head, and the pregnant belly. The hands represented my work—the work of war, my creative work, and my spiritual work—the handless pregnant Figure represented my own fragmented psyche and dissociated self, and the head represented a rebirth of a new self. These symbols become even richer for me when, many months after completing Figure 13, I had the opportunity to read the tale of The Handless Maiden. I was shocked and inspired by the similarities between my painting and the story, specifically my depiction of a pregnant and handless woman.

Rational thought and symbolic reckoning are considered to be the most complex functions of the brain (Hinz, 2009). Problem solving and analytical thought are required to paint, comprehend and contemplate the mysterious symbolic nature of the inner world (Hinz). Choosing to work with symbolism, mythic thought and intuition in a creative fashion ensured that my whole brain was fully engaged in the creative process of painting Figure 13. The free flowing creativity I experienced as I painted Figure 13 allowed me to access the benefits of the liminal space. Kalsched (2013) explains that the liminal space unites two opposing realities by creating a third space that participates in both realities and yet also transcends them. The opposing realities that I contended with in Figure 13 was the idea of being bound. To be bound can imply confinement, which is negative. Alternatively, to bind something together can be positive if the intention is commitment and support. Through Figure 13, I realize that I am forever changed by my war experiences; however, I am also made stronger because of them. Figure 13 assisted me to create a third

reality where my scars are sinewy and beautiful: a reality where I could welcome and embrace fragmented elements of my psyche and dissociated self.

In the work of creating Figure 13, I was confronting not only trauma memories but also my own internal defense mechanisms which created and maintained dissociative mechanisms. It is as if my own internal defenses had left me helpless and vulnerable. Kalsched (2013) notes that in traumatic situations, “the child—a symbolic carrier of the animated soul’s life—is pushed back (by the psyche’s defenses) from between the worlds where it was alive and at play, into the unconscious where it is trapped and imprisoned” (p. 60). The creative process involved in painting Figure 13 allowed me to visualize the symbolic child that represented dissociated aspects of myself and recognize that this child could be met and integrated.



*Detail of Figure 13, Bound by Jennifer Stewart, 2014.*

In this detail of Figure 13, a small child can be seen perched upon a branch in the distance. The child was added on the final day of painting, almost as an afterthought, and yet it is an excellent illustration of the healing I had experienced while creating Figure 13. The child holds a piece of red thread that weaves its way through the image and ultimately emerges from the masked face as a red snake. The red thread of Figure 13 binds me to the world, to my duty, to my history, and to my dissociated soul/child. It reminds me that I cannot escape my experiences. I can only gather up the broken pieces and creatively re-imagine myself as whole, knowing, and beautiful. The child represents my own soul/child who had been locked away in an attempt to protect me from what I could not, in the fog of war, symbolically contend with. I wanted to explore the metaphor of the child in greater depth; and so upon completing the painting Bound (Figure 13), I immediately began to create an image which featured a child in need of care. This artwork (Figure 14) became the subject of my final dialogue. In the following image (Figure 14), I have reclaimed my hands, embraced the teachings of the Wild Woman archetype, and continue the process of recovering my Self.



*Figure 14.* “Recovering My Self” by Jennifer Stewart, 2014.

I have seen wolf mothers plunge their pups into the coldest streams imaginable, run until a pup is splay-legged and can hardly keep up and then run some more. They are toughening up the sweet little spirit, investing it with strength and resilience. In mythos, the teaching of endurance is in the rites of the Great Wild Mother, the Wild Woman archetype. It is her timeless ritual to make her offspring strong. It is she who toughens us up, makes us potent and enduring. (Estes, 1995, p. 421)

### **Dialogue with Figure 14 (Recovering Myself)**

**Image:** You have endured and your experiences have given you a new inner strength.

**Jen:** You have to be strong to save your soul/child.

**Image:** You created me with intention and purpose.

**Jen:** That is true. The image of a nurse providing resuscitation to a child was a fitting finale for my last art making experience. Estes (1995) notes, “Things of psychic value, once dead, can be revived” (p. 29). As I painted you, it occurred to me that I was painting a self-portrait. I was both the attentive nurse and the weary patient.

**Image:** The nurse has hands for helping and her eyes are open. The child is tired for he has been in exile; his eyes are open too. He is wondering if he is safe; he has travelled far to be with you.

**Jen:** I will keep this child safe; this magical child image represents the reintegration of my very soul. In my journal I wrote, “As I begin to practice a deep instinctive knowing about all manner of things in my life, I see that my hands are returning—in my images and within my psyche.” I also wrote, “This painting was easy to paint and even easier to think about. I imagine myself recovering what was lost. The child in the painting represents what had been lost and what had been found.”

**Image:** This painting was created very quickly, in less than a week.

**Jen:** Yes, this image came fully formed. After I painted it, I compared it to Figure 7 which is also a self-portrait. The images are very complementary in colour. The greens, reds, blacks, and whites are present in both images. I spend a lot of time looking at these two images side by side.



**Figure 7.** “Self-portrait”, 2012



**Figure 14.** “Recovering My Self” 2014

Figure 14 Continues:

**Image:** What a transformation.

**Jen:** Yes, you capture just how far I have travelled.

**Image:** You are still wearing a mask.

**Jen:** Yes, I am still wearing a mask and gloves too. This portrait captures the tentative connections I have made with my soul/child and indeed, my own children. I am not fully recovered from PTSD but I have made deep connections with my authentic self. I have become mySelf, one self, meaning an integrated psyche.

**Image:** How would you describe your experiences of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms?

**Jen:** Soul-making.



### **Discussion of Dialogue with Figure 14 (Recovering Myself)**

Hands represent my creative life and personal agency. In my artwork, I have seen the theme of handlessness expressed repeatedly. In Figure 14, the return of my hands in imagery reflects a major shift in my psyche. Toyoda (2006) suggests that using one's hands increases the sensitivity of the psyche as well as connection to our spiritual natures. "The hands are aware of more than what we are conscious of. When you get lost, you may ask your hands to show you the way" (Toyoda, p. 101). The active use of my hands to create art has been instrumental in the recovery of my mental health and the reduction of dissociative symptoms related to PTSD. In contemplating the return of my symbolic hands, I am called to consider the tale of The Handless Maiden and its various endings.

In some versions of the story the young Queen is taken care of in the woods by a helpful spirit for seven years. During this time in isolation the woman's hands grow back and she is able to nurture and care for her baby. Another common version of the story has the Queen dropping her baby into water and instantaneously growing hands with which she rescues her child. In both versions, the baby may represent the woman's soul/child (Kalsched, 2013, p.53). In all versions of the story the young woman remains in her forest home, quiet and protected, for seven years to fully integrate her returning creativity and instinctual nature. I resonate with both story endings. My hands seem to have arrived both in an instant and as a gradual regrowth. The liminal space allows for both realities to be true at the same time. What seems to be the common factor in these two realities is the direct effect that my hands have had on my ability to integrate dissociated aspects of my psyche. As in the story of The Handless Maiden, I too required my hands to rescue and

nurture my soul/child. In reclaiming my symbolic hands, I reclaimed the ability to bind my own wounds and heal myself.

### **Summary of Results and Discussion**

In this chapter I have presented the results of my research as dialogues between myself and the images I created during the research process. Following each dialogue, I connected my findings to the Expressive Therapies Continuum, to my literature review, and to theological themes such as handlessness and the liminal space. The results of my research are a reflection of the tremendous effort I have made to be authentic in the presentation of my art making experiences. Every step of the heuristic journey offered challenges as I strove to answer the question, “What is my experience of making art as a person with dissociative symptoms related to PTSD?” With perseverance, I was rewarded with new insights, ameliorated mental health, and a more fully integrated psyche that continues to be sustained by my deep commitment to a creative life.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

During the last four years, art has offered me a sense of purpose and outlet for my sorrows and emotional pain. Art making allowed me to access my soul's wild emissary and deflect self harm ideation away from myself and onto the canvas. In the depths of my mental illness, I carried great pain within myself. Some of it was my own and some of it was the suffering of others that I had taken on while witnessing war first hand. The pain was very dark and I experienced an intense amount of shame related to holding it. Art making allowed me to transform those feelings. The road was not easy but it was always compelling. I have learned that events or things emerging from the imaginary space are not all predictable. For example, the meanings and symbols of my art work shifted significantly as I became a more fully integrated person. It was equal measures of curiosity and desperation that kept me engaged in the heuristic process. I wanted to discover something important about art making and dissociative states and I had hopes that my heuristic journey would restore my mental health. Fortunately, both of my aspirations have been met and I have been able to document my journey and my findings in my research.

The strength of my research is in its authenticity and creativity. The heuristic arts-based process has allowed me to fully experience my research question and express my findings in a way that best resonated with my new knowledge. Heuristic research is, "a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of an experience ....The self of the researcher is present throughout the process" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). This inner focus and involvement of the self is the inherent uniqueness and strength of the heuristic methodology. I feel extremely blessed to have had ample time to

pursue my research question which increases the validity of my findings. By eschewing outside time pressures, I have been able to remain focussed on learning and sharing what has been true for me in my art making experiences.

There were many times during my research process when I would pause and wonder, “What am I doing?” I now recognize my uncertainty as an important element of the heuristic process. After creating my artwork, I felt unable to correlate my results or discuss them. I had significant amounts of data and time, however, I lacked energy and felt overwhelmed. I had no idea how to proceed and so I did nothing. I waited, my anxiety rose, I waited some more, my anxiety increased and still I did nothing. I trusted that this was not an example of laziness or malingering on my part; rather, I was incubating something.

I was incubating a new way of being and a new way of seeing the world and myself. Having made my heuristic discoveries, I shall never see the world again as before. Now, one eye focuses inward and the other looks to the world around me with increasing creativity and discernment of what is good for me and my children. I concur with Sela-Smith (2002) when she stated that, “heuristic inquiry that results in self-transformation and the creation of a story that generates potential for transformation in others and in society is the strength of the self-inquiry method” (p. 82). My transformation was born in the liminal space which I accessed while creating my art work and dialoguing with my images. The liminal space has allowed me to re-conceptualize the dissociative state as something other than only pathological or mystical. The dissociative state is both pathological and mystical; however, it also served as a very real and functional holding

place from which I could retrieve myself. This was a powerful metaphor that allowed me to eventually recover my symbolic hands and work towards an integrated psyche.

Making art allowed me to work with trauma memories indirectly and at my own pace. In the early days of my mental illness, the work of meaning making brought me too close to traumatic memories and exacerbated dissociative symptoms; and therefore, I preferred to not explore the meaning of the images I had created. Despite my initial inability to work symbolically with my art work, images continued to portray my current realities and prognosticate the next steps of the healing journey. In other words, my artwork was a repository for knowledge I would eventually need in my recovery process.

The knowledge and information contained in my art works were developed in the fertile grounds of the liminal space. Dissociation and cognitive impairment did not prevent me from crossing the threshold of liminality. In fact, my distraught psyche may very well have orchestrated liminal experiences to heal itself. Miller (2004) states that the transcendent function—stemming from the psyche—is what allows us to access the liminal space where we brush up against something deeper and more numinous than our everyday understandings (p. 116). Returning again and again to the liminal space allowed for subtle shifts in my personal awareness and gently increased my capacity to work with traumatic memories.

The liminal space provided a bridge between my inner life and the outer world. I found this connection to be of a spiritual nature, both mystical and transcendent. I view creativity as my birthright, a natural drive that has been developed through persistence and hard work. My ability to be creative has directly affected my ability to recover from

PTSD. Hinz (2009) describes the healing dimension of the Creative level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum as an “inventive and resourceful interaction with the environment leading to creative self-actualization experiences” (p. 171). The Creative level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum encompasses cognitive processes as well as the synthesizing and actualizing tendencies of the individual (Hinz, p. 169). In my research, synthesis has included the generation of at least three different types of information during the artistic experience. The synthesis of inner experience and outer reality has been explored throughout my discussion under the label of liminality. I have also touched upon the synthesis between myself and my media, both the creation of tangible art works as well as the synthesis of new understandings and knowledge. Lastly, I have explored the synthesis between the different experiential and expressive components of the Expressive Therapies Continuum.

Consistent use of the creative process has provided me with many opportunities to gain greater self awareness and mastery over dissociative symptoms. For me, creativity acts as an adjunct to all components of the Expressive Therapies Continuum and paradoxically, each component of the Expressive Therapies Continuum potentiates my creativity. Like the age old question of which came first, the chicken or the egg, it is challenging to fully understand what causes creativity to bloom and grow within a person’s psyche. Was I creative and so I created? Or did I create and therefore become creative? What I have come to know about creativity is that it is the work of my life and is symbolically represented by my hands.

My research has focussed on symbolic and spiritual aspects of my art making experiences. The tale of The Handless Maiden provided archetypal images and metaphors to inspire my own recovery. Due to cognitive, perceptual and sensory impairments related to PTSD, working holistically within the Expressive Therapies Continuum was initially a major challenge for me. Years of art making at the kinesthetic/sensory and the affective/perceptual levels, eventually shepherded me to a place where symbolic messages from my unconscious could be viewed and understood without triggering major dissociative episodes. Each art making experience has been a stepping stone towards my recovery; however, it has been my interactions with personal symbols that has allowed me to fully integrate fragmented aspects of my psyche.

The development of an artist identity has been an obvious benefit of consistently creating art over a period of two years. In dedicating myself to creating artwork that would be suitable for an art show, I was compelled to spend long hours perfecting my craft. In developing my artistic skills, I reclaimed a sense of personal competency that PTSD had undermined. The development of an artist identity increased my confidence and self efficacy. Identifying myself as an artist gave me membership in a new community of people when old alliances were falling away. In my experience, meaningful work and healthy self esteem are important aspects of recovery from PTSD. The benefits of developing an artist identity for soldiers who experience PTSD deserves further study.

Throughout my thesis I have not discussed the human relationships that have supported me throughout the heuristic process. Nevertheless, I am quite certain my relationships with fellow artists have had a positive influence on my stabilizing mental

health. The role of community, emotional safety and social bonds in the treatment of PTSD is emphasized by both Collie et al. (2006) and Van der Kolk (1987). Van der Kolk states, "One of the most urgent tasks facing therapists of traumatized individuals is the re-creation of a sense of human interdependence and community" (p. 155). I created much of my artwork in private but I also worked in a community art studio and received support and guidance from fellow artists, my psychologist and a few close friends. This research could be enhanced through an exploration of the benefits of creating art in a community studio.

The heuristic journey is not an easy path. It is time consuming and requires great personal commitment to self knowledge and authenticity. The heuristic process provides a template one might use to gain knowledge about one's problems. Moustakas' model of research provided me with tools to slowly and methodically observe myself, my problems, my strengths and my experiences. Heuristic research methods organized and codified my personal search for discordant or dissociated aspect of the Self that were longing for integration and understanding. "Something amazing happens when a researcher surrenders to the call . . . When the question has been properly formed, it appears to have a power that draws the image of the question everywhere in the researcher's life experience" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 65). In my experience, surrendering to the research process was akin to beginning a heroic journey that would lead me to the discovery of lost internal resources. The heuristic process is arduous; however, it is a process that has assisted me in the recovery of my mental health.



In summary, my continuing recovery from PTSD (and its dissociative symptoms) has been supported by my artistic endeavours and my heuristic research. Art making and self-dialogue allowed me to access the liminal space in order to synthesize healing symbols and metaphors of integration and personal wholeness. My commitment to making art has allowed me to develop an artist identity which will continue to benefit me all the days of my life. Researching myself has been a powerful and empowering experience that has enriched and changed me forever. My research has allowed me to understand the power of my metaphorical hands and the importance of their presence in my life. My new relationship to my hands at times seems ineffable; and yet, their restoration has put me upon the rich path of soul integration and self-knowledge.

### **Implications for PTSD Treatment**

It is important to note that my research is not intended to be generalized. Another military nurse who was injured in Afghanistan would likely have a very different art making experiences than I did. Nevertheless, based on my own experience of recovery through art making, I can see its healing potential of for others, especially people whose dissociative symptoms might interfere with PTSD treatment

**Managing and overcoming dissociative symptoms.** Symptoms of dissociation may interfere with PTSD treatments, especially trauma focussed therapies where dissociation might decrease one's ability to process trauma memories and related cognitions and emotions (Lande, Tarpley, Francis, & Boucher, 2010). The dissociative state is protective and works to resist the retrieval of traumatic memories thus hindering treatment (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Collie et al. (2006) explain that art making allows for con-

trolled desensitization to anxiety producing memories and experiences which could help with integration of traumatic material. The satisfactory integration of traumatic material into one's life story put the trauma in the past. It no longer will be experienced and re-experienced as if it were still happening in the present (Collie et al., 2006). Art making can side step well established dissociative tendencies because art work requires no explanation and can be self-paced. The images clients create in their most fragile moments may initially be too painful to explore; however, when clients return to images for information (days, weeks, or years later), they may find an opportunity to witness the depth and breadth of their own internal wisdom. Where appropriate, I would encourage clients to consider the liminal space as the bridge between their dissociated inner world and the outer world.

Art making creates a liminal space that is both real and mythic, timeless yet bound in time. In the liminal space, people can synthesize materials which have the potential to heal the wounded psyche or explore deep questions related to trauma and death. The concept of liminality has the potential to facilitate the discussion of spiritual matters which may be an important aspect of treatment for some clients. Researchers such as Fontana and Rosenheck (2004, 2005) and Decker (2007) note that greater consideration of existential questions must be incorporated into PTSD treatment options. It is possible that working intentionally with liminality and art making may be a way of introducing spirituality into PTSD treatment for those clients who seek it.

**Creative level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum.** The Expressive Therapies Continuum provides a framework that organizes image formation and informa-

tion processing into categories that range from non-verbal simple kinesthetic experiences to complex symbolic cognitive processing. It has been my experience that creativity and liminality can be present anywhere along the continuum. I believe that the Expressive Therapies Continuum will be useful to art therapists and clients who wish to understand the value of both simple and complex art making experiences. Throughout the discussion of my art experiences I touched upon individual components of the Expressive Therapies Continuum such as cognitive, symbolic, affective, perceptual, sensual, and kinesthetic processes. My intention was not to create a reductionist or fragmented view of my art making, rather, I wanted to create an image of a complex person working towards an integrated perspective: a creative perspective. Therapists and clients might benefit from working with distinct components of the Expressive Therapies Continuum; however, it is often difficult or unnecessary to isolate one element at a time.

Regardless of the component being focussed upon, creativity must be fostered and supported. In my opinion creativity serves an integrative function. Creative involvement at any level can be healing without cognitive overlay or symbolic interpretation which is good news for those who are not willing or able to use words or symbols to explore their trauma memories. I have experienced the importance of allowing symbolism to find its own way into conscious thought as opposed to forcing it in a premature effort to evoke meaning, closure, or catharsis. Where appropriate, therapists may consider the introduction or exploration of mythical stories with clients as a way to deepen symbolic content; however, working at any level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum in a crea-

tive manner might allow people who experience PTSD to overcome dissociative patterns and improve their quality of life.

**Developing an Artist Identity.** Through my own experiences, I have become very aware of the importance that artist identity has played in my willingness and ability to create artwork and sustain an art practice. I am curious to know if development of an artist identity might assist other soldiers as they transition out of military life. It is possible that the development of an artist identity might provide considerable benefits to some soldiers recovering from PTSD.

### **Implications for Future Research**

My research has allowed me to discover several questions that could be investigated through future research. Most importantly, my literature review highlights the need for more research to better understand the influence of the dissociative subtype on PTSD treatment response as well as the best treatment practices for people with dissociative symptoms. My research experience has also left me curious about the following questions:

How might portrait work decrease dissociative symptoms related to PTSD?

How might the development of an artist identity affect soldiers who experience PTSD?

How might art making decrease dissociative symptoms in a variety of populations?

How might art making, in a community studio, be able to support the development of an artist identity and/or the reduction of dissociative symptoms?

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