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THE BRILLIANCE OF BEAUTY: THEOLOGY AND THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS

A THESIS

Presented to the

MASTERS DEGREE THESIS COMMITTEE

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MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, HONOURS

By Norbert Michael Krumins

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In memoriam

Thomas Merton

Henri Nouwen

John O'Donohue

and Julie

ABSTRACT

This study explores the theological nature of beauty as lived experience in the expressive arts studio. The methodology, rooted in phenomenology, is a blend of heuristic and arts-based research. I consider my own experiences of beauty as well as those of several co-researchers. Together, we participated in a two-day studio workshop which I designed and facilitated in the form of a retreat. The studio was multimodal: the participants created works of visual art (painting, collage, sculpture), music, dance, and poetry. A portable labyrinth was used to enhance the experience. The co-researchers and I shared our experiences during several circle discussions. Ten co-researchers participated in the retreat; six were subsequently interviewed. The thesis includes reproductions of several examples of visual art and poetry in keeping with a heuristic/arts-based approach.

The thesis draws extensively from the literature and praxis of expressive arts therapy. However, it is framed primarily by a theological rather than a clinical perspective. I explore the transformative nature of beauty more in a spiritual context than a psychotherapeutic one. I focus more on the creative process than the finished product of a work of art. In other words, it is more about the artist than the art. The later works of Thomas Merton form an integral part of the theological literature, in particular his exploration of Zen. This serves as a springboard into how our essential spiritual nature – to use a Zen phrase, our *Original Face* - can be explored through the creative process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: BEAUTY CALLS, BEAUTY WAITS	3
Naming Beauty	4
<i>Re-enchantment</i>	6
<i>Disenchantment - a case for beauty</i>	7
<i>Expressive Arts</i>	8
Preliminary Literature Review	9
Field Research	12
Ethical Issues	13
LITERATURE REVIEW: TO WALK IN BEAUTY	15
John O’Donohue and The Embrace of Beauty.....	15
A Theology of Unity	17
Zen.....	19
Theological Aesthetics	21
The Asian Influence	23
Finding Our Way to Play – Art as Therapy.....	24
Tikkun ha’olam	25
Methodology – Research With Soul in Mind.....	28
Separation and Reunion.....	29
HEURISTICS AND THE WAY OF POETRY	32
Adapting the Moustakas Model.....	35
Arts-based Research	37
Designing the Retreat	38
Six Windows	43
<i>Joshua’s Window to the Soul</i>	46

<i>Sophia's gold mine</i>	49
<i>Anna's hands</i>	51
<i>Lela's Original Face</i>	54
<i>Samantha: sacred body, sacred voice</i>	56
<i>Emma writes a new script</i>	58
DISCUSSION: IN BEAUTY WE ARE ONE.....	63
Living in World One	64
The Man with Deep-Seeing Eyes	66
From the Desert to Zen.....	68
From Zen to Art - to Art as Prayer	69
A ChristZen View.....	72
The Way of Tea – the Way of the Studio.....	73
A Deeper Immersion	75
Flow – The Participation Mystique	76
The Studio as Church	81
The Original Face	87
Explication Meets Creative Synthesis	89
CONCLUSION: BOWING TO BEAUTY.....	90
Dostoyevsky's Dream	94
SOURCES CONSULTED.....	96
APPENDIX 1. INTRODUCTION LETTER.....	102
APPENDIX 2. PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM.....	104
APPENDIX 3. SAMPLE QUESTIONS.....	105
APPENDIX 4. A THEOLOGICAL WORLDS INVENTORY	106
APPENDIX 5. FURTHER RESEARCH.....	107

What if Beauty was the Tao?

“I did not have to ask my heart what it wanted because of
all the desires I have ever known, just one did I cling to,
for it was the essence of all desire: to know beauty.”

- St. John of the Cross¹

“Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

- Rumi²

“Why is the execution of a work of art not in itself a work of art?”

- Paul Valery³

¹ Quoted in John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 7.

² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Quoted in Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, (Edinburgh: published by The Fruitmarket Gallery, distributed by Yale University Press, 2009), 49.

INTRODUCTION: BEAUTY CALLS, BEAUTY WAITS

First, I will offer a confession. During an early meeting with my thesis advisor I blurted out the following in what I fear was a somewhat self-inflating tone: “This is, after all, a thesis, not a love letter!” What was I *thinking*? This thesis cannot be anything *but* a love letter: a love letter to beauty. Beauty is my passion. It is the key to my theology. I am with John of the Cross: to know beauty is the essence of my desire.

However, following one’s desire is not enough. I strive to live a life imbued with a sense of vocation. As John O’Donohue writes, “In Greek, the word for ‘the beautiful’ is *to kalon*. It is related to the word *kalein* which introduces the notion of ‘call.’ When we experience beauty, we feel called.”⁴ Frederick Buechner takes this a step further: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness, and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁵ Beauty, then, is the way I find my “deep gladness.” As part of my vocation, I strive to help others find *their* beauty. As Jean Vanier writes: “To love someone is not first of all to do things *for* them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude: ‘You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.’”⁶

When I asked at the outset whether *Beauty was the Tao*, I was not posing a formal research question. That would be a proposition too deep and wide for a Master’s thesis. It is, rather, a question for a lifetime. Meanwhile, I will narrow the question for the purpose of this study.

⁴ O’Donohue, *Beauty*, 13.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins), 119.

⁶ Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 16.

This thesis is a heuristic exploration of the relationship between spiritual theology and the expressive arts. I discuss my experience in the expressive arts studio as well as those of my co-researchers. These discussions were rooted in phenomenology.

What do I mean by the expressive arts? I have adopted Natalie Rogers' definition, who calls the expressive arts ancient forms of "rebirthing."⁷ This rebirthing can occur in solitude or in a group setting such as an expressive arts studio where participants explore various artistic media individually and as an ensemble in an environment sometimes called an *atelier*. Here then, is my central research question: What is the lived experience of beauty in the expressive arts studio? I also consider the following underlying questions:

- How are spirituality and creativity linked?
- How is the Divine manifested, or experienced, in the expressive arts studio?
- What is the relationship between beauty and the soul?
- How can we take these spiritual/creative experiences out of the studio and into the world for the benefit of others?

Naming Beauty

The relationship between beauty and theology has a long history in the Christian church. St. Augustine's writings are an influential example. Augustine writes, in his *Confessions*, "I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new!"⁸ Ultimately, for Augustine, beauty became his name for God.⁹

⁷ Natalie Rogers, *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing*, (Palo Alta, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1993), xiv.

⁸ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions, Book X*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1982), 321.

⁹ Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1.

What do I mean when I speak of beauty? It is, of course, a word with many implications and possible definitions. Rather than attempting to confine beauty to a narrow definition (after all, theology has too long offered tidy definitions of what are, in essence, ineffable concepts), I simply offer beauty as a theological construct with various possible faces. It might be an adjective: *the soul is beautiful*. It might be a verb: just as YAHWEH is *I AM*, God *is* Beauty. As I have already suggested, it might be a quality of being, a pilgrimage perhaps, even a place: Beauty is the *Tao*, or if you prefer, Beauty is the *Way*. I have deliberately left the door open for many interpretations. The experiences of my co-researchers as well as my own will serve to illuminate the concept further.

One way to consider what beauty *is* would be to ask what beauty *does*. Rollo May suggests that in beauty we find joy and peace at the same time - that beauty creates in us a sense of timelessness, and thus it is eternal.¹⁰

For Bruno Forte,

Beauty is an event; beauty happens when the Whole offers itself in the fragment, and when this self-giving transcends infinite distance. But is this really possible? How can the limitless inhabit what is little? How can the everlasting “abbreviate” itself without ceasing to be? And how can immensity become small and still exist?¹¹

I will not attempt to answer Forte’s questions directly as they fit more within the realm of theological aesthetics. I am concerned, rather, in considering these questions *indirectly*. To paraphrase a Zen term, where does beauty lie “outside the scriptures?” For me, beauty is a given. I have no need to prove its existence. Beauty just is. Although my rational mind is curious to know how the limitless can inhabit the little, I choose to

¹⁰ Rollo May, *My Quest for Beauty*, (Dallas: Saybrook Publishing, 1985), 20.

¹¹ Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics*, trans. David Glenday and Paul McPartlan, (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2008), vii.

suspend the question and let it sit in the back of my mind. In the end, I am more interested in the *experience* of beauty. The question, is not so much what *is* beauty? Rather, where does beauty *reside* and how can I get there? One way, is through the expressive arts.

Re-enchantment

When we experience beauty we are re-enchanted. Several years ago I came across the following comments from Jill Purce, a pioneer in the rediscovery of ancient vocal techniques such as chanting:

There is a profound sense of disenchantment in Western society. I think people feel like this because quite literally there is no chant in their lives. All the situations in which people came together in traditional cultures to chant have gradually eroded away, so people feel disempowered and helpless in a desacralized world. My aim is to re-enchant the world, to make it more magical through people chanting together again.¹²

Reading the above passage was an “aha” moment for me. I realized that to “re-enchant” described my vocation, both literally (I have since taken training in spiritually based vocal techniques), and metaphorically (my work as a facilitator in the expressive arts has re-enchantment as its focal point). As Thomas Moore suggests, our soul needs enchantment.¹³ The expressive arts studio is one place where re-enchantment happens; through the use of art materials, storytelling, dance and music we find a way to beauty. Sadly, history has shown us that there are those who would have it otherwise.

¹² Quoted in Roger Housden: *Retreat: Time Apart for Silence and Solitude*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 158-59.

¹³ Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), ix.

Disenchantment - a case for beauty

“I have a mad and starry desire to assassinate beauty.” – Tristan Tzara¹⁴

On the front cover of Arthur Danto’s book, *The Abuse of Beauty*, there is a reproduction of Marcel Duchamp’s famous painting, “L.H.O.O.Q” which depicts the *Mona Lisa* with a moustache. I doubt Duchamp (1887-1968) was making a theological statement. Rather, he was responding to the artistic sensibilities of his time. Likewise, I doubt that the strange comment from the poet Tristan Tzara (1896-1963), cited above, was a call to real violence – both Duchamp and Tzara were influential voices in the Dadaist movement of the early twentieth century - one might call them aesthetic anarchists. Nevertheless, the real assassins of beauty are lurking.

Elie Wiesel, in his masterwork entitled, *Night*, depicts the horrors of the Holocaust. One scene in particular from this book has always haunted me. It is the story of a young Polish violinist named Juliek who somehow managed to carry his violin all the way to Gleiwitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz. Wiesel recounts how one night he hears the sound of a violin:

Who was this madman who played the violin here, at the edge of his own grave? Or was it a hallucination? It had to be Juliek. He was playing a fragment of a Beethoven concerto. Never before had I heard such a beautiful sound. In such silence.

...

The darkness enveloped us. All I could hear was the violin, and it was as if Juliek’s soul had become his bow. He was playing his life. His whole being glided over the strings. His unfulfilled hopes. His charred past, his extinguished future. He played that which he would never play again.

...

¹⁴ Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, (Chicago: Carus Publishing, 2003), 39.

I don't know how long he played. I was overcome by sleep. When I awoke at daybreak, I saw Juliek facing me, hunched over, dead. Next to him lay his violin, trampled, an eerily poignant little corpse.¹⁵

The story of Juliek is a testament to why we need beauty. I was saddened, and then inspired, to write, *Song for Juliek*:

Juliek plays Beethoven, beautiful Beethoven

Let ring your violin one more time for me
One more time for the world to see
The broken dreams of Juliek

Juliek, Juliek

Oh silence, my old friend
It seems we meet again and again
Dreadful silence, that's all we've got for Juliek, silence.

Juliek, Juliek

The violin lies crushed upon the floor
Beethoven sings no more
From the strings of Juliek

Juliek, Juliek

Let ring your violin
Let ring your violin
For the soul of the world
For the soul of the world.

Juliek is a symbol for the loss of innocence, the loss of beauty. He can also serve as an example and an inspiration: if a madman can hold on to beauty even at the edge of his own grave, perhaps we - through the expressive arts - can find ways to play our life. One solitary soul is a microcosm for the soul of the world.

Expressive Arts

In recent years, the term “expressive arts” has come to be associated with expressive arts *therapy*: a relatively new and emerging field. According to Ellen Levine,

¹⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 94-95.

“The work of art becomes the embodiment of the alive self because its form has been generated from creative, alive activity. The work of art also stands on its own and can enliven and stimulate others as they witness the work and get drawn into it, provoked or moved by it.”¹⁶

Although this thesis borrows from the field of psychotherapy, it essentially has as its main focus the *theology* of the expressive arts. Thus, the participant in the expressive arts studio is viewed less as a “patient” requiring therapy and more as a person with *soul* on a spiritual journey. I embrace the view articulated by Markus Alexander, who suggests that through the expressive arts we are able to *give form to the formless*:

If we take on this role as giver of form to what was formless, we might be called an artist. It is not about being an artist, however. It is more like being a humble servant. In the quiet of the birthing-place of a new form, vast amounts of energy are released. The artist serves this release. As an integral part of the creative act, this infusion of energy into our physical, mental, emotional and etheric bodies changes them, enlivens them. This is reason enough to ascribe to the philosophy, truth is beauty and beauty, truth. To experience the beauty of expression moving through us and changing us for the better implies a movement not only toward truth but also a movement in and as truth.¹⁷

Preliminary Literature Review

I have reviewed the literature in three key areas: theology, expressive arts therapy, and heuristic/arts-based research. John O’Donohue’s book entitled *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* serves (to borrow a phrase from the world of theatre) as a *sub-text* for the thesis. This meditation on the nature of beauty has inspired me and influenced my evolving

¹⁶ Ellen Levine, *Tending the Fire: Studies in Art, Therapy and Creativity*, (Toronto: EGS Press, 2003), 51.

¹⁷ Markus Alexander, *Why Make Art?*, World Arts Organization website: <http://www.worldartsorg.net/writing>, accessed March 22, 2009.

theology for some time now. According to O'Donohue we are meant to create, and when we do we are serving beauty.¹⁸

In my opinion, a theology of the expressive arts should move beyond a strictly Judeo-Christian worldview. As a door to a wider perspective, I point to the writings of the Catholic monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Merton's theology – especially in his later years – reflected his interest in other worldviews, in particular, Zen. Merton developed friendships with a number of spiritual leaders from the East, including the renowned Japanese scholar, D.T. Suzuki, the 14th Dalai Lama, and the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh.

Merton's life and writings are a source of great inspiration for me. His later works form a significant part of my literature review as well as the chapter which discusses my research findings. Merton's influence on my life is significant – I have felt compelled to weave much of his thought throughout this study – in particular his writings connecting Christianity with Zen.

A Zen aesthetic permeates much of Merton's latter poetry, drawings, calligraphy and photography. In my own poetry and visual art, I tend to favour this aesthetic, which is characterized by among other things, simplicity of form. I rediscovered my delight in this aesthetic, I hasten to add, in the expressive arts studio.

Several names appear frequently in the literature associated with the expressive arts: Paolo Knill, Stephen Levine, Ellen Levine, Shaun McNiff, and Natalie Rogers. My research draws from all of these authors as well as others. The authors I have surveyed tend to take a primarily clinical perspective rather than a spiritual one. This is not surprising as all of these authors are, or have been, practicing expressive arts therapists.

¹⁸ O'Donohue, *Beauty*, 7.

However, some more than others, tend to accentuate the spiritual. As this thesis is essentially a work of theology, rather than psychotherapy, it is to these authors that I tend to gravitate.

Early on in my journey through the expressive arts I made an important discovery that had to do with how this kind of therapy works. In short, it is not primarily about the finished product such as the painting or song; it has more to do with the *process*. McNiff in his book, with the appropriate title, *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*, writes, "I believe that creativity is an intelligence that is broader than the experience of an individual person acting alone. It is an energy that exists within an environment, and as an artist I strive to collaborate with it."¹⁹ I have incorporated a research methodology based on the heuristic model: a form of phenomenological research which includes the experiences of the researcher.²⁰ I have blended the heuristic model with arts-based methods, drawing from the work of Shaun McNiff and others. Art-making becomes another way of exploring and expressing lived experience.

I have also considered Robert Romanyshyn's work, which is a refreshing take on research in psychology and has obvious implications (i.e. the word "soul" in the title) for research with a theological component. He writes: "Research with soul in mind is *re*-search, a searching *again*, for something that has already made its claim upon us, something we have already known, however dimly, but have forgotten."²¹ To this end, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* by W.

¹⁹ Shaun McNiff, *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 4.

²⁰ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, 3rd edition, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2002),107.

²¹ Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind*, (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), 4.

Paul Jones has been an invaluable resource. It has provided me with a deeper understanding of my own functional theology as well as an intelligible framework for viewing the theology of others.

Field Research

My field research involved working with ten co-researchers who were invited to participate in a two-day experiential expressive arts workshop. Together, we explored various creative media in an intermodal environment (moving from one creative modality to another, such as painting, sculpture, drumming and dance). My subsequent interviews with six of these co-researchers formed an integral aspect of this research.

The two-day workshop, over a weekend, was designed as a spiritual/creative retreat. My co-researchers were chosen from colleagues at St. Stephen's College and others associated with the World Arts Organization, based in Edmonton. I chose co-researchers who had some familiarity with the expressive arts in order to reduce the time spent introducing the process and to leave more time for the experience itself.

The retreat was held at St. Stephen's College in September, 2009. I designed the studio environment in an aesthetically pleasing manner in keeping with the theme of beauty. Audio, visual and tactile materials, as well as a portable labyrinth were incorporated into the space to enhance the experience. Co-researchers were guided through a series of exercises using visual media including paint, pastel, clay and collage. Exercises also included other modalities such as percussion and movement. Periodically throughout the weekend we shared our experiences during "circle" discussions.

Ethical Issues

I have followed the relevant procedures as outlined in the St. Stephen's College *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (MTS Manual, May, 2004). I explained the research project to my co-researchers in detail, obtained their informed consent in writing, and ensured their anonymity and confidentiality (see appendix nos. 1, 2). I used pseudonyms to protect their identity. I kept some of the raw data, such as signed consent forms, in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Other data, including audio files of my interviews, were stored electronically on a password-protected computer.

While preparing this study I ensured the validity and ethical integrity of the work through several means. I am a meticulous fact checker and have been committed to providing accurate information. I have transcribed my interviews and reviewed key passages several times to ensure their accuracy and to ensure that the analysis of my data reflected a fair interpretation of the narratives collected. I followed-up with several of my co-researchers when I felt clarification or further illumination of their comments was needed. This was done by telephone and/or e-mail.

Over the past year I developed an open and honest working relationship with my thesis advisor and checked with her on an ongoing basis to ensure she was satisfied with the accuracy and integrity of my data and analysis. I met regularly with Markus Alexander, my mentor in the expressive arts. Mr. Alexander was an invaluable resource, both as a sounding board on philosophical issues and in offering practical advice on the development of my field research and literature search. I have met regularly with members of a small discourse group to discuss the philosophical and practical implications of the expressive arts. For further advice, I met occasionally with two colleagues from St. Stephen's College who have both completed Master's theses using

the heuristic model. More recently, I have joined the newly formed Arts-based Discussion Group, facilitated by the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education, which meets bi-weekly. All of these individuals and groups have served to support me as I conducted my research.

In summary, this study looks at the lived experience of beauty (theologically framed) in the expressive arts studio. It considered the relationship between creativity and spirituality. It also looked at the broader implications of how we might bring beauty out of the studio and into the world. The emphasis here, rooted in phenomenology, is on the theological implications of the expressive arts experience, rather than the clinical (therapeutic) implications. I employ a methodology which is heuristic and arts-based. I consider the experiences of my co-researchers as well as my own. In the following chapter I discuss the relevant literature in theology, aesthetics, expressive arts therapy, and my particular blend of research methodologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW: TO WALK IN BEAUTY

“The soul knows for certain only that it is hungry.” – Simone Weil²²

I have taken a thematic approach to my literature review. The three inter-related themes are in the fields of theology, the expressive arts, and heuristic/arts-based research. John O’Donohue and Thomas Merton are central figures in the theological literature. Paolo Knill, Shaun McNiff, Stephen Levine, and Ellen Levine inform much of my exploration of the expressive arts. Clark Moustakas, and again, Shaun McNiff, lead the way in my chosen methodology.

John O’Donohue and The Embrace of Beauty

I would like to ground this thesis *poetically* by touching first on John O’Donohue’s view of beauty. His remarkable book entitled *Beauty: the Invisible Embrace* captured my attention several years ago. It is an extended meditation; “a series of encounters with various forms of the Beautiful.”²³ In a sense, O’Donohue serves as an *archivist* of beauty. *Beauty: the Invisible Embrace*, together with his other works, exemplify a poetic way of knowing the beautiful; an embodied knowing. Following O’Donohue, my heuristic journey, described in more detail later in this thesis, is also a “series of encounters” with beauty.

O’Donohue’s other name for God is beauty.²⁴ He writes, “In the presence of the God of Beauty our own beauty shines. God is the atmosphere where our essence clarifies,

²² Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 210.

²³ O’Donohue, *Beauty*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

where all falsity and pretension vanish. Here we are utterly unfolded.”²⁵ O’Donohue calls on us to choose a new way of living which is more conscious of the beauty around us.²⁶ This takes on a theological perspective: “In order to become attentive to beauty, we need to rediscover the art of reverence . . . Ultimately, reverence is respect before mystery.”²⁷

For Simone Weil, the soul is hungry. For O’Donohue, and for me, the hunger is for beauty. O’Donohue points out, however, that there is another hunger – our longing for intimacy, to belong.²⁸ Real intimacy, he asserts is a sacred experience.²⁹ I am drawn to O’Donohue’s use of the Gaelic phrase, *Anam Cara* (soul friend).³⁰ It is with one’s *Anam Cara* that true intimacy is felt.

This sense of sacred intimacy can be found in the expressive arts studio. It is here that we are able explore what O’Donohue calls a *phenomenology of soul* - a way to discover what he calls our “eternal essence” the “ancient reason” why we are here.³¹ It is this eternal essence, this eternal beauty, which brings me to the later theology of Thomas Merton.

²⁵ Ibid., 248.

²⁶ Ibid., 23.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

²⁸ John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), xxii.

²⁹ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 17.

³⁰ Ibid., xviii.

³¹ Ibid., 106-107

A Theology of Unity

I would like to place the following words from Thomas Merton on a marquee as they capture succinctly the central theology of this thesis:

The deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”³²

In my view, Merton’s “original unity” is synonymous with O’Donohue’s “eternal essence.” Merton has captured what I would call a *theology of unity*: when I look at my face in the mirror, gentle reader, I see your face. To use a Zen term, this is the *Original Face*. Put in Judeo-Christian terms, metaphorically, this is how we are created in the image of God. I will discuss this concept later in this thesis. For now, I will simply say that one extraordinary vessel for the recovery of this original unity - the original face - is the expressive arts studio.

On some levels, my heuristic journey in the expressive arts studio is also my journey through the writings of Thomas Merton. Therefore, I will withhold a further elaboration of Merton’s theology for now as it will form an essential aspect of my discussion chapter. It would, however, be appropriate to place Merton in context as an international figure.

Merton was a man of many faces: monk, priest, mystic, poet, artist, photographer, and author. Many years after his death the accolades continue to pour in. Christine Bochen, in her introduction to *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* writes: “Thomas

³² Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (New York: New Directions, 1973), 308.

Merton is celebrated as a spiritual master, a prophet, and a man of letters whose life and writing both reflected and helped to shape twentieth-century American Catholicism.”³³

The 14th Dalai Lama, in his autobiography, recalled meeting Merton in Dharamsala, India, in 1968:

More striking than his outward appearance, which was memorable in itself, was the inner life that he manifested. I could see he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity . . . It was Merton who first introduced me to the real meaning of the word “Christian.”³⁴

My journey with Merton has inspired my evolving theology as a Catholic with a strong interest in eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism. Merton has served as my bridge between West and East. Merton’s journey, according to Ilia Delio, is the journey to the true self, the journey into the “transcultural Christ.”³⁵

The bridge between West and East can also be viewed as the bridge between the masculine and feminine aspects of God. Here I have found some of the writings of Henri Nouwen helpful, especially his book entitled, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1995). This book is an exegesis of the Gospel parable of the prodigal son. What makes it unique is that Nouwen’s discussion of the parable is done through an examination of Rembrandt’s painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The painting depicts the father embracing his son. Nouwen spent many hours gazing at the painting in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

³³ In *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings, Selected* with an introduction by Christine M. Bochen, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 22.

³⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 106.

A critical moment came when Nouwen noticed the father's two hands: "How different is the father's right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender . . . It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand."³⁶ This was a critical moment for Nouwen: "As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father."³⁷

Bede Griffiths, a contemporary of Merton, was another spiritual writer who explored the masculine and feminine nature of divinity. Griffiths was a Benedictine monk who lived in India for about twenty-five years. He went to India to discover "the other half of [his] soul."³⁸ This mirrored what he considered lacking in both the Western world and the Western Church: "I wanted to experience in my life the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and intuitive, the conscious and unconscious, the masculine and feminine."³⁹ After all, as Joseph Campbell points out, we are more than we think we are.⁴⁰ We are masculine and feminine. We are yin and yang. When yin and yang are in balance we are one.

Zen

D.T. Suzuki was instrumental in introducing Zen to the West. In his foreword to Suzuki's book entitled, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Carl Jung wrote, "The spiritual

³⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, (New York: Continuum, 1995), 94.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, (London: William Collins Sons, 1982), 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Referenced in Gus Gordon, *Solitude and Compassion: The Path to the Heart of the Gospel*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 33.

conceptions necessary to Zen are missing in the West.”⁴¹ Yet, strictly speaking, Zen is not a religion in the traditional sense. As Suzuki points out, Zen does not deny or affirm the existence of God.⁴² The following description of Zen, found frequently in the literature, is attributed to Bodhiharma (6th century C.E.), considered to be the first patriarch of Zen:

Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures,
With no reliance on words and letters,
A direct pointing to the human mind,
And the realization of enlightenment.⁴³

Two centuries after Bodhiharma, Zen Master Huang-po offered this concept in a way that appeals to me as it strikes a more winsome, almost playful, chord:

Zen is beyond all words.
Away with all thinking and explaining
There is only mysterious silent understanding
and no more.⁴⁴

In Zen, the key to enlightenment lies *within*. According to a traditional Zen metaphor, we are thirsty and crying out for water, when all the while we are drowning in it. This is akin to Luke 17:21 NIV, where “the kingdom of God is within you.” Likewise, in Deuteronomy 30:11-14, we see: “This teaching is not remote or mysterious. It is not . . . across the sea so [that you should] say, “Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that

⁴¹ In D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ Quoted in John Daido Looi, *The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life*, (New York: Random House, 2004), 3. Throughout much of the literature the phrase “mind of *man*” is used. I prefer Looi’s modern translation which is more inclusive.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Wolfgang Kopp, *Zen Beyond All Words: A Zen Master’s Instructions*, trans. Barbara Wittenberg-Hasenauer, (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1996), no page number. Similarly, Merton, as cited earlier, uses the phrase, “beyond words.”

we might be able to hear it and keep it? It is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can fulfill it.”⁴⁵

The expressive arts studio is a way to explore these truths within. A Zen sensibility has permeated my own experience in the studio. According to D.T. Suzuki, the Zen arts are a way to train the mind in order to come in contact with ultimate reality.⁴⁶ As John Daido Looi asserts, this creative/spiritual process is a way to find our essential nature.⁴⁷

Strictly speaking, this thesis is not about theological aesthetics. It is primarily about the experience of the artist in the studio. Nevertheless, the two are related. Therefore, a brief discussion of theological aesthetics is in order as a preface to my discussion on expressive arts therapy. We, as artists, as spiritual persons, do not live in a vacuum. We bring to the studio our prior experience as *consumer* of the arts.

Theological Aesthetics

The philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) declared, “Insofar as works of art are produced by mind, they are in themselves essentially spiritual.”⁴⁸ Early in the twentieth century, the world renowned painter Wassily Kandinsky, in his groundbreaking book entitled *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, stated, “That is beautiful which is produced by

⁴⁵ This translation in Avram Davis, *The Way of Flame: A Guide to the Forgotten Mystical Tradition of Jewish Meditation*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 13.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Looi, *The Zen of Creativity*, 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel on the arts: selections from G.W.F. Hegel's Aesthetics, or the philosophy of fine art*, abridged, trans. Henry Paolucci, (Smyrna, DE: The Bagehot Council), 2.

the inner need, which springs from the soul.”⁴⁹ For Kandinsky, the artist was the “priest of beauty.”⁵⁰ Kandinsky envisioned a new age of art; “an epoch of great spiritual leaders.”⁵¹ In light of such a grand statement, it could be said that the art world has let Kandinsky down; theology is largely absent from the modern discussion of aesthetics. Nevertheless, the spiritual in art still lives and breathes.

Several years ago I visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York City where I viewed Pablo Picasso’s masterpiece entitled *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907). I immersed myself in the presence of the painting. I was overwhelmed with emotion to the point of tears. I wrote in my journal: “I sit in awe before *Les Femmes d’Alger*.” The subject matter of this painting is far from what one would normally call spiritual (the “women of Avignon” were prostitutes). Nevertheless, I recall later describing this to friends and family as a “religious experience.” I could find no other words for it.

Another example of how so-called secular art has the power to draw out the spiritual can be found in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. The chapel displays a large collection of Mark Rothko’s paintings. Rothko (1903-1970) was an artist without religious convictions. The paintings in the Rothko chapel certainly do not illustrate religious themes, or for that matter, *themes* of any kind - they are large abstract swaths of colour, known as “colour field” paintings. However, visitors to the chapel have left comments such as,

“A Stonehenge for us,”
 “Seldom have I felt more in the presence of God,”

⁴⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler, (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 108.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 112.

and the following three comments which strike me as possessing a remarkably *Zen like* quality:

“In hope we can all reach that point in us that is everything,”
 “A place, not to think - to unthink,”
 “There is no there, - here.”⁵²

Secular art, then, has a remarkable capacity to draw out the religious in us, even if that was not the artist’s intention.

The Asian Influence

Asian thought has had an impact on a number of modern art movements such as abstract art, minimalism, and conceptual art. Alexandra Munroe has traced the Asian influence on painters such as Georgia O’Keefe and Ad Reinhardt, (Reinhardt, incidentally, was a close friend of Thomas Merton), dance choreographer, Martha Graham, Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and composers Philip Glass and John Cage.⁵³

Perhaps Cage’s most famous work, entitled 4’ 33” - known as the “silent piece” - was first “performed” in 1952. In this piece, the pianist sits at the piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The silence is punctuated by the opening and closing of the piano lid.

Cage developed what he called *composition as process*: “It became clear . . . that structure was not necessary . . . The mind, though stripped of its right to control, is still present. What does it do, having nothing to do? And what happens to a piece of music

⁵² Susan J. Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 7-8.

⁵³ Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 22-31.

when it is purposeless?⁵⁴ It seems to me that Cage's "composition as process" is linked, philosophically, to the concept of "trusting the process" – a key element in the literature of expressive arts therapy.

Finding Our Way to Play – Art as Therapy

For Shaun McNiff - one of the pioneers of expressive arts therapy - trusting the process involves stepping into the unknown, believing that something of value will happen.⁵⁵ This does not mean we step blindly into the unknown. My experience in the expressive arts studio has shown me that when I am present to my environment and approach my creative work with an open mind and heart, emotional and spiritual transformation is possible. This is not always easy.

One of my biggest obstacles has been the voice of my internal critic: "You can't paint, you can't dance, you can't sing . . . no one will like this . . . who do you think you are? . . ." However, the work of the expressive arts studio is not primarily about the finished product, it is about the process. This can sometimes be a struggle – we can feel lost in the process. However, as McNiff suggests, when we stay with it, transformation can occur.⁵⁶ The process in the studio is often compared to meditation, something which requires discipline.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁵ McNiff, *Trust the Process*, 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 25

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

Discipline requires patience. As Natalie Rogers suggests, “Our art speaks back to us if we take the time to let in those messages.”⁵⁸ Although the expressive arts studio is primarily about the process rather than the finished product or work of art, this does not necessarily mean the finished product has no value. I have found that in my own creative work, ironically, the less I concern myself with the finished product, the happier I am, in an aesthetic sense, with the result. This has often inspired me to create more work. There has been an added benefit here - over time, the voice of the internal critic has surfaced less and less.

A focus on the finished product is analogous with the analytical, diagnostic model of psychotherapy, where an “illness” is “treated.” However, what I am concerned with here is the humanistic rather than the traditional, medical model. In this form of therapy one works *with* the issue, not *on* the issue. As Rogers asserts, “Part of the psychotherapeutic process is to awaken the creative life-force energy. Thus, creativity and therapy overlap. What is creative is frequently therapeutic.”⁵⁹ In this model, the artist (client) discovers meaning in the work; the therapist does not impose an interpretation or analysis.

Tikkun ha’olam

“The whole world is medicine. What is the illness?” – Zen koan⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Natalie Rogers, *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing*, (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behaviour Books, Inc., 1993), 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁰ Brenda Shoshanna, *Jewish Dharma: A guide to the practice of Judaism and Zen*, (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), 247.

For therapists such as Ellen Levine there is an underlying spiritual element to their work: creativity meets spirituality, meets therapy. Levine's work is influenced by a concept I have held dear for some time, the Jewish notion of *tikkun ha'olam*, the repair of the world.⁶¹ Other expressive arts therapists, such as Shaun McNiff, have also embraced Levine's notion of this concept.⁶² In this sense, the therapeutic process has both individual and global implications.

Tikkun ha'olam is, of course, an ideal. Suffering is a reality of the human condition. The arts, nevertheless, can provide us with insight, inspiration – and in terms of suffering – at the very least a respite, a *salve*, if not salvation itself. Stephen Levine, in language that hints at the theological, writes:

The suffering which lies in the human condition and which strikes each one of us in the form of our fate can only be met by a surrender to Being which makes it possible to receive a blessing adequate to our pain. The therapeutic power of art lies not in its elimination of suffering but rather in its capacity to hold us in the midst of that suffering so that we can bear the chaos without denial or flight.⁶³

The connection between the creative arts and healing has been with us since time immemorial. This seems almost forgotten in our present day. Levine reminds us that in traditional cultures, healers as shamans were also artists. He compares these ancient shamanic ceremonies – meant to heal the soul - with the Catholic Mass and the Passover Seder.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ellen Levine, *Tending the Fire*, 15.

⁶² Shaun McNiff, "Artistic Inquiry: Research in Expressive Arts Therapy," *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives*, edited by Stephen K. Levine and Ellen G. Levine, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999, 81.

⁶³ Stephen K. Levine, *Poesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1992), 3.

⁶⁴ Stephen K. Levine, "Poesis and Post-Modernism: The Search for a Foundation in Expressive Arts Therapy," *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives*, edited by Stephen K. Levine and Ellen G. Levine, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999, 31.

The connection between art and ritual is expanded upon by Paolo Knill, Helen Nienhaus Barba and Margo N. Fuchs: “Art in its purest form is primarily a ritual activity that is practiced in an elaborate manner only by humans and has no evident ‘goal’ other than celebrating creativity and human potential.”⁶⁵

That which has “no evident goal,” and to borrow from Cage, that which is “purposeless,” both sound to me like *play*. This brings me to a brief discussion on one key way in which expressive arts therapy works. How do we relinquish our focus on the finished product in order to stay with the process? A key dynamic running through the literature involves a seemingly simple concept; play, or “deep play.” According to Natalie Rogers we play in order to “recapture that sense of freedom and abandon we had as a child: the curiosity, inquisitiveness, and urge to explore what was once ours. As you play and create, your self-consciousness about being the creator dissolves.”⁶⁶

Paolo Knill, another important voice in the expressive arts therapy field, has developed a praxis which is deeply rooted in the notion of play, where we can be open to surprise in a place of safety.⁶⁷ It is in our nature to play. This, in my opinion, is a dynamic sadly lacking in our present day, Western culture. I believe play is one of the key ingredients necessary in achieving *tikkun ha'olam*. The Christian theologian Paul Tillich called art the “highest form of play.”⁶⁸ The expressive arts studio is where play finds its home.

⁶⁵ Paolo Knill, Helen Nienhaus Barba, Margo N. Fuchs, *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy*, (Toronto: EGS Press, 2004), 23.

⁶⁶ Rogers, *The Creative Connection*, 27.

⁶⁷ Paolo Knill, “Soul Nourishment, or the Intermodal Language of Imagination,” *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives*, ed. Stephen K. Levine and Ellen G. Levine, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999), 44-45.

⁶⁸ Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 4.

Methodology – Research With Soul in Mind

First and foremost, I have attempted to conduct my research, to use Romanyshn's phrase, "with soul in mind." This involved doing my best to work in service of something other than myself.⁶⁹ I have attempted to allow the still small voice to guide the development of my ideas, the design and facilitation of the two-day retreat, and my interactions with my co-researchers.

I turn now to the three inter-related areas of methodological literature which have further informed this work: heuristics, arts-based research, and the "theological worlds."

Heuristic research (as well as the expressive arts therapy praxis developed by Knill et al) has its roots in phenomenology. Phenomenology, as developed by the German philosopher Edmund H. Husserl (1859-1938), is the study of how we describe our experience through our senses.⁷⁰ According to Michael Quinn, the foundational question in heuristic inquiry is, "What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?"⁷¹

According to Clark Moustakas the heuristic researcher gets "inside" the question to become "one" with it.⁷² He points out that although heuristics is autobiographic, it nevertheless can have social and even universal implications.⁷³ I am reminded here of the poet's dictum: *the more personal the more universal*.

⁶⁹ Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher*, 82.

⁷⁰ Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3rd edition, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2002), 105.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷² Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 15.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

A key dynamic of heuristic inquiry - as it will bear out in this study - involves the possibility that the initial research question may change as the work evolves. Gerhard Kleining and Harald Witt assert that the topic of a heuristic research study should be preliminary and open to change.⁷⁴ This openness to change is also a key dynamic of arts-based research. Patricia Leavy writes, “Artists engage in experiential inquiry, finding new ways to explore knowledge and meaning as they create. Visual [and I would add, *auditory* and *kinaesthetic*] images provide a way to connect with, represent, and give meaning to inner experiences.”⁷⁵ The artist (reminiscent here of a Zen sensibility, i.e. outside the scriptures), “probes *below the level of the rational mind* [emphasis added] and reveals what cannot be known from that perspective alone.”⁷⁶ Pat Allen phrases it succinctly: “Art is a way of knowing what it is we actually believe.”⁷⁷ The place outside the rational mind is where mystery resides. It is the realm of the arts and of theology.

Separation and Reunion

The primary lens through which I view my heuristic journey is found within the theological worlds of W. P. Jones. I resonated with Jones’s findings early on in my theological studies. Jones developed a method which delineates five distinct, yet overlapping typologies which he describes as “family resemblances” or “worlds.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Gerhard Kleining and Harald Witt, “The Qualitative Heuristic Approach: A Methodology for Discovery in Psychology and the Social Sciences. Rediscovering the Method of Introspection as an Example.” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Art. 13, January, 2000, <http://www.qualitativeresearch.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1123/2495,1>. Accessed April 9, 2010.

⁷⁵ Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: arts-based research practice*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), 241.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Pat Allen, *Art is a Way of Knowing*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1995), 3.

⁷⁸ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 18.

Within each world there is a rhythm which flows between what Jones calls *obsessio* [dilemma] and *epiphania* [resolution].”⁷⁹

My dominant theological world is World One (appendix no. 4). Jones names the *obsessio* in World One, “separation” - the *epiphania*, “reunion.”⁸⁰ A classic example of this world is found in *The Wizard of Oz*; Dorothy’s search for home. The *obsessio* of World One is found in the novels of Hermann Hesse, such as *Steppenwolf* and in T.S. Elliot’s, *The Waste Land*.⁸¹ The theme of separation and reunion – where one feels alienated and yearns for home - permeates all of these works.

Having found a methodology which has its origins in phenomenology, I was delighted to discover the following comment from Robert Romanyshyn, which sounds very much like World One: “We might say that phenomenology is a kind of homecoming, a return to what we already know without knowing that we know it.”⁸²

In summary, I have identified three main themes in this literature review: a theology of unity, the expressive arts, and heuristic/arts-based research. A theology of unity is largely informed by the later works of Thomas Merton which were strongly influenced by a Zen sensibility. The literature related to the arts included a brief discussion of theological aesthetics, again with a Zen influence. The authors whom I considered in the field of expressive arts therapy served collectively as a bridge between creativity and spirituality. The literature on methodology brought together elements of heuristic and arts-based research. This was further described in the context of the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁸¹ Ibid., 53.

⁸² Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher*, 88.

“theological worlds.” In some measure, all of this literature points to what O’Donohue called a phenomenology of soul. It all points to beauty. From a heuristic perspective, it all points home.

HEURISTICS AND THE WAY OF POETRY

“To be without method is deplorable, but to depend entirely
on method is worse.” – Lu Ch’ai⁸³

I have chosen to employ a heuristic research methodology which is based largely upon the work of Clark Moustakas, and further informed by the arts-based research methods developed by Shaun McNiff and others. Heuristic inquiry is rooted in phenomenology. It is subjective and autobiographical. It considers - through a phenomenological lens - the experiences of the researcher and his or her co-researchers. The very nature of both phenomenology and theology is largely personal. Phenomenological descriptions are about conscious experiences – in a theological context, the *truth* of the event is determined by the person experiencing the event, not by a detached observer. Theologians from St. Augustine, to Paul Tillich, to Thomas Merton have brought their faith, their biases, and their personal experiences to their work. Therefore, in my view, the autobiographical nature of heuristics makes it well suited to the kind of theological phenomena I examine in this study.

The word “heuristic” is rooted in the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or find. Moustakas remarks that the “cousin” word of heuristics is *eureka*.⁸⁴ Moustakas draws extensively from the philosophical writings of Michael Polanyi (1891-1976), including the seminal work, *The Tacit Dimension*.⁸⁵ The tacit dimension is organic. According to Sandy Sela-Smith,

⁸³ Lu Ch’ai, “Discussion of the Fundamentals of Painting,” *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, 1679-1701, A facsimile of the 1887-1888 Shanghai edition with the text translated from the Chinese and edited by Mai-Mai Sze, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1963), 17.

⁸⁴ Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 9.

⁸⁵ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966).

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. Tacit knowledge is a continually growing, multileveled, deep-structural organization that exists for the most part outside of ordinary awareness and is the foundation on which all other knowledge stands. This deep dimension of knowledge is under construction each time a new experience is introduced.⁸⁶

Moustakas makes a connection between tacit knowing and intuition, a key element of heuristic inquiry. Our intuitive capacity helps us form patterns and relationships.⁸⁷ This capacity is relevant for any scholarly field, theology not the least.

I came to heuristic methodology through a circuitous route. Initially, I had set out to use narrative inquiry as my primary methodology. However, something did not feel right. I carried on with my research for several months and still felt as though something was missing. Then one day I had a small epiphany. I am currently teaching an online academic writing course at St. Stephen's College. I encourage my students to approach their writing as a spiritual practice. In my introduction to the course I suggest that instead of simply writing *about* theology, perhaps we should be *doing* theology as we write. I wondered whether I was truly modelling this idea. Was I simply filling in all of the necessary academic blanks on an intellectual level - or was I willing to immerse myself, authentically, spiritually, in the process?

I then recalled what I wrote at the outset: this thesis was to be a love letter to beauty. A love letter as a detached observer (the model in many forms of academic research) is no love letter at all. Finally, I recalled my research for a course entitled,

⁸⁶ Sandy Sela-Smith, "Heuristic Research: A Review and Critique of Moustakas's Method," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 42 (July, 2002):60, <http://jhp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/42/3/53> (accessed February 27, 2010).

⁸⁷ Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 23.

“Metaphor in the arts and spirituality” at St. Stephen’s College.⁸⁸ My final paper for this course explored the history of the Zen *koan*. The koan is a *poetic* device aimed at bringing the student of Zen to enlightenment. It is usually in the form of a question which cannot be answered by the logical, rational mind. In my paper I quoted Robert Aitken: “. . . the student who elects to pursue the path of Zen Buddhism gives up history and philosophy as basic tools and takes up the way of poetry. The way of poetry is the way of staring at the word or words with only the question, ‘What is it?’ occupying the mind.”⁸⁹

The above quotation, it seems to me, fits within the tacit dimension, and thus it is an appropriate question for heuristic inquiry. It is the kind of question I am drawn to as an artist (dare I say *poet*?) and a theologian. Simply put, then, heuristics meets poetry, meets theology.

I would like to take this connection between heuristics and theology one step further. To illustrate the heuristic approach, Moustakas offers a poem by John Moffitt, entitled, *To Look At Any Thing*:

To look at any thing
 If you would know that thing,
 You must look at it long:
 To look at this green and say
 “I have seen spring in these
 Woods,” will not do - you must
 Be the thing you see:
 You must be the dark snakes of
 Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
 You must enter in
 To the small silences between
 The leaves,
 You must take your time

⁸⁸ December, 2009. Markus Alexander was the instructor.

⁸⁹ Robert Aitken, *Original dwelling place: Zen Buddhist essays*, (Washington: Counterpoint, 1996), 106.

And touch the very place
They issue from.⁹⁰

While reading this poem I was struck - not only by how it speaks to the heart of heuristic inquiry - but how it also serves to illustrate an important element of my theology, captured thus: “The Universal Dharma (the mutual integration of all phenomena) embraces all things, and all things mutually enter into and mutually identify with each other. The whole world exists in a speck of dust as the speck of dust exists in the world.”⁹¹

I am reminded here of the poetry of William Blake:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.⁹²

Heuristics, then, is the way of poetry. To see the world in a grain of sand is *theology* as the way of poetry. In this way, I have created a bridge between my chosen methodology and my theology – a theology of unity.

Adapting the Moustakas Model

I have adapted, rather than fully adopted the research design developed by Moustakas. I will explain my rationale for this in due course. First, however, it would be helpful to describe the basic elements of his methodology.

Moustakas frames six phases of heuristic research, as follows (in abbreviated form):

Initial engagement. The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one

⁹⁰ Quoted in Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 12.

⁹¹ Quoted in Chris Verebes, *Mind Only: Essence of Zen*, (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 2002), 19. Verebes quotes from “An Introduction to the thought of Wonhyo (617-686) by Master Pyowon.”

⁹² William Blake, *Selected Poems*, ed. G.E. Bentley, Jr., (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 295.

that holds important social meanings, and personal, compelling implications.

Immersion. Once the question is discovered and its terms defined and clarified, the researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states. Everything in his or her life becomes crystallized around the question.

Incubation. Incubation is the process in which the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question. Although the researcher is moving in a totally different path, detached from involvement with the question and removed from awareness of its nature and meanings, on another level expansion of knowledge is taking place.

Illumination. The process of illumination is one that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. The illumination as such is a breakthrough into conscious awareness of qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question.

Explication. The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning.

Creative Synthesis. Once the researcher has mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question, the researcher is challenged to put the components and core themes into a creative synthesis. This usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or by some other creative form.⁹³

While I embrace the purpose of, and intention behind, each of the above phases, I have difficulty with the overall approach in one important way. Moustakas lays out his six phases in a linear fashion. Heuristic inquiry, especially in the realm of the tacit dimension is more in keeping, it seems to me, with a circuitous, rather than linear way of thinking. I will admit that my view is formed by the fact that I am an holistic, organic, and circuitous thinker. Several of the six phases, to my mind, can operate simultaneously, therefore, taking a linear approach can serve to limit, especially the intuitive nature of the

⁹³ Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 27-32.

methodology. If heuristic inquiry “is not guided by rules or mechanics,”⁹⁴ why then is the methodology framed within these six linear steps?

Sandy Sela-Smith writes, “Paradoxically, [Moustakas] creates a methodological structure for a process that he himself states must take place free from methodological structures if it is to be authentic.”⁹⁵ This is not to say, however, that a linear approach is invalid, or even desirable for some researchers; to this the growing literature on heuristics will certainly attest. However, for this holistic thinker at least, an approach “not guided by rules or mechanics” - and one not framed in a linear fashion is the preferred approach.

Arts-based Research

Arts-based research is a relatively new and burgeoning field. It is a natural companion to heuristic inquiry. Arts-based research involves working with and through the objects/creations themselves – the artist (in the case of this study, the researcher and co-researchers) create a dialogue with the work. As Shaun McNiff asserts, arts-based research is an expansion of heuristics as it includes the materials of creative expression.⁹⁶ To paraphrase Pat Allen, art as an element of research becomes a way of knowing and a way of *explaining*. I will suggest that the arts-based approach developed by McNiff and others is more in keeping with a methodology which is non-linear, holistic, and open-ended; one which I embrace wholeheartedly. As McNiff points out, arts-based research,

⁹⁴ Bruce G. Douglass and Clark Moustakas, “Heuristic Inquiry: The Internal Search to Know,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 25, no. 3, (Summer, 1985), Beverly Hills: Sage Publications), 41.

⁹⁵ Sela-Smith, “Heuristic Research: A Review and Critique of Moustakas’s Method,” 77.

⁹⁶ Shaun McNiff, *Art-Based Research*, (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), 54.

like creativity itself embraces the unknown.⁹⁷ This embrace of the unknown, I would add, is also in keeping with authentic theological exploration.

The discussion of my findings, then, will incorporate elements of Moustakas's model blended with an arts-based perspective. It will also be presented in a more organic, circuitous manner. This, as I have suggested, is more in keeping with an open-ended approach to research.

Designing the Retreat

My intention was to design and facilitate a weekend which would serve the spiritual and creative needs of the participants. In this sense, my research questions were of secondary importance; I attempted to place the needs of the participants first. Several days before the retreat (September, 2009), I met with Markus Alexander who advised, "To facilitate the retreat you need two things: sensitivity and skill." I trusted my sensitivity was apparent throughout the retreat. As for skill, I depended largely on a suggestion, again from Markus Alexander. He suggested that my main role was to "open the door [for the participants] and then step back [to allow them the freedom to do their work]." Although I had a variety of art making activities planned, I trusted my intuition to guide much of our work together. This is in keeping with the intuitive nature of heuristic research.

The retreat was held on the weekend of September 12/13, 2009, at St. Stephen's College. A section of the college library was converted into a studio space. The following art supplies were made available to the group: modelling clay, acrylic and water colour

⁹⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

paint, paper, brushes, pencil crayons, pastels, collage materials such as old magazines, tissue paper, construction paper, and glue.

Chairs were set up in a circle where we held several group discussions. There was also an area set aside for movement/dance. Throughout the weekend, various images and quotations were projected on to a screen. A variety of instruments (some brought by the participants) were on hand. These included hand drums, a variety of percussion instruments, two guitars, and a lap dulcimer,

A portable labyrinth was laid out on the floor of a room on the second floor of the college. Variations of the labyrinth pattern are found in numerous cultures around the world. It was called the Never Ending Circle by the Celts and is known as the Medicine Wheel in some North American indigenous traditions. Perhaps the most famous labyrinth in Christianity is in the Chartres Cathedral in France. A labyrinth differs from a maze - it has no dead ends or tricks. It has one, circuitous path which leads to the centre and then back out again. It has been called a “path of prayer,” a “walking meditation,” a “crucible of change,” a “watering hole for the spirit,” and a “mirror of the soul.”⁹⁸

I suggested several structured activities during the retreat. However, there were also several open studio sessions where the participants worked on their own, yet still in each other’s company. This loose structure allowed for a sense of play. The overall approach was in keeping with a method of facilitation to which I have been exposed, and have practiced, in several venues over the past few years. Again, the intuitive was very much at play: I allowed my instincts as a facilitator to decide when to direct and when to

⁹⁸ Veriditas website: <http://www.veriditas.org/about/guidelines.shtml>, accessed March 8, 2010. Veriditas is an international organization based in California. “The work of Veriditas centers around the Labyrinth Experience as a personal practice for healing and growth, a tool for community building, an agent for global peace and a metaphor for life.” The Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress is the organization’s founder and creative director.

step back. For example, I dispensed with one planned activity, which was to take the group outside to draw in a nature setting. I sensed that everyone was already too deep in their work, and that such an outing would serve as a distraction. For several sessions, recorded music was played in the background. These recordings ranged from world music, to classical, to Gregorian chant. There were also several sessions when we worked in silence.

An *intermodal* approach was taken throughout the weekend: participants moved from one art modality to another. Often, with intermodal work, one creative act inspires another. Stephen Levine and Ellen Levine write, “Whether through fantasy, dream or art work, the imagination has the capacity to utilize every sensory modality in the creation of new meaning. Imagination is intermodal in its very essence.”⁹⁹

I wanted my co-researchers to feel welcome as soon as they walked into the building – and in keeping with the concept of a retreat – to slow down if they so desired. To this end, I placed a welcome sign just inside the front doors of the building next to a “Buddha board.” A Buddha board is based on the Zen concept of being present in the moment.¹⁰⁰ It measured approximately eight inches by ten inches. The board stands upright like an artist’s easel; a small brush and a reservoir filled with water sits in front of the board. One simply dips the brush in the water and makes a mark on the board. Within minutes, the water evaporates and the surface returns to a blank state.

The co-researchers arrived in the library to the sound of a single cello; a recording of J.S. Bach’s cello suites. We gathered in the circle and introduced ourselves. I

⁹⁹ Stephen K. Levine and Ellen G. Levine, *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers), 11.

¹⁰⁰ Buddha Board official website: <http://www.buddhaboard.com/noflash/html>, accessed March 8, 2010.

employed a method similar to the First Nations ‘talking stick.’ Instead of a stick, a Tibetan singing bowl was used – after each person was finished speaking, she or he would strike the bowl and pass it to the next person in the circle. We gathered in this manner several times throughout the retreat.

We spent a few minutes in the labyrinth room where we removed our shoes. I briefly explained the history of the labyrinth and how it might be used as a meditative practice in its own right as well as a doorway into the creative possibilities of the art studio. As Artress writes, “Most of the experiences that occur in the labyrinth are unexpected. They are guided by a sacred wisdom, a creative intelligence that knows more about what we need than do our conscious selves.”¹⁰¹ We performed a ritual known as “warming the labyrinth.”¹⁰² We stood in a circle, holding hands. I offered a prayerful intention, paraphrased as follows: “As you walk this path, may you find nourishment, creativity, and peace.”

We then returned to the studio where our first creative activity involved working with clay. I introduced the activity with a guided meditation. The meditation was not written down beforehand; it was said as a kind of prayer, straight from the heart. I paraphrase the words as follows:

Take a moment to contemplate your hands. Gaze at your palms, your fingers. The beauty in your hands. Consider the many things your hands have done in your life - the many *good* things your hands have done. Look at how strong your hands have been - and how gentle. Remember all that your hands have held: perhaps a child, a loved one. Think too, of how your hands are connected to your ancestors. Imagine how your ancestors’ hands have been imprinted on your hands. In a moment, we will work

¹⁰¹ Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 76-77.

¹⁰² I learned this ritual several years ago from Lauren Artress during a two-day labyrinth workshop at the Providence Renewal Centre in Edmonton.

with the clay. To guide your work in the studio, I invite you to ask yourself the following question: if my hands could speak, what would they say?

During one of our circle discussions I spoke about my interest in the Zen koan and how it might be used as a device in the studio. I encouraged the participants to consider the following traditional koan while they created their art work: what was your original face before your parents were born? During other sessions I offered suggestions with fewer directives. For example, we created a spontaneous piece of music where several people played instruments while the rest of the group danced. Afterwards, I suggested they carry whatever was moving energetically within them to the studio area and allow it to direct their work - whether it be in painting, sculpture, poetry, or collage.

The co-researchers did much of the work on their own. However, I was also interested in observing how beauty might be experienced when people worked in pairs. Towards the end of the first day I asked everyone to move around the room in silence and to intuitively find a partner. I asked them to think of their partner overnight, to keep that person in their heart, and to support him or her for the remainder of the retreat. I also hinted, without revealing any details, that they would be asked to create some art work with their partner on the following day.

The next day I invited each pair to walk the labyrinth together in silence, then return to the studio and create another clay sculpture together, again in silence. Following that activity everyone had a chance to discuss their experience with their partner. They were also encouraged to move into another art modality of their choosing, this time without their partner. At the end of the second day we returned to the circle and discussed our experiences. I was intent to be as present as possible during this time, therefore I did not take any notes.

Six Windows

“The strongest experience for me was while doing the collage.
It was like a window to my soul.” – co-researcher, Joshua

I conducted audio-recorded interviews with six of my co-researchers in the weeks following the retreat. I initially intended to include only five or six co-researchers in my study. However, I anticipated there might be some attrition; therefore, I invited more than an adequate number of people in the event some were unable to attend. As it turned out, all of the ten people I invited were able to participate. I did not, however, interview everyone in the group. I decided that six interviews, closer to my original goal, would generate enough data considering the size and scope of this study. Nevertheless, I was pleased that ten people attended: I believe this was an ideal number given the nature of the retreat.

Michael Patton has described three basic approaches to qualitative interviewing:

1. *the informal conversational interview* relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions . . . During an informal conversational interview, the persons being talked with may not even realize they are being interviewed;
2. *the general interview guide approach* involves outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before interviewing begins. The issues in the outline need not be taken in any particular order and the actual wording of questions to elicit responses about those issues is not determined in advance. The interview guide simply serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure all relevant topics are covered; and
3. *the standardized open-ended interview* consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980), 197-98.

I employed a blend of the first two; the “informal conversational interview” and “the general interview guide approach.” In conducting heuristic research, Moustakas favours the first method: “Dialogue is the preferred approach in that it aims toward encouraging expression, elucidation, and disclosure of the experience being investigated.”¹⁰⁴ While I share this view, I nevertheless blended the two approaches for two reasons. First, I felt that by inviting my co-researchers to consider my research questions before, during, and after the retreat, I was treating them, in the true sense of the word, as *co-researchers*, as colleagues, not ‘respondents’ or ‘subjects.’ I would suggest that the tone and direction of my interviews still encouraged “expression, elucidation, and disclosure.” The second reason was of a practical nature: under the St. Stephen’s College ethical guidelines for research involving humans it is customary to provide the ethics committee with sample interview questions as well as an example of the consent form provided to the co-researchers (see appendix no’s 3, 2).

In keeping with the above approach, I had a general idea of the kinds of questions I wanted to pose, (for example, each co-researcher was reminded of my main thesis question at the beginning of the interview) however, many of my questions surfaced intuitively as each interview unfolded. I attempted to make each question as open-ended as possible. Despite the free-ranging feel of the interviews, a loose structure was maintained. I encouraged each participant to bring to the interview examples of the art work they created during the retreat/workshop. In those cases where participants brought samples of their work, we spent some time discussing them. The following areas were discussed with each participant:

1. The experiences of beauty during the retreat.

¹⁰⁴ Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 47.

2. The experiences of the creative process itself - in particular, the spiritual, aesthetic and/or embodied dimension of these experiences.
3. The emotions experienced.
4. The insights grounded either psychologically and/or theologically/spiritually.

Prior to the retreat I provided each co-researcher with a copy of the *Theological Worlds Inventory* (see appendix no. 4). I encouraged everyone to complete the survey, however, I made it clear that they were under no obligation to do so. My intention was to allow the *Theological Worlds* to serve as a mutual frame of reference, a mutual language of sorts, during the interviews. This inventory did not resonate with everyone. One co-researcher in particular had difficulty with the monotheistic nature of the survey as it was not in keeping with his worldview.

Each interview lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours in length. I transcribed each interview and revisited the transcripts - and in some cases listened to the recording several times before concluding my analysis. Recording equipment can be intimidating for some people. In an effort to facilitate a comfortable setting I began each interview by ringing the same Tibetan singing bowl which we had used during the retreat. This was a way to ground the interview and help us both return in an embodied, energetic manner to the experiences of the weekend. All of my co-researchers appeared to appreciate this small but symbolic gesture.

Each person considered one or more pieces of their art work and offered comments in a manner similar to an *aesthetic response*. The aesthetic response is often used in expressive arts therapy as a way for the client to dialogue with their work of art. I found it to be an equally effective method during the interview process. Paolo Knill, et al, discuss the purpose of the aesthetic response in relation to beauty:

If we are to explore aesthetics in a way that is truly pertinent to the arts in psychotherapy, a way that nurtures soul, it is necessary to leap beyond the traditional understanding of formal aesthetics which concerns itself with ideal forms, and beyond the oversimplified statement that “beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder.” Instead, we will concentrate on a phenomenon which we call the *aesthetic response*. This phenomenon occurs within persons who engage in the artistic/creative process as artists or performers, *and* as witnesses. This phenomenon does not provide for measuring art’s beauty against some objective ideal. Rather, the aesthetic response describes characteristic *ways of being in the presence of a creative act or a work of art* – ways that touch soul, evoke imagination, engage emotions and thought. Our purpose here is to focus on the *quality* of response, rather than to try to objectify the kinds of occurrences evoking it.¹⁰⁵

The following stories are not structured as synopses of the interviews, rather, as glimpses into some of the key experiences of each participant. My aim is to capture the essence of the experience: a snapshot of the phenomenon. I have given each co-researcher a pseudonym.

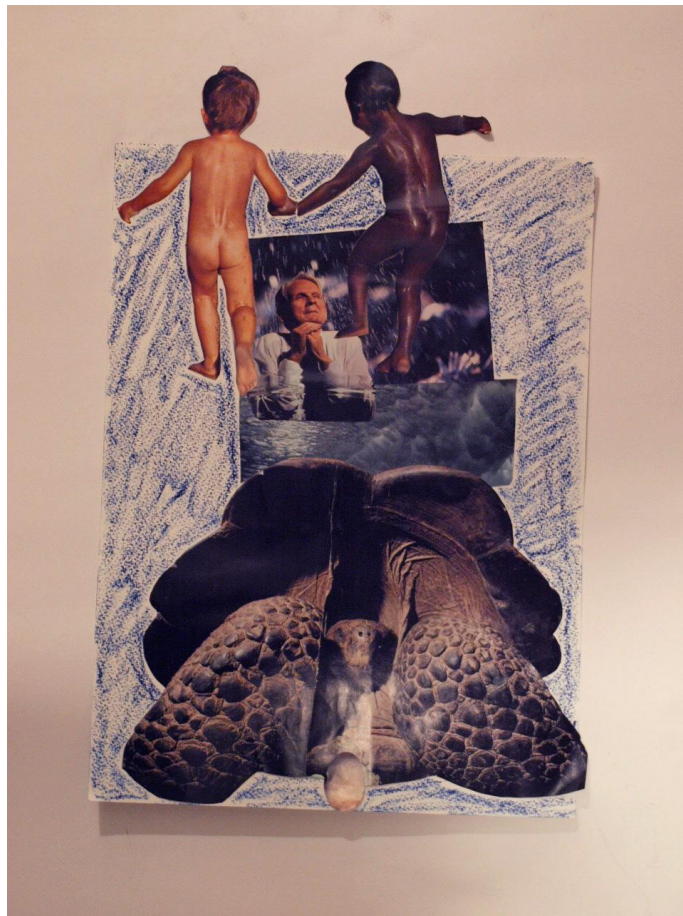
Joshua’s Window to the Soul

Joshua decided he would like to try his hand at collage during one of the open studio segments of the weekend. He had not created a collage since elementary school. He spent some time leafing through several of the old *National Geographic* magazines provided. He was unable to find any images that struck him and was about to give up. He decided to look at one more magazine, which is when he experienced a shift: “The process while doing the collage was really like a ‘flow effect’¹⁰⁶ - each of the images

¹⁰⁵ Paolo Knill, Helen Nienhaus Barba, Margo N. Fuchs, *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy*, 2nd edition, (Toronto: EGS Press, 2004), 70-71.

¹⁰⁶ Joshua refers here to a term used by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: “These exceptional moments are what I have called *flow experiences*. The metaphor of ‘flow’ is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as ‘being in the zone,’ religious mystics as being in ‘ecstasy,’ artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture. Athletes, mystics, and artists do very different things when they reach flow, yet their descriptions are remarkably similar.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 29.

really clicked, they just came together without any effort. It was like the images selected me and not that I selected the images. Once it was done it was like waking up from the ‘flow.’” Joshua described the collage thus: “The older man has such an expression of bliss in this image. I don’t know why I put him in the rain. Water is one of the most nurturing elements. For me the background - the water - reinforces this sense of bliss.”



Joshua's collage

With a pleasant smile and a gentle tone of voice, Joshua said the collage was like a window to his soul. I asked him to look at his collage again, without analyzing it, and describe how his soul was speaking to him through this window:

JOSHUA: I think the soul - if you link it to beauty - is the most beautiful element of every human being. The soul itself is flawless - if I link it to the picture - the soul in a way is beyond time, it's very, very, ancient. And the turtle could be a symbol for that - at the same time it's completely new and raw and innocent. The phrase that comes up with those kids that are holding hands - in terms of the older man - it's like they're stepping on the shoulders of giants. There's this childlike innocence but there's also a very, very, deep, rich, life experience that's there. And incredible gratefulness.

NORBERT: And those are aspects of your soul?

JOSHUA: Yes.

NORBERT: As you looked into the window of your soul, how did you feel?

JOSHUA: At rest. Completely at rest and at peace.

Joshua also reflected on walking the labyrinth. He walked it several times - alone as well as with his partner, Sophia. This was a new experience for him: "It took me quite by surprise, walking the labyrinth, suddenly as I was walking up from the basement to the second floor I got really, really nervous and anxious. I took a deep breath before taking the first step. It was like walking toward my inner centre. Standing in the centre [of the labyrinth], it was like, wow, I've arrived. I'm there." He also described walking the labyrinth with Sophia: "It was very beautiful because part of it was solitary but part of it [was that] we walked together - there was a very strong connection with her."

Joshua and Sophia returned to the studio in silence after their labyrinth walk where they created a sculpture together with clay - still keeping silent. "It was wonderfully playful working with [Sophia]. It often felt like we were in school, like she was a little school girl and I was a little school boy [laughs]." Joshua added, "[While] playing with [the] material - it often felt like each of the little forms I made were a gift for her - and the other way around. It was a very strong experience for me of me being a man and she being a woman and how that came into form in our work. I was, in a way, often

providing a base for her on which she would then create something very playful . . . We were building a garden. It just happened. It just unfolded . . . There was definitely beauty in that.”

Sophia’s gold mine

Sophia also recalls the experience of creating the sculpture with Joshua: “We were immersed in the clay work together . . . We were complementing each other . . . it felt natural, and as [Joshua] said it was very yin/yang, very balanced.”

Another key experience for Sophia involved creating a collage: “I was drawn to vivid blues and gold, and I had never painted behind a collage before. I got totally involved with that. It felt good as I was doing it. It was surprising. It felt right. And I could feel the energy, I could feel the whole, and I was almost in awe in some ways. And every time I look at it I still feel that I am evolving - evolving back to listening to the small still voice through the art, through using my hands.” I asked Sophia to expand on her phrase, *evolving back*: “Almost sometimes I feel as if I’m retrieving parts of my adolescence that I’ve put by the wayside, retrieving parts of myself that are going to evolve into something bigger. I feel that’s coming for some reason very strongly.”

Our conversation made its way to a discussion of the Zen koan, *what was your original face before your parents were born?* “I found it puzzling, I found it very deep, engaging, but I wasn’t conscious I was using it. And I keep on thinking about it . . . what was I meant to be? Why am I on this earth? Am I using my talents wisely, all of that.”

I asked Sophia whether she thought about the koan while she created her art work: “No, it went into my subconscious, say, I wasn’t conscious that that was my main theme.” She said she responded in the same way she had to other questions I had posed [i.e. if your hands could speak what would we they say?]: “I listened to them, I wrote

them down, but then I started the project and let that evolve. And let my hands do what was necessary. My hands took over and I became very immersed in what we were doing.”



Sophia working with clay

NORBERT: How would you describe that feeling of being immersed in the work?

SOPHIA: A very deep place. It's a soul space. It's almost as if I'm inside of myself. It's a comfortable space. And very, very personal. And that particularly comes out when I'm doing journal writing afterwards - if I'm doing stream of consciousness writing. Then the whole experience comes out in quite broad sweeps. It's almost like a twilight zone that I work in. So it's as if - everyone else in the room, they're in a fog so to speak. I know they're there but I'm in a twilight zone. It's invigorating but at the end of the day I'm very tired. And yet it's been very laid back, very low key. So, it's a very gentle process of the intuitive voice speaking.

Sophia spoke about how this retreat was similar to other expressive arts

workshops/classes she has attended:

I'm amazed at it because it's such a simple process and yet it's deep and it's not an easy process. I like the sharing we do, but I particularly like being left alone to uncover and do my own journey; we're not allowed to do that enough. In tapping the inner resources, or unfolding more from within, and seeing who oneself is, we're seeing how much we are part of each person in that room as well. And it fits together like an organic whole. You may think that I'm putting a lot on the workshop, but I am. I'm excited by the process. It encapsulates for me, in a small microcosm, what one can envision in the larger scheme of things. When people share, when people are comfortable, you see each other as similar to yourself - you see the uniqueness and you see the similarity. The beauty [is] unfolding like we've all got gold mines inside ourselves . . . I find the experience very spiritual . . . I believe that God lives within each of us, not out there someplace. The intuitive voice, or spirit, is talking - it's a spiritual journey.

Anna's hands

I would like to relate Anna's story by starting with two poems she wrote during the retreat. The first poem was composed after she created her clay sculpture. I had encouraged the group to consider the question: if your hands could speak, what would they say?

Ode to my Hands

Push, fold, mold,
The power of my hands

Knead, knead, the staff of life
support
comfort
love my hands

Such need to move and feel the clay under my hands

the need to really connect
such power in kneading
making

I love my hands

always have!

They are magnificent,

And then after the push and pull

A softening is there

a need to express
the soft

And so I feel the soft
gentle
welcoming

satisfying in a different way

Each in their own time
powerful movement
soft, gentle stroking

Smooth out the rough edges.

Moving, folding, holding
My hands holding what I have made.

The fruit of my hands
and my mind,
imagination.

What do I do?

My hands follow
They do so much
So flexible
so adaptable
so strong
so obedient
so magnificent

I love my hands
They are my best friends!

A short while later she wrote the following lines, “about an image that surfaced in the clay piece”:

Power, gentle, strong, invisible yet always there
 Such beauty
 ascended master mother
 Draped in Blue

Our Vessel
 Serve and pour

Show blue paint of mother
 shedding light

from her heart
 onto her daughter.

Anna calls her art-making a portal - a way in - to her relationship with God.

It's a way in to my *body* because I'm making [art] with my kinaesthetic - my movement - with my eyes and with my hands, and so I'm using my body to make art. So when an image comes forth from that, for me it's a way to then connect with something that's there inside of me, inside of my body, inside of my mind, inside of my spirit, it's all, to me, all one. I might use the word body but I'm using all of that together. And it comes out that way, and to me that's the truest form of a relationship with God.

Anna expanded on this further:

The times that I feel grounded or at peace, I feel in the flow, I just feel, you know, comforted, is when I'm doing my art work. That doesn't mean I don't bring frustration to my art in the moment that I'm creating something - I have lots of feelings in the moment but it's being in process that gets me through the mud and it also gets me through to seeing God - and it's not about *seeing* God - it's almost like a feeling of another reality - it's a feeling of another reality that I call God.

During several parts of the retreat the participants worked on their art in silence.

Anna described this as *monastic*:

In our silence we could do whatever - we could do prayerful art. [When] we were making music or drawing, or working with clay, [when we were] moving, it was safe, it was respectful, it was very comfortable . . . and you could just have the freedom of being whatever in the moment - you could just be whoever you are at that moment. There was that sense of comfort and security to just *be*.

Lela's Original Face

“What really stands out for me was the peace that I experienced in writing the poem that emerged from the collage.” – co-researcher, Lela.

Initially, when the question (koan), *what was your original face before your parents were born?* was posed, Lela was, “not the least bit interested.” She laughed as she recalled, “I thought, good question - [but I am not] going to go there!” However, she then experienced a shift: “and then it was the most important thing of the whole weekend for me.”

On the evening of the first day of the retreat, Lela created a collage:

I was not aware when doing the collage of doing a collage on that question. I was just doing a collage in response to the day, which I enjoyed making. And then when I came in the next morning, and I was looking at [the collage] I realized that one way of looking at the collage was that it was a response to that question. And as soon as I did that then I wrote a poem and the poem felt true, deeply true, and therefore I felt just incredibly peaceful because it felt like it was a process that had unfolded quite lightly - so there was a kind of playful unexpectedness to it that came from just letting it go, and not feeling like I had to answer the koan.

I think koans will never offer insight until you invite the rational mind to take a holiday. And so my rational mind said I'm not going to go there and then that was when an answer or an insight appeared. That's what I love about the expressive arts in relation to matters of spirit as well as matters of understanding [the] self - that it is a way to turn off the answers that you think you know in order to let in the answers that you know from a different place.

The poem Lela wrote is entitled, *Before*:

The face before I was born is burnished
like an ancient vessel unearthed after a long burial.
It is illuminated with the light that dances
off the edge of an ocean wave at dawn.
The skin is soft as the cheek of a sleeping child,
etched with the lines of an old woman at prayer.
In the eyes, the compassion of a mother embracing her weeping child.
And around the mouth, the strength of a warrior.
In the face before I was born, I see a profound knowing
about the new life that nestles in the cradle of death.

A willingness to leap into the deep mystery that beckons.
 And above all, in the face before I was born,
 I see exquisite tenderness.

Several months after our interview, I sent Lela an e-mail message, requesting a description of the collage and whether she had any follow-up comments to offer. Her response (via e-mail) follows:

The collage marries images of child, mother, and crone. It contains the warmth of sun on water and images of containers - a burnished pot, a rock cairn, and two nests. There is also a stylized warrior figure at the bottom. During the weekend, I recognized in these images elements of “the face before” and was delighted to thread them into a poem. It was satisfying and felt like it offered interesting insights into the essence of who I am. I then put the collage away and didn’t revisit it for about four months. When I pulled it out again, I discovered that some of the images in the collage were showing up in subtle and fascinating ways in my current creative efforts.

I wonder now: Did the collage prompt the direction that my creative work took in the months that followed? (And if the collage is “the face before”, this feels like divine guidance). Or did the collage offer a glimpse into the future of my work that was just being conceived but had not yet been born? I don’t know the answer, but when I look at the collage now it reminds me of the power of a weekend like that to allow us to tap into the deep. And then if we hold the experience lightly without dissecting it, the weekend continues to guide us long after it is over. Now that I’ve rediscovered the collage, it’s on my bulletin board - offering nourishment and insight whenever my eyes are drawn there.

During our initial interview, we discussed how beauty surfaced for Lela in the studio:

My present appreciation and experience of beauty is very connected with the concept of grace. Grace for me - part of it is about surrender as opposed to trying to control, and beauty to me is not about the aesthetically lovely looking thing but the surrendering to the honest experience, or the honest response. So, there were lots of instances where I felt [I was in] an environment with people that I trusted, I felt that the process was being facilitated by someone I trusted, and I was feeling, although tired, that I could trust that if I just surrendered to it that I would get the nourishment I needed while also doing whatever else that you [Norbert] needed and wanted. So there was a sense of that throughout.

We discussed further the spiritual nature of the retreat:

Now this is difficult because I would actually have a hard time identifying very much of anything that wasn't at one level about Spirit. My personal experience of Spirit is, the more we pay attention, the more likely we are to see it everywhere. So that would be a strong underpinning to how I experience the world. That being said, a weekend like that is an opportunity to pay attention, to have a heightened awareness, a more delicate awareness, a more subtle experiencing of consciousness of the Spirit than we might have if we were rushing from here to the grocery store, to do the dishes, to go out to the meeting. In a weekend like that, what we're doing is slowing it down, which is to me, a really important part of the process.

Samantha: sacred body, sacred voice

“We become lost if we don't treat our bodies as sacred.”
– co-researcher, Samantha.

The use of the Tibetan singing bowl at the beginning of our interview reminded

Samantha of a painting she had done during the retreat:

What I painted, for me, was an image of resonance. It came partly because I had come from some intense voice lessons [several days before the retreat]. Resonance was playing in my mind, and that's what I painted . . . I keep going back to that painting - it helps me articulate, in a creative way, a non-verbal way, that sense of mystery around how we are constructed in such a complicated way and how our bodies function in such a fascinating way. And for me there's something very sacred about all of that.

We then talked about her painting in relation to the concept of beauty. She said

the painting functions as a *reminder* of beauty:

not so much because [the painting] would be beautiful to anyone else - but because it's an instant reminder of the beauty of the complexity of our bodies and our bodies as instruments. And also the beauty of voice, like a beautiful singing voice - the multifaceted aspects of sound and of voice. I don't have to work: I see that painting and it's instant - this sense of recognition and appreciation of beauty of the voice. It's a conduit. It takes me to the beauty without having to wade through any garbage, or baggage.

NORBERT: Did you feel [this painting] was beautiful?

SAMANTHA: Yes. And I still think it's beautiful. It's not 'fine art,' but what makes it beautiful is that when I created it, I put the paint on the paper the way it came out of my felt sense . . . I didn't try to create a

‘thing.’ I just put it down intuitively . . . so it felt like it was very authentic because I just went with what came. I went with something that was authentic. I just put that down on the paper. I didn’t try to manipulate it, I didn’t worry about what other people thought, I was just totally focussed on putting this on to the paper. So, it became beautiful because it felt authentic to me.



“Resonance” by Samantha

NORBERT: So, there was beauty in the authenticity?

SAMANTHA: Absolutely, yes, yes ... It was authentic because it was solely mine . . . My painting is beautiful to me because it makes me feel good, it touches my sense of Spirit. It’s a visualization of something that’s sacred: our voices are sacred, our bodies are sacred. I think we become lost if we don’t treat our bodies as sacred.

Samantha also talked about the art studio in more general terms and how it can be analogous for how we might live in the larger world:

So, [when] the studio is a microcosm of society a safe place is created where people are able to work in their most authentic way. We’re able to

work on our own but also in a community where we're allowed to work on our own. That's what makes [the studio] a spiritual place for me: the safety and the encouragement to work authentically. And there's no judgement. It just is.

What we each have to offer is sacred. It's important to treat each other and our potential, or our gifts, or whatever word you want to put on it, as sacred, so that we can bring what we have to offer into the world. That's what is sacred about that, that's what's holy about [for example] creating from clay: what does the material bring? And then what do I bring out of the material?

Samantha then, laughing, compared the studio to church: "It felt *way* better than church because it was creative!"

NORBERT: That was a bold, theological statement!

SAMANTHA: Well, it put me in community with people I had something in common with . . . I don't have to sit still, I can move around. It's not a passive way of connecting with what's sacred. The only thing not passive in church, pretty well, is the singing, and then I'm singing words of theology that I don't agree with some of the time, or all of the time. Whereas, in the studio, because we work independently but in community I can do some of the things I want that are meaningful to me.

NORBERT: So, you're creating your own theology.

SAMANTHA: I *am* creating my own theology. So, then it's more meaningful because I can explore my relationship with the divine, or what's holy, or what's sacred. When I'm sitting in church I can use my head, I can use my intellect, to think about some of the things that are stated but it's all *at* me instead of a mutual relationship.

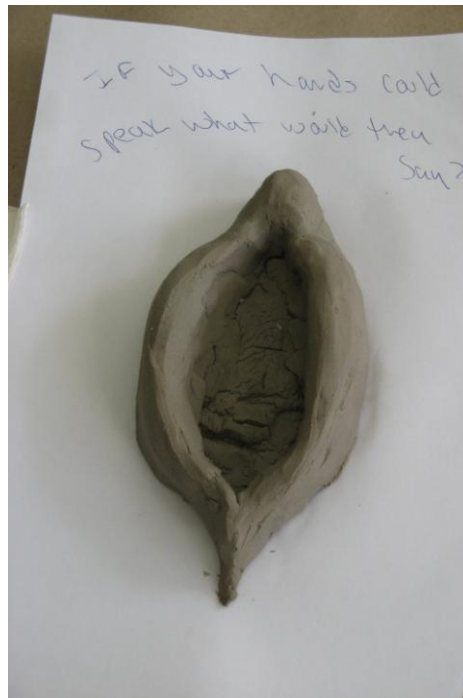
Emma writes a new script

Emma arrived at the retreat feeling excited about attending yet also feeling somewhat insecure and anxious. This changed during our opening circle, when everyone, in turn, struck the Tibetan singing bowl: "I really resonate with the singing bowl, I don't know why, I don't have any past relationship with [it] . . . As I was sitting anxiously, as each person went around and used the bowl, it just felt like a softening for me and a slowing down."

Our first art activity involved sculpting with clay, while working with the question, if your hands could speak, what would they say? I asked everyone to spend a few moments looking at their hands before moving into the art making. Emma says she was touched by this experience:

I recall a real warmth and a real sense of love radiating within and I remembering being really close to tears. And there was the part of looking at our hands, and the gentleness, and just honouring the strength, and all the work that our hands have done. And then that connection to ancestors, and that just shifted something for me - it was like [the paradox of how] we enter the world alone, we leave the world alone, and yet I'm not alone. And I'm in this circle and - even the circle of people that were there on the weekend - we all have our ancestors with us. And so, to me, that speaks to beauty.

As soon as you [Norbert] asked the question [if your hands could speak, what would they say?], I had a real visceral response to that, I felt the presence of tears, and I wrote, "You are not alone, I can hold you, you are not alone, I can hold you," and I just kept repeating that. And at first it was like I was saying it to myself and then it felt like my mom, my dad, my ancestors, and then something far bigger than us as humans was saying "you're not alone, I can hold you," and this is a place I can rest.



Clay and paper installation by Emma

I was intrigued to learn more about this connection with her ancestors:

I was looking at my hands and I thought, okay I'm forty-four years old, looking at how my hands have changed and how age is showing up. Then I thought about my mother - what were my mother's hands like? - and then, what were my grandmother's hands like? And it went from there. There is something about hands that we connect with and that my hands weren't just sort of brand new, off the assembly line . . . this was like an embodied knowing that I am not alone: that my ancestors are present and have always been."

Emma created another sculpture, this time with her partner. She wrote the following narrative about the experience:

Silence. In clay our hands meet. His, larger than mine. With both hands, his strength bears down on the clay - a solid block that gives way. He stops. My hands, smaller, find an edge and tentatively begin to touch, shape, connect. We work in silence, our hands, masculine and feminine, finding, creating, responding to the rhythm of being together. He initiates, I follow, respond. He initiates, I again follow and respond. Enjoying the movement of his hands, his strength, he initiates with contact, our eyes meet and permission is given. A pause. It is my turn. *I* initiate, he watches and responds. We are both in, our hands, fingers, breath. We can no longer distinguish between who initiates and who responds. And it is no longer about our hands meeting, working the clay. The *clay* initiates and responds along with us. Form comes into being. The wise old spirit of the forest looks upon us, its branches holding the last of the autumn leaves. Our hands find a place to rest, to be still. Our eyes meet, and a few forbidden words are exchanged in the silence.

Then she wrote:

Was this my face before my parents were born? Made of bark, weathered from the elements of tears, passion and breath. The place where both masculine and feminine meet as one.

"So, that, to me," said Emma. "is how beauty is expressed in the studio. Like suddenly there was no separation - and then it wasn't just the two of us, but [also] the clay - [which she called *the third*] - and all of a sudden the clay begins to respond and

initiate.”¹⁰⁷ Emma adds, “It’s like the veil drops away and there’s connection; there’s no separateness on a spiritual level.”

Emma, like Samantha, compared the retreat to church:

This is what all the good of what church could be. For me, there was such a profound experience of being part of a community . . . I felt like there was a process for me where I was invited and I got to come home to myself, and in coming home to myself then I was able to be part of this community, part of this circle in how I was at that moment, not having to *be* something, not having to perform in some way. I felt like we were each able to bring our wholeness *and* our pain and our suffering to the circle.

Emma recalled a moment in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass, when the congregation prays, *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the Word and I shall be healed:*

That has been healing at times, but has also made me so angry, like ‘not being worthy, not being worthy’ - that just being my own inside mantra. And on the retreat weekend I thought of those words and I had a very different experience of what that meant. In that weekend, by the end, I was feeling very much a part of this beautiful circle of people who are just showing up in their pain and their joy, like there was room for both and everything in between.

I felt like that weekend the ‘Word’ was said without being said. And the healing came from the light within each person, connected to that in me. We help heal each other. I experienced something different than what I had ever experienced before that shook my belief system, shook my old story that I had been telling myself and I don’t think I have a new story to go with it. My old story would be, ‘I’m unworthy for your love - and I have to somehow beg for it.’ Well, now I know that script no longer fits and I have to write a new one.

All ten of my co-researchers deeply touched my heart and soul. In the following chapter I will discuss how their presence resonated with my own experience in the

¹⁰⁷ Emma refers here to McNiff’s phrase, “third object,” which he uses in the context of art therapy: “The artistic image is a participant, something to talk to and something that expresses itself to us, in what was previously a two-way dialogue between patient and therapist.” McNiff, *Art-Based Research*, 185. Emma says she also views the *third* as “the presence of the holy.”

expressive arts studio and how it relates to my evolving theology. I will develop the *metaphor* of the labyrinth as a way to illustrate my findings.

DISCUSSION: IN BEAUTY WE ARE ONE

“and in thy voice I catch

The language of my former heart . . .

May I behold in thee what I was once . . . “

– William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”¹⁰⁸

Take a walk with me, gentle reader, through my labyrinth. Its centre – and its path – has many names: God, Divinity, the Way, the Original Face, Grace, Love . . . Beauty. I have found all of these in the studio. I have seen all of these in the hands, the faces, the voices, of ten people who joined me for two, prayerful days. As I write this paragraph I am immersed in the question: what if Beauty was the Tao? This question stretches far beyond the scope of this thesis. Or does it? Ultimately, is *that* my question? Perhaps. Moustakas speaks of *immersion* and *illumination*: for me, immersion plus illumination, in one glorious moment, might just equal *mysticism*. Is this arrogance on my part? What could *I* know about mysticism? Not much - yet, perhaps a little – the size of a mustard seed will do.

I offer the metaphor of the labyrinth as a framework for the discussion of my research. It is in keeping with the holistic and circuitous model of heuristic inquiry which I am endeavoring to develop. Jacques Attali writes, “The ancients knew that the process of discovery resembles moving through a labyrinth, with a constant alternation of proximity and distance to an inaccessible reality . . . Then, when Plato triumphed over Aristotle, science banished the random, the obscure, the complex and the curved. It

¹⁰⁸ William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth*, (London, GB: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1958), 55-56.

sought for the simple, the straight, the predictable.”¹⁰⁹ Attali’s criticism of modern science is perhaps too severe and somewhat unfair. Nevertheless, his implicit call for a return to the circular is well taken. As Keith Critchlow suggests, the spiritual cosmology of the labyrinth is hardly recognized in our modern day where Descartes’ mind/body/spirit split still holds sway.¹¹⁰

From my perspective, the journey of the labyrinth is also the journey of Theological World One, my dominant worldview, moving between separation and reunion, the world of the “alien.”¹¹¹ It is through this theological lens that my discussion will continue. The journey is dominated more by ephiphania than obsessio; the epiphania manifesting in my moments of reunion with beauty, especially in the studio.

Living in World One

According to W. Paul Jones residents of World One arrive at atonement *experientially*: through a “tearing of the veil” a new dimension of reality is opened to us.¹¹² I was raised a Roman Catholic. From my First Communion to my days as an altar boy, I was immersed in a World One sensibility - a world described succinctly by Michael Greeley:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Attali, *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1999), 42-43.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 45.

¹¹¹ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 45.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 187.

world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.¹¹³

Jones rings a similar note: “The ‘little things’ as sacramental pointers, are sufficient - just ‘a stone, a leaf, an unfound door.’”¹¹⁴ Just as these *sacramental pointers* might be found in a Roman Catholic cathedral, so too can they appear in the expressive arts studio. This dynamic has sometimes been called the “little door to the big place.” Here, psychology meets spirituality, as Artress writes, “When the imagination travels through the psyche, archetypal symbols release energy, which creates meaning that is experienced as sacred. This is what [William] Blake meant when he said that to the imagination the sacred is self-evident.”¹¹⁵

My world is not all votive candles and holy water. There are also times when *obsessio* rears its ugly head; the antithesis of beauty. Some residents of World One use the word *nightmare* - as I often have - to describe their sense of abandonment.¹¹⁶

An example of this sense of abandonment occurred for me, ironically, in the very room where we held our retreat. It was during a class on the Christian Scriptures.¹¹⁷ I found myself, with T.S. Eliot, “. . . in rat’s alley, where the dead men lost their bones.”¹¹⁸ In the “prelude” to my final paper for the course - which served as a creative synthesis in its own right - I wrote:

¹¹³ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

¹¹⁴ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 55. Jones quotes Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), 1.

¹¹⁵ Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*, 144.

¹¹⁶ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 48.

¹¹⁷ The course name was “Introduction to Christian Scriptures,” July, 2009. The instructor was Dr. Geoffrey Wilfong-Pritchard.

¹¹⁸ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1922), 9.

Imagine you are a pilgrim in a Roman Catholic church, reverently walking the Stations of the Cross. You reach the thirteenth station which normally depicts the followers of Jesus removing his body from the cross. As you prepare to offer the obligatory prayer you look up and see, with horror, an entirely different image: his body has been abandoned - the birds are picking away at his flesh, the dogs gnawing on the bones. There is no fourteenth station (removing the body for burial). There is no empty tomb. Welcome to my nightmare.¹¹⁹

My paper continued as follows:

My “nightmare” happened early in the week of our class. We had a brief discussion about the way crucifixions were normally done during Jesus’ time. When I heard that the bodies were usually left to the elements and that they were *not* buried (which, of course, is contrary to how the canonical story goes), I pictured Jesus in this abandoned, decayed, state. My reaction to this was visceral. This was a moment of psycho-spiritual disorientation . . . This is not the first time in my life that I doubted the historicity of the canonical story of the resurrection of Jesus. However, it was the first time I felt the doubt in such a deep, visceral way, that is, *I felt it in my body*.¹²⁰

Happily, the *obsessio* makes way for *epiphania*. As Jones writes, the *obsessio* of World One can be a “cauldron of inexhaustible fecundity.”¹²¹ The cauldron is the expressive arts studio. This is where healing from psycho-spiritual disorientation can occur - through the art making *and* through the realization that when we are in community we are *not* alone after all; we are one.

The Man with Deep-Seeing Eyes

As I walk my labyrinth I am held by the memory of Thomas Merton. My journey through the expressive arts has gone hand in hand with my journey with Merton. I identify with Merton in his need for solitude coupled with his desire to be connected to

¹¹⁹ The paper was entitled, “To Whom Shall I Bow? Exploring the Gospels as Judeo-ChristZen Texts,” September 8, 2009. The term, “ChristZen” will be explored later in this thesis.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* Coincidentally, as I had submitted this paper only a few days prior to the retreat, this “nightmare” was still fresh in my memory.

¹²¹ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 111.

the world. Jones offers Merton as an exemplar of World One. Jones makes reference to James Finley, who describes the mystic (and thus Merton) as: “one who sees things as they are; he sees all of life as coming from God, sustained by God, and returning back to God.”¹²² Jones comments: “a more succinct summary of World One is hard to find.”¹²³ Merton was able to “see things as they are,” and for that, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of the Madonna House Apostolate, called him “the Man with Deep-Seeing Eyes.”¹²⁴

An example of this depth of seeing is what has come to be known as the “Louisville Vision.”¹²⁵ On March 19, 1956, Merton stood in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, in the midst of a busy crowd:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be *alien* [italics added] to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.¹²⁶

As I write these pages we are mid way through the season of Lent; the season of the desert. It strikes me that the labyrinthine journey of World One is also the journey of the desert, the place where silence reigns. Merton was a personification of the desert pilgrim - a contemplative through and through. As a (Trappist) monk he lived much of his adult life in prayerful silence at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky.

¹²² James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self*, (Notre Dame, IND: Ave Maria Press, 1978) 91.

¹²³ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 116.

¹²⁴ Quoted in J.S. Porter, *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things*, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2008), 10.

¹²⁵ Robert Waldron, *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention*, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2007), 11.

¹²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co, 1966), 140.

It is perhaps no coincidence to see Merton employ the desert as metaphor in some of his writings: “What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion . . . It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things.”¹²⁷

The poet Edmund Jabes once remarked: “You do not go into the desert to find identity but to lose it; to lose your personality, to become anonymous. You make yourself void. You *become* silence. The real silence is death and this is terrible. It is very hard in the desert. You must become more silent than the silence around you. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak.”¹²⁸ To become silence and to hear silence speak are within the realm of mystery, the realm outside the rational mind - which brings me to Zen.

From the Desert to Zen

Merton led me to Zen - by way of the desert fathers and mothers - by way of D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki was instrumental in introducing Zen to the West. Merton had already been a “serious student of Zen” for several years when he wrote to Suzuki in 1959: “I will not be so foolish as to pretend to you that I understand Zen. To be frank, I hardly understand Christianity.”¹²⁹ Nevertheless, Merton wrote, “If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But I still don’t know what it is. No matter. I don’t know what the air is either . . . Not to be foolish and multiply words, I’ll say

¹²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 334.

¹²⁸ Quoted in David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: religion, literature, art, and culture*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2.

¹²⁹ Quoted in William D. Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*, (Marknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 99.

simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it.”¹³⁰

Merton and Suzuki corresponded with each other and then met face to face in 1964. Their meeting was an emblematic one. In a New York hotel room the two spiritual masters shared in the traditional tea ceremony. Merton would later write about the theological implications of the tea ceremony, comparing it to the Christian Eucharist and calling it “a celebration of oneness and convergence.”¹³¹

From Zen to Art - to Art as Prayer

At times, there was a convergence between Merton’s aesthetic sensibility and his sense of compassion. One example in particular stands out in my mind. In May, 1964, a group of Japanese citizens on a “world peace pilgrimage” visited Merton at Gethsemane. They were survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, some of them, “marked by the effect of their wounds.”¹³² I was deeply moved when I read the following passage from Merton’s journal:

I think the one who impressed me most was the most silent of all, Mrs. Tayoshi. She was always thoughtful, said nothing, kept very much apart and yet was very warm and good. All she did was come up quietly and with a little smile slip a folded paper crane onto the table after I had read them my poem about paper cranes. The paper crane is the symbol of the Japanese peace movement. After they had all gone, it was Mrs. Tayoshi’s paper crane that remained, silent and eloquent, as the most valid statement of the whole afternoon.¹³³

¹³⁰ Ibid., 101.

¹³¹ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (New York: Dell Publishing Inc.), 1967,10.

¹³² Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988), 49.

¹³³ Ibid., 50.

While Merton is well known as an author and prolific letter writer he was also an artist, calligrapher, and photographer. His art – like his writings – was connected to his spirituality. Art became a form of prayer for Merton:

In an aesthetic experience, in the creation or the contemplation of a work of art, the psychological conscience is able to attain something of its highest and most perfect fulfillments. Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve.¹³⁴

In the 1960s, while Merton became increasingly interested in Zen, he practiced his skills as a visual artist. Robert Waldron writes: “While drawing, Merton seemingly entered Zen No Mind, permitting his hand to draw whatever it wanted to, and the results, by Merton’s admission and corroborated by others, were often extraordinary.”¹³⁵

More and more, in his latter years, Merton was attracted to an aesthetic of simplicity. The beauty he saw had, “a simplicity that is and has and says everything just because it is simple.”¹³⁶ There also appears a degree of subtlety in many of his writings, a Zen-like quality. The following is an excerpt from Merton’s poem entitled, *Stranger*:

When no one listens
To the quiet trees
When no one notices
The sun in the pool

Where no one feels
The first drop of rain
Or sees the last star

Or hails the first morning
Of a giant world

¹³⁴ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 34.

¹³⁵ Waldron, *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention*, 64.

¹³⁶ Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*, 127.

Where peace begins
And rages end:

One bird sits still
Watching the work of God:
One turning leaf,
Two falling blossoms,
Ten circles upon the pond

...

Closer and cleaner
Than any wordy master,
Thou inward Stranger
Whom I have never seen,

Deeper and cleaner
Than the clamorous ocean,
Seize up my silence
Hold me in Thy Hand!¹³⁷

I took some time to sit with this poem; a period of immersion. In response, I wrote the following as a creative synthesis:

Poem for T.M.
Stranger, whom I never met,
Do you know that someone is listening?
A thousand paper cranes, calling out with one voice
And you, one bird, still watching,
Tell me what you see now.
Is it deeper and cleaner still,
This silence?

The man with deep-seeing eyes. The monk who sips a cup of tea with reverence.

In short, Thomas Merton was a ChristZen. Let me explain.

¹³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977), 289-90.

A ChristZen View

“When Jesus opens his mouth in the Gospel of Thomas, there is a Buddha sitting on his tongue.” – Kenneth Arnold.¹³⁸

During the retreat I took a moment to describe my theological worldview to my co-researchers. My intention was not to impose my theology on the group; rather, I simply felt it was important to be transparent about my spiritual interests and biases. I called myself “something of a ChristZen.” I came across this phraseology in an article by Kenneth Arnold which is an experiment in reading the Gospel of Thomas with “Zen mind” or “unthinking mind.” Arnold writes, “The teachings of Master Jesus cannot be apprehended intellectually. Like koans, they need to be realized by what Zen would call the unthinking mind.”¹³⁹

A sense of humour is often present in Zen literature. This is one of the aspects of Zen that appeals to me as I try not to take myself too seriously. Therefore, I use the term ChristZen with a smile on my lips. After all, a clever joining of two words does not adequately describe any theology. Like Merton, even with my strong leanings toward Zen, I nevertheless remain a practicing Catholic; I do not believe the two are mutually exclusive.

Merton has also led me to the writings of his friend, the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Nhat Hanh offers another connection between Buddhism and Christianity, here in the context of what he calls *interbeing* (which, in turn, I view as related to Dharma as the mutual integration of all phenomena - cited earlier):

¹³⁸ Kenneth Arnold, “The Circle of the Way: Reading the Gospel of Thomas as a ChristZen Text,” *Cross Currents*, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/arnoldwinter2002.htm>, 1, accessed March 21, 2010.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* This is also sometimes called Zen No Mind.

When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence . . . Just as a flower is made only of non-flower elements, Buddhism is made only of non-Buddhist elements, including Christian ones, and Christianity is made of non-Christian elements, including Buddhist ones. We have different roots, traditions, and ways of seeing, but we share the common qualities of love, understanding, and acceptance.¹⁴⁰

I will take another turn in the labyrinth. These qualities of love, understanding, and acceptance can be found in another venue: the Tea House. This is a place where Merton and his friends would have felt at home. It is also a place that reminds me of the expressive arts studio - a place of peace and of beauty.

The Way of Tea – the Way of the Studio

“With a bowl of tea, peace can truly spread.”¹⁴¹

Over the past few years I have had a growing interest in the Japanese *Chado*, or Way of Tea. This interest has grown in tandem with my journey through Zen and the expressive arts. The practice of drinking powdered green tea was brought to Japan from China by monks in the twelfth century. The rituals associated with tea evolved over several centuries. Soshitsu Sen, the fifteenth Grand Master of the Urasenke School of Tea, describes the four main principles which guide the Way of Tea: harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility:

“Harmony” is the result of the interaction of the host and guest, the food served, and the utensils used with the flowing rhythms of nature. It reflects both the evanescence of all things and the unchanging in the changing. The host interacts with the guest, both thinking of one another as if their roles were reversed . . .

¹⁴⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 11.

¹⁴¹ Soshitsu Sen XV, *Tea Life, Tea Mind*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), 9.

“Respect” is the sincerity of heart that liberates us for an open relationship with the immediate environment, our fellow human beings, and nature, while recognizing the dignity of each . . .

“Purity,” through the simple act of cleaning, is an important part of a tea gathering . . . Such actions as clearing the dust from the room and dead leaves from the garden path all represent clearing the “dust of the world,” or the worldly attachments, from one’s heart and mind . . .

“Tranquility” . . . Sitting alone, away from the world, at one with the rhythms of nature . . . purified and sensitive to the sacred essence of all that is around, a person making and drinking tea in contemplation approaches a sublime state of tranquility. But strange to say, this tranquility will deepen even further when another person enters the microcosm of the tea room and joins the host in contemplation over a bowl of tea.”¹⁴²

The Way of Tea, then, serves as a metaphor for a way of life. It strikes me that the above description of the tea ceremony would also accurately describe the dynamics of an expressive arts studio – such as our retreat and several expressive arts workshops and classes I have attended. I will call it the Way of the Studio.

The Way of the Studio, as I have experienced it, is a journey *outside the scriptures*. The following story, at the heart of the Zen Buddhist tradition, illuminates this concept:

Once when the World-Honoured One [the historical Buddha] in ancient times was upon Vulture Peak [Mount Grdrakuta], he held up a flower before the assembly of monks. At this time all were silent. The Venerable Kashyapa alone broke into a smile. The World-Honoured One said, “I have the All-Pervading Eye of the True Dharma, the Secret Heart of Incomparable Nirvana, the True Aspect of Formless Form. It does not rely on letters and is transmitted outside the scriptures. I now pass it on to Mahakashyapa.”¹⁴³

Here, I suggest, is a meeting point between Zen and the Tao:

¹⁴² Soshitsu Sen, *Tea Life, Tea Mind*, 13-14.

¹⁴³ Philip Kapleau, *Straight to the heart of Zen: eleven classic koans and their inner meanings*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 3.

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
 The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the experience in the studio - the experience of beauty - just *is*.

Metaphorically, we see the flower (the beauty) and we smile. In my view, this comes as a result of simply *trusting* the process.

A Deeper Immersion

As I have continued my heuristic exploration I have realized that my central research question has changed. I would like to set aside the idea of beauty as the *centre* of the question and offer it as the underlying *subtext* to the question. Or, put another way, beauty becomes a *backdrop* to the experience of the studio. I will say here that beauty is inherently present; it is a given. The six co-researchers whom I interviewed have acknowledged this in one way or another. The question itself presupposed that beauty would be present – I am admitting my bias here. What, then, does beauty feel like? What does it sound like? Look like? What does the phrase *lived experience* mean in the present context? In my exploration of these questions I have identified three main themes: *flow*, *the studio as church*, and *the Original Face*. These themes have emerged from periods of immersion, and re-immersion in the experiences described by my co-researchers and how they have resonated with my own. As parts of an organic whole, I hesitate to separate these various elements too far as they are inextricably connected. However, I will identify and briefly discuss each of them.

¹⁴⁴ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*: A New Translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 1.

Flow – The Participation Mystique

“Devekut [rapturous attachment] is seventy times more valuable for the soul than Torah study.” – Sefer Haredim¹⁴⁵

As an artist and as a spiritual being, I resonate with Shaun McNiff’s call to trust the process, particularly as it is viewed as part of a “deeper ecology of creation” - where we work on our own and with others in the studio.¹⁴⁶ As McNiff suggests, when we are in harmony with each other and our environment we are able to work spontaneously and instinctively. This is known as the *participation mystique*.¹⁴⁷

In my experience, the process in the studio is often akin to meditation: *a way to pay attention*. The participation mystique becomes a way to *Devekut*: rapturous attachment. While “rapture” suggests bliss, the path to Devekut can also be one of grief. The expressive arts studio as a venue to pay attention can be a place of laughter *and* tears. As Avram Davis attests, in the context of Jewish meditation, this is the path to wisdom.¹⁴⁸

Nevertheless, I would like to stay with bliss for a moment. When Joshua, a co-researcher, described creating his collage he used the term, “flow effect.” In his aesthetic response to the collage, Joshua twice used the word “bliss.” When I asked him to describe how he felt after looking at the collage he said, “At rest. Completely at rest and at peace.”

Sophia, when describing her art-making, said, “My hands took over and I became very immersed in what we were doing,” and, “It’s almost like a twilight zone that I work

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Avram Davis, *The Way of Flame*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ McNiff, *Trust the Process*, 20.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁴⁸ Davis, *The Way of Flame*, 56.

in.” She called this, “A very deep place. It’s a soul space. It’s almost as if I’m inside myself.”

Lela recalled the retreat as “an opportunity to pay attention, to have a heightened awareness, a more delicate awareness, a more subtle experiencing of consciousness of the Spirit . . . what we’re doing is slowing down.” She also called it a [tapping] into the deep.”

Anna’s description of her experience carries a similar ring: “The times that I feel grounded or at peace, I feel in the flow, I just feel, you know, comforted, is when I’m doing my art work . . . it’s a feeling of another reality that I call God.”

Samantha described her experience, thus: “You go into a zone . . . It was very self-contained. It was a sense of being happy, calm .” She added, “I didn’t worry about what other people thought. I was just totally focused on putting this on to the paper.”

According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi a person in flow is completely focussed - in this state one’s sense of time can become distorted.¹⁴⁹ This is a dynamic I have experienced myself – and observed in others - in the expressive arts studio. Flow, then, appears in several ways to be synonymous with the participation mystique and with Devekut. Phrased differently, when we are one with each other, when we are one with God, time and space are suspended.

I use a different phrase to describe my own experience of flow in the studio; *being in the Tao*. It has occurred in more than a dozen expressive arts classes and workshops where I have been a student and in several others venues as well. One of the most dramatic examples occurred several years ago at a music workshop in Edmonton, facilitated by the internationally renowned founder of the Naked Voice Foundation,

¹⁴⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 31.

Chloe Goodchild. We spent much of the weekend singing; however, there were several sessions that involved drumming and dancing. At one point, I was beating a hand drum. I felt ecstatic. I was so engaged that I did not realize I had cut one of my hands on the drum. I only discovered that my hand was bleeding when the song was over.

I have also experienced being “in the Tao” as a facilitator. One such event occurred toward the end of the retreat. I will describe the experience in due course. However, I would first like to provide some context. Enter, once again, Thomas Merton. In December, 2008, I wrote a paper entitled, “Thomas Merton, the Expressive Arts, and Me,” for a course, which incidentally was called, “Art Therapy Studio: Beauty - A Healing Force.” I wrote,

I decided only recently against writing my Master’s thesis on Thomas Merton in favour of a (still percolating) topic related to the expressive arts. However, I believe Merton will nevertheless have a significant influence on the writing of my thesis. This paper perhaps holds some of the seeds I hope to nourish as I approach the larger work.

As I finished reading the *Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, I pictured this honest, humble, and brilliant man, not much older than I am now, as he wrote what were to be his final journal entries. And I felt a genuine sadness, a sense of loss: not for the man who has become almost a mythological figure to some, rather for someone like you and me, a simple monk who, with humility, reached out to God and to others in a profound way. In some ways Merton is a hero to me, but I think, more accurately he was the kind of person whom I might have been friends with if we had known each other in the same place and time. Merton died too soon. It is my hope that I might, in some modest way, pick up where he left off.

Merton’s lifelong friend, Edward Rice, wrote a somewhat irreverent biography entitled *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*. That is how I think of Merton now: sitting up in a sycamore tree, a kindred spirit calling down to me, encouraging me, challenging me to dig deeper, to know my true self, to pray, to love, to make art, to sing, to dance, to drum, to be a teacher. And to not take

myself too seriously! My thesis won't be *about* him. But there he will be, like a buddha, perched on the branch of that sycamore tree, smiling.¹⁵⁰

After what may seem like a somewhat lengthy departure (read: walking the labyrinth!) I return now to my description of an experience of being “in the Tao.” It was during an open session of the studio. My co-researchers were deeply immersed in their creative work. I was quietly moving about the room, doing my best to “hold the space.” I had laid out several books related to my thesis topic for the use of my co-researchers. These included books of poetry, expressive arts therapy and theology. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, to which I referred above, was among them.. As I glanced down at the book, I recalled the paper which I have just quoted. Suddenly, I felt an intense rush of energy move up my spine, which lasted for about one minute. I have never felt anything like it. It was de-centering and nourishing at the same time. I felt a deep sense of peace. It felt as though the “the man in the sycamore tree” was indeed with me. This was, nevertheless, a deeply moving, and *beautiful* experience for me. It was as if I was standing in beauty. I felt a spiritual oneness with my co-researchers and a oneness with Thomas Merton. It was a moment very much like Merton's “Louisville Vision.”

Immediately following this experience, I recalled some reading I had done several years ago on yoga and I wondered whether I had just experienced a manifestation of *kundalini* energy, an energy believed to lie dormant at the base of the spine until it is “awakened.” In this process the various *chakras* or energy centres of the person are activated.¹⁵¹ According to Teri Degler, who has studied the relationship between

¹⁵⁰ Norbert Krumin, “Thomas Merton, the Expressive Arts, and Me.” Unpublished essay, 2008. I was the teaching assistant for this course. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, previously cited. I also refer here to Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1972).

¹⁵¹ Bruce W. Scotton, Allan B. Chinen, and John R. Battista, *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 111.

kundalini and creativity, the awakening may eventually lead to “the ultimate realization of oneness with God.”¹⁵² One of my co-researchers, Emma, had noticed, sensed, that “something” had happened to me at the moment I just described. During our closing circle, I recounted the experience to the group.

In my opinion, a key aspect of “being in the Tao” involves *presence*. When, for example, I felt the rush of energy described above, I recall feeling very present with my environment and with the collective energy of the group. As Ralph Harper suggests, presence can be subliminal, it can be intuited, if not always acknowledged.¹⁵³ To borrow co-researcher Lela’s phrase, cited earlier, presence is a “subtle experiencing of consciousness.”

I would like to describe one more example of “being in the Tao” as it speaks to the heart of this thesis. This experience did not occur in the expressive arts studio, rather, in a studio of another sort; a library. I have found “book research” to be as creative – and as spiritual – as research in the art studio. The following experience occurred in the early evening of March 22, 2009 in the University of Alberta’s Rutherford Library; a place I sometimes call The Temple of the Rutherford! I was rummaging through the stacks on the third floor when I came upon a book entitled, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*. To say it was a well worn copy would be an understatement: the illustration on the cover was no longer distinguishable. The binding had come apart and was held together (barely) by tape. I describe the book in such detail as this was not only an intellectual/spiritual moment, it was also an aesthetic moment. The librarian later

¹⁵² Teri Degler, *The Fiery Muse: Creativity and the Spiritual Quest*, (Toronto: Random House, 1996), 19.

¹⁵³ Ralph Harper, *On Presence: Variations and Reflections*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 9.

remarked, “this book certainly has seen better days!” For me, however, March 22, 2009 was this little book’s *best* day. And one of *my* best days. I opened the book to page three. A previous library patron had underlined the following sentence: “Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom.”¹⁵⁴ This was an ‘aha’ moment: Suzuki has described the expressive arts! I am not simply drawing an analogy between Zen and the expressive arts; Zen and the expressive arts are *one*.

In summary, the experience of the flow effect, or being in the Tao, can occur on one’s own or in a group setting such as the expressive arts studio. Sometimes flow occurs after a struggle with difficulty - as one’s *obsessio* gives way to *epiphania*. One ingredient of flow, as several of my co-researchers and I have reported, manifests in a feeling of peaceful calm. For some, this is a spiritual experience. I have linked elements of flow with the participation mystique and *Devekut* (rapturous attachment). In short, flow happens when we trust the process. *We flow* into beauty. Beauty flows back to us.

The Studio as Church

I turn now to the second theme identified in my research: the notion of studio as church. Why are so many people leaving the Church? The answers to that question are complex and varied. For those who go to church, why do they? Some of the possible reasons that come to mind are the desire for community, communion, rest, retreat, inspiration, music, prayer, and acceptance. These questions are beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, they sit in the back of my mind as I contemplate my own experiences in the studio and those of my co-researchers. Several of them referred to

¹⁵⁴ D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 3.

what, in my opinion, would be desirable qualities for our churches to embody, if they do not already.

Sophia said, “I like the sharing we do, but I particularly like being left alone to uncover and do my own journey; we’re not allowed to do that enough. In tapping the inner resources, or unfolding more from within, and seeing who oneself is, we’re seeing how much we are part of each person in that room as well.”

Anna used the word “monastic” to describe aspects of the retreat: “In our silence we could do whatever - we could do prayerful art. [When] we were making music or drawing, or working with clay, [when we were] moving, it was safe, it was respectful, it was very comfortable . . . There was that sense of comfort and security to just *be*.”

Lela commented, “There were lots of instances where I felt [I was in] an environment with people that I trusted, I felt that the process was being facilitated by someone I trusted, and I was feeling, although tired, that I could trust that if I just surrendered to it that I would get the nourishment I needed.” She added, “In a weekend like that, what we’re doing is slowing it down, which is to me, a really important part of the process.”

Samantha said, “It felt *way* better than church because it was creative!” She elaborated, thus: “Well, it put me in community with people I had something in common with . . . It’s not a passive way of connecting with what’s sacred . . . I am creating my own theology.”

During our final circle at the retreat, Emma said she felt as though she had just been to church. She elaborated on that during our interview: “For me, there was such a profound experience of being part of a community . . . I felt like we were each able to bring our wholeness *and* our pain and our suffering to the circle.”

I found the similarity between the studio and church evident during an expressive arts therapy course in December, 2007. The main part of my paper took the form of a creative synthesis of my experience in the class. An excerpt follows:

My Dear Melchizedek:

Greetings in all the languages you know, which are many! I thought I would write you a long letter this time. Isn't it sad how people don't write letters very much anymore? No one takes the time to colour by hand. No fingerprints in ink. No gentle leaves pressed between the pages. I will warn you, however, that much of this letter will appear in the form of an academic paper. After all, I'm not sure if I can get away with repeating the word *love* over and over for 15 pages. I'm writing mostly to tell you about an experience I had in December when I spent a week with a small group of exceptionally beautiful people. We formed what I hope will be a long lasting bond. It felt as though I had spent a week in church.¹⁵⁵

As a Catholic, I have always loved Holy Thursday. This annual celebration – steeped in ritual - commemorates the Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and called them, for the first time, his *friends*. Here I am also reminded of Melchizedek, with his offering of bread and wine in Genesis 14:18 (NIV). I wrote the following song several years ago on Holy Thursday, entitled, *I am with you always*. I was asked to play this song at one point during the class. The lyrics follow:

Love, love.
 Don't ask why, just love her.
 Beauty. You have brought beauty into this world.
 Don't ask why. Just love beauty.
 Have no fear. Have no fear.
 For I am with you always.
 Until the end.
 For you are my friend.

¹⁵⁵ Norbert Krumins, "Letter to Melchizedek: Toward a Theology of the Expressive Arts." Unpublished essay, 2008.

I had taken this course during a stressful time in my life. I came to the class feeling anxious and worried about a family member who was in crisis. I had voiced my concerns early in the week. My class members were very supportive. I wrote:

I had gone from a feeling of abandonment (“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”),¹⁵⁶ to a sense that I was not alone. I was part of a community: an *ecumenical* community; the rituals we performed were inclusive in nature. We created – and experienced – beauty. We felt something of the divine mystery. We reached out to one another. We shared moments of joy (“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” – John 15:11 NIV). In a word, this was *church*.¹⁵⁷

For many years, the name Melchizedek has occasionally bumped into my consciousness. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, as a child, it struck me as exotic and mysterious. Therefore, in keeping with the heuristic (intuitive) nature of this study I will stay with the image for a moment. Lent will soon draw to a close. In a few days, during Holy Week, the name Melchizedek will make one of its rare appearances in the Catholic liturgy, here, in relation to Jesus: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:17 NIV). I was delighted to run across Melchizedek several years ago in the novel *The Alchemist*, by Paulo Coelho. Here, the mysterious stranger takes on a different persona when he meets the hero of the story, Santiago, a shepherd boy: “‘My name is Melchizedek,’ said the old man . . . Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a crucial moment, I make it easier for things to happen. There are other things I do, too, but most of the time people don’t realize I’ve done them.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Matthew 27:46, Psalm 22:1 NIV, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

¹⁵⁷ Krumins, “Letter to Melchizedek,” the “rituals” I refer to here took the form of creative exercises. However, they felt deeply spiritual to me.

¹⁵⁸ Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, trans. Alan R. Clarke, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 20-24.

The primary function of the priest, in my opinion, is to help facilitate transformation - to paraphrase the words of Melchizedek in *The Alchemist*: to make it easier for things to happen. Expressive arts therapist, Shaun McNiff, tells the following anecdote: “Following a university lecture that I gave in the 1980s, a psychiatrist friend told me, only half-jokingly: ‘Shaun, you’re not a therapist. You’re a priest.’”¹⁵⁹ In facilitating the retreat I attempted to create what McNiff refers to as a *temenos*: “a sacred place that acts as a vessel of transformation.”¹⁶⁰ The priestly function is not, however, confined to the facilitator: my co-researchers ministered to me as much as I ministered to them.

I would like to explore one final aspect of the studio as church by returning to the motif of the tea ceremony. To do so I will offer a brief exegesis of the following story from the 12th century, found in *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony*:

Rikyu was once given by his teacher, Joo, the job of sweeping the tea-garden. In fact, however, the garden had already been swept so clean that not a single fallen leaf was to be seen. Rikyu, given the job of re-sweeping a garden that was already so well swept, went straight out into the garden and, going up to a tree, grasped it with both hands and shook it gently. He watched as four or five leaves gently fluttered down to the ground, and then went back into the house. Master Joo looked at the garden and commended Rikyu with the words, “That’s what you call real sweeping!”¹⁶¹

I marvel at the above story - I can almost hear the leaves falling, followed by the gentle laughter of teacher and student. Such is the power of metaphor. However, I cannot explain the story intellectually. To me, this speaks to the heart of *Chado*, the heart of Zen,

¹⁵⁹ Shaun McNiff, *Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 3.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶¹ Horst Hammitzsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony*, trans. Peter Lemesurier (Wiltshire, Great Britain: Element Books, 1979), 56.

and the heart of the expressive arts; it is, indeed, “outside the scriptures.” Zen, like the studio, involves mystery, it often involves paradox, and sometimes, a sense of humour. The above story illustrates all three of those elements.

Note how the word “gently” appears twice in the above story. The word *gentle* is one of the most powerful of words. Its power lies in its subtlety: gentleness can lead to peace. The four key elements of *Chado*: harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility - it seems to me - cannot be present without the quality of gentleness. Gentleness, as a quality of being is in this sense a spiritual word *par excellence*. It is a quality of being I have observed among my colleagues in every expressive arts studio I have attended, not the least of which includes the retreat created for this thesis. These good souls moved about the studio in a manner akin to what Horst Hammitzsch describes: “I had many Japanese friends who were followers of the Tea Way - followers not merely in the sense of mastery of its forms, but in a much deeper sense. They were truly in search of the ultimate, the most profound. For them the Tea Ceremony was no aesthetic amusement, not just a training in etiquette. They were *chajin*, tea-people to the very core.”¹⁶² These qualities, it seems to me, stem from the heart. And by *heart*, I am referring to Hammitzsch’s use of the Japanese word, *kokoro*, in its broader meaning of heart, soul, mind and spirit.¹⁶³

The studio as church, then, can be a place for transformation, a *temenos*. In the studio we can create alone and we can create together. It is a place where we are not judged. It is a place of trust. It is a place where, to borrow from Frederick Buechner, we

¹⁶² Ibid., 20.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 22.

can bring our deep hunger and find our deep gladness.¹⁶⁴ It is a place where we can find rest, nurture, and inspiration. It is a place where we are free to create our own theology. It is a place where we can find beauty.

The Original Face

I come now to my third and final theme: the Original Face. For several months prior to the retreat, I had been sitting with the idea that “Zen and the expressive arts are one.” This served, in heuristic terms, as a period of incubation. I asked myself, if Zen and the expressive arts are one, how then might I bring this concept more explicitly into the studio? The answer came in a moment of inspiration when I decided to offer the koan (what was your original face before your parents were born?) to my co-researchers during the retreat. I had not planned to use this koan in the studio; I took something of a risk and trusted my intuition.

Emma said initially she found the koan to be “almost de-centering.” It eventually made its way into her poetry: “Was this my face before my parents were born? Made of bark, weathered from the elements of tears, passion and breath. The place where both masculine and feminine meet as one.”

Sophia found the koan puzzling: “I found it very deep, engaging, but I wasn’t conscious I was using it. And I keep on thinking about it . . . what was I meant to be? Why am I on this earth? Am I using my talents wisely? All of that.”

For Lela, the koan became, “the most important thing of the whole weekend for me . . . I felt just incredibly peaceful because it felt like it was a process that had unfolded quite lightly – so there was a kind of playful unexpectedness to it that came from just

¹⁶⁴ Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 119.

letting it go, and not feeling like I had to answer the koan.” Lela captured the essence of koan practice in the following comment: “I think koans will never offer insight until you invite the rational mind to take a holiday.”

When Joshua described his collage, he did not relate it specifically to the koan. However, as I listened to him talk about the “window to his soul” it struck me that the Original Face could have another name, the Soul: “The soul itself is flawless - if I link it to the picture - the soul in a way is beyond time, it’s very, very, ancient. There’s this childlike innocence but there’s also a very, very, deep, rich, life experience that’s there. And incredible gratefulness.”

For several years I have been instinctively drawn to the koan, “What was your original face before your parents were born?” I feel that it is my “life koan.” In several expressive arts studios I have found myself, intuitively, working with the koan. Like Emma, I wonder whether it is “the place where both masculine and feminine meet as one.” Like Sophia, it sparks the question, “Why am I on this earth?” As I searched the literature related to Zen koans, I have noticed that it appears again and again. In a sense it could be called *the* koan. As Philip Kapleau writes, “Every koan points to our Original Mind and is designed to bring us to the realization of it. You could say that all koans have a fundamental purpose - to lead us to our own real home, the one we knew before our parents gave birth to us.”¹⁶⁵ Our “own real home,” incidentally, strikes the familiar chord of Theological World One. This home is a place of beauty. As Merton points out, “in Zen

¹⁶⁵ Kapleau, *Straight to the Heart of Zen*, 2.

enlightenment, the discovery of the ‘original face before you were born’ is the discovery not that one *sees* the Buddha but that one *is* the Buddha . . . »¹⁶⁶

The Original Face is the Universal Face. When I look at Joshua’s collage, I see the window to my own soul, “beyond time, ancient.” Like Lela, “In the eyes, the compassion of a mother embracing her weeping child. And around the mouth, the strength of a warrior.” Like Anna, “gentle, strong, invisible yet always there.” In beauty we are one.

Explication Meets Creative Synthesis

Paolo Knill teaches us to PLAY! Therefore, I would like to summarize this chapter with a short game of word association, written in the form of stream of consciousness. I will call it, *Ode to Tintern Abbey*:

Mustard seed and mysticism
 Rat’s alley and Holy water
 There is beauty at the corner of 4th and Walnut
 Lord Buddha, what exactly are you doing on the tongue of Lord Jesus?
 Tea with Suzuki and the deep-seeing eyes
 Slow down my friend, you’re walking on hallowed ground
 The flower is made entirely of non-flower elements
 Deep in the desert we hear silence speak
 Don’t ask why, just love beauty
 Melchizedek, soul friend, mystery, thank you for your gifts
 Ten souls dancing, painting, sculpting
 Now that’s what I call real sweeping!

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions, 1968), 5.

CONCLUSION: BOWING TO BEAUTY

“But I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things.” – Vincent van Gogh¹⁶⁷

I began this study by asking, what if Beauty was the Tao? Although I focussed much of my discussion on the lived experience of beauty in the expressive arts studio, I have not abandoned the larger question. I hope to continue my love letter to Beauty on another day. Beauty called and I responded. This call was also a call to re-enchantment. Beauty continues to inspire me. She still calls my name. It was not my intention to turn this thesis into an argument for beauty. However, in a sense that is what I have done. If I have sung beauty’s praises with bias, even zeal, then like a true zealot I offer no apologies.

My love affair with beauty has also been my love affair with the artistic process. My creative journey has become my spiritual journey. Art is my prayer. Sometimes it is a prayer of lament, however, more often than not, it is one of thanksgiving. Often, it is a prayer filled with reverence and awe. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki reminds us, “Bowling is a very serious practice. You should be prepared to bow, even in your last moment.”¹⁶⁸ And so, as I conclude this thesis, I feel called to bow to Beauty in all its subtlety. And, dear reader, to play with a Buddhist saying, *the beauty in me, bows to the beauty in you.*

I also bow to the figure of Thomas Merton, who has loomed large in this study. His recognition that we are all one continues to sustain and inspire me. His Louisville vision at the corner of 4th and Walnut teaches us that every street corner in the world could be the corner of 4th and Walnut if we only opened our eyes to see the beauty in one

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Mary Oliver, *Red Bird: Poems*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), no page number.

¹⁶⁸ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1971), 17-18.

another. The Dalai Lama recognized Merton as a true Christian; he was that and much more. Merton was a Christian who knew that Christianity does not hold a monopoly on the truth.

Merton's friend D.T. Suzuki has served as a bridge between Zen and the expressive arts. His little book, tattered and torn, still reminds me that there are indeed ways from bondage to freedom – ways to find our true nature, our original face. Henri Nouwen staring at Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son reminded me that God is Father *and* Mother. W. Paul Jones has taught me that we do not have to be alone and alienated forever – there is a way to return home. Always in the background, I have had John O'Donohue urging me to journey with beauty, to journey with reverence, and ultimately to journey in peace.

Such pioneers in the expressive arts as Paolo Knill, Shaun McNiff, and Ellen Levine have had prominence here: their collective contribution as therapists to the language of the soul will, I trust, be a lasting one. They tell us that, sometimes, we can play our way to healing. Clark Moustakas and his colleagues have shown us that as researchers we do not have to pretend we are outside the phenomenon of study. Rather, we can embrace how we are an integral part of the phenomenon itself.

My ten co-researchers have had a tremendous influence on the development of this study. They have all shown a great capacity to explore their creativity, to reveal their vulnerability, their *humanness*. They are no longer co-researchers – they are my brothers and sisters. Joshua, with the window to his soul “beyond time, ancient;” Sophia, with her spiritual “gold mine” inside; Anna, her “magnificent hands,” her “portal” to God; Lela, with her original face, “illuminated with the light that dances;” Samantha, bringing the sacred into the world; and Emma, bringing her wholeness *and* her pain.

By employing the metaphor of the labyrinth, I have connected numerous elements in this study which, taken collectively, may have initially appeared disparate: the artistic/creative process, beauty as process (the *creator*), beauty as object (the *created*), the re-enchantment of the world, *Tikkun ha'olam*, the journey of the soul, the Divine as yin and yang, the Divine as a *way* not an *it*, the Divine as One, the intermodal dynamic of the expressive arts, the playful and the serious, the *obsessio* and the *epiphania*, the bridge between the East and the West, ChristZen, the use of the Zen koan in the studio, the Original Face.

In keeping with the organic and exploratory nature of heuristic inquiry, the object of my research question has changed: from Beauty as the Tao, to Beauty as the lived experience in the studio, back to Beauty as the Tao. The wheel continues to turn.

The time I have spent developing this thesis has been a period of deepening. I have begun to develop a *practice of beauty*. Like all spiritual practices it involves patience. As a spiritual pilgrim I have always known how important it is to *slow down*. The expressive arts studio is an ideal place for that to occur. Slowing down is more than ever a necessity in our fast paced, increasingly secular world. The more I practice trusting the process, the fewer reminders I need to do just that. The more I slow down the more I can see the beauty around me.

My experience in developing and facilitating the two-day retreat has, I hope, made me a better teacher. I feel more confident in my abilities as a result of these experiences. As a teacher I am learning to trust myself. The more I allow my essential nature, my original face, my *beauty* – to shine through - the more my students will trust me, and in turn hopefully be inspired to trust themselves.

My love affair with beauty has been sustained – not only by the grace-filled moments of epiphania along the way - but also by the dark moments of obsessio. Epiphania gives meaning to to the obsessio – obsessio gives meaning to ephipania. Even though this thesis has had an autobiographical thread running through it, I have chosen to keep certain aspects of my life private. For example, I have not discussed the impact of suicide on my life. I have not described how, during the Second World War, my parents escaped from Soviet occupied Latvia, their beloved homeland. I have not described my experiences as a prison chaplain when I ministered to criminals and victims alike. Or the brain injury I received in a car accident years ago. They were, to steal from Dickens, the worst of times. Nevertheless, all of these events and persons have deeply affected my life and my theology.

Happily, there have been many other transformative moments. Falling in love, being present at the birth of my two children, making a new friend, losing my fear of singing in public, catching the football from Vinny in grade eight, watching Neil Armstrong touch the moon, breaking off a piece of the Berlin Wall, planting a tree in memory of my paternal grandmother, writing a song for my maternal grandmother, listening to Krishna Das sing, listening to Yo Yo Ma play Bach, watching Lara's face in *Dr. Zhivago*, making my first clay sculpture, dancing as though no one was watching, drinking red wine in a Paris bistro, lighting a candle and offering prayers at the Notre Dame Cathedral. My love affair with beauty is a love affair with life.

Dostoyevsky's Dream

James Hillman once spoke of the repression of beauty.¹⁶⁹ John O'Donohue wrote, "In a sense, all the contemporary crises can be reduced to a crisis about the nature of beauty."¹⁷⁰ I will use stronger language: the violence running through human history has been a series of *deseccrations* of beauty. The great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote that beauty will save the world.¹⁷¹ Perhaps with some hope – and some *creativity* – we will make his dream a reality: *Tikkun ha'olam*. We are called to embrace beauty and we are made to create it, with our hands, our bodies, our voices. In this way, we become co-creators with God.

In my introduction I focussed on Elie Wiesel and his story of Juliek, the young violinist. This story – and others like it – must not be forgotten. In 1986, when Wiesel accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, he said, "if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices."¹⁷² We owe Juliek – and the millions of others around the world whose voices have been silenced - a testimony to truth, goodness, and yes, beauty.

Several years ago I came across an extraordinary documentary film, directed by Ron Fricke, entitled, *Baraka*, which means "blessing" in Sanskrit.¹⁷³ The film has no dialogue (read: *wordless!*). It depicts the many horrors of our world, from the gas chambers of Auschwitz, to the bloody remnants of the Rwandan conflict, to the burning oil fields of the Persian Gulf war. It also captures so much that is beautiful in our world,

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in O'Donohue, *Beauty*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for The Idiot*, trans. Katherine Strelsky, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 172.

¹⁷² Wiesel, *Night*, 118.

¹⁷³ <http://www.spiritofbaraka.com/baraka>, 1, accessed April 15, 2010.

from waterfalls, to fragile wildlife, to chanting monks. This film horrified me and inspired me. In response to this film I wrote the following song, entitled, *Never Too Late*. I wish I could sing it for you, gentle reader; the lyrics on their own do not quite capture the passion in my voice. Nevertheless, I offer these words as a prayer in honour of the power, the brilliance, of Beauty:

Humanity, I love thee
Sons and daughters of Rwanda
Sons and daughters of Berlin
What have you done?
Feed the lambs of Rwanda
Grow a garden in Berlin
It's never too late to begin.

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APPENDIX 1. INTRODUCTION LETTER**Norbert Krumins****6620 – 94 Street****Edmonton, Alberta T6E 3C9**

Dear (co-researcher),

Thank you for your interest in my thesis research on the experience of beauty in the expressive arts studio. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some of the issues we have already discussed and to secure your signature on the attached participation consent form.

I will be using a qualitative (narrative) research model through which I will seek comprehensive descriptions of your experience.

As you know, I am interested in the relationship between theology and the expressive arts. The following is my central research question: What is the lived experience of beauty in the expressive arts studio? My thesis will also pose the following underlying questions:

- How are spirituality and creativity linked?
- How is the Divine manifested, or experienced, in the expressive arts studio?
- What is the relationship between beauty and the soul?

Your involvement in this research will be as a participant in a two-day expressive arts retreat/workshop in Edmonton at St. Stephen's College, 8810 - 112 Street, Sept. 12/13th, 2009, 10:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M. This retreat will be an opportunity to express yourself in several modalities: painting/drawing, sculpture, music, and movement. Several (approximately nine) other co-researchers will also take part in this retreat. We

will explore the theme of beauty in a collegial environment. As the facilitator of the retreat I will do my best to create an atmosphere of trust where everyone can feel safe.

At a mutually convenient time following the retreat I will conduct an audio taped interview with you. Some of the questions will be prepared beforehand. However, I am interested in your personal story and will conduct the interview with a flexible approach.

Yours truly,

Norbert Kruminis

APPENDIX 2.

PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

I, (name), agree to participate in a research study with the working title of *The Brilliance of Beauty: Theology and the Expressive Arts* as described in the attached introductory letter. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Master of Theological Studies degree, including a thesis and any other future publication. I understand that my name and other demographic information which might identify me will not be used at any time including future publication. I also understand that I may opt out without penalty and my personal data will be returned or destroyed and not included in the study.

I agree to take part in a group retreat/workshop at St. Stephen's College, 8810 - 112 Street, on Sept. 12th and 13th, 2009 (10:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M.) and to meet on an individual basis with Norbert Krumins for an initial interview of 1 to 2 hours, at a mutually convenient place and time, and to be available for an additional 1 to 1 ½ hour interview, if necessary. I grant permission for the tape recording of the interview(s). I also grant permission for the photographic reproduction of my creative material if requested, however, I retain the right to deny that request without penalty.

Research Participant

Primary Researcher

Date

Date

APPENDIX 3.
SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about the spiritual journey of your life – what have been some of the ups and downs? (Feel free to borrow from the language of the Theological Worlds Inventory, i.e. what have been some of the key moments of “obsessio” and “epiphania” in your journey?)
2. What has been the role of creativity in your life? In what way, if any, has your creative life intersected with your spiritual life?
3. Can you describe your feelings, emotions, and/or insights while participating in the two-day retreat?
4. Would you describe any of these as experiences of beauty? If so, please expand.
5. Would you describe any of these as experiences of the Divine? If so, in what way?
6. Have any of these experiences inspired you to make changes in your daily life?

APPENDIX 4.

A THEOLOGICAL WORLDS INVENTORY

The instrument entitled “A Theological Worlds Inventory: Discovering One’s Self and Congregation,” by W. Paul Jones (copyright 1992) was provided to each co-researcher. The inventory includes 63 questions and a self-scoring sheet. Jones briefly describes the five worlds and names them as follows:

1. Separation and Reunion
2. Conflict and Vindication
3. Emptiness and Fulfillment
4. Condemnation and Forgiveness
5. Suffering and Endurance

The instrument includes the following provision: “Permission to use for educational and religious settings only, with acknowledgement to St. Stephen’s College and Paul Jones, and in hope that persons will be encouraged to buy the book *Theological Worlds* by Paul Jones.”

APPENDIX 5.
FURTHER RESEARCH

I would like to suggest several areas of further research stemming from this study:

1. *The theological view.* This thesis has differed somewhat from much of the literature in the field of expressive arts therapy as its primary focus was on the theological rather than clinical perspective. Further study from a theological view is encouraged.
2. *The labyrinth.* The use of the labyrinth as a meditative and creative tool in itself was given somewhat peripheral attention here. A study which has the labyrinth as its central focus would broaden the literature in both theology and expressive arts therapy.
3. *The Zen koan.* Further research could focus specifically on the Zen koan as a doorway into creative/spiritual work.
4. *Theological Worlds.* The Theological Worlds Inventory is Christian-centred. The development of a method more inclusive of other faith backgrounds would provide a valuable addition to the literature.
5. *Silence.* The expressive arts studio is often a silent space. I have observed how artists not only welcome, but often relish this dynamic. The lived experience of silence in the expressive arts studio would, I believe, make for an intriguing study.