
DISCOVERING SPIRITUALITY THROUGH THE ARTS

Natalie Rogers

*"If you bring forth
what is within you,
what you bring forth
will save you.*

*If you do not
bring forth
what is within you,
what you do not bring forth
will destroy you."*

Jesus,
The Gospel of Thomas,
Gnostic Gospels

In developing a training program in the expressive arts, my intention has been to offer psychotherapists, mental health professionals, artists, and educators methods that would enhance their work and a place where they could activate their creativity. As the program evolved, it came as a surprise to me that many people were reporting an awakening to their higher self or an opening to what

they called the God spirit or universal energy. This was not part of my plan, although it fit with my experience of the very special ambiance in the room when we were all involved in our expressive art simultaneously. I call it *the sacred space*. Others refer to it that way, as well. During the many years of facilitating this work, my own art has become lighter, brighter, more flowing, and symbolically more open and evocative of spiritual energy. My experiences during the expressive arts program have included receiving blessings, love, and a sense of internal peace. These developments could be a product of my aging and maturity, but my growth has also been stimulated and nurtured through the expressive arts programs where the group consciousness is so poignant. Movement and sounding particularly put me in touch with things spiritual. It is through my body and sound vibrations that I gain access to my deepest feelings. It can be a time when I feel every cell opening to the cells of all be-

ings. Art is the form in which those feelings become visible. Since I have had no religious training of any sort (my father rebelled against his puritanical upbringing and his theological training), I tend to be cautious about any claims to spiritual awakening. Also, (like my father), I abhor the possibility of being seen as any kind of guru. In the past I have kept most of my personal experiences of universality to myself. But as I discussed my experiences of receiving light, or possible angels, or messages from beyond, with friends and colleagues, I found they, too, had kept such experiences to themselves. It seems important to share these events to explore their meaning and significance.

Spiritual Imagery

In using the Creative Connection process, people often find themselves in nonordinary states of consciousness. What may emerge in the resulting work are symbols that exist in many cultures. The individual may say things such as, "I don't know where this particular image came from, I've never related myself to a butterfly (or bear or cross or serpent or Easter egg) before," or "How did this symbol, which is also on a tomb in Egypt and a vase in China, appear in my art when I have never thought of it before?" Such symbols are found in ancient and modern cultures and become archetypal or universal, although their meanings may be specific to each culture. As Carl Jung and other psychologists and anthropologists have found, these images come from a collective unconscious. As participants reflect on their expressive art, they may become fascinated with this universal symbology. When powerful im-

ages come out of "nowhere," even the skeptical person may wander into the halls of mysticism.

As I have said often, I do not interpret symbols for people. Even if I had the expertise, I would ask them to pursue the meaning of these symbols for themselves rather than rely on any external authority. By discovering her own internal relationship to the symbol, the individual finds its real power. For the intellectually curious, looking into the meaning of those symbols as defined by other cultures may add interest and dimension.

Spiritual symbols abound in churches, caves, sand paintings, weavings, tombs, and temples. They range from the cross in all its varied forms to the rose window, chalice, lingam (phallus), yoni (vulva), spirit-guide animals and sacred plants. When these and other symbols arise spontaneously in expressive art, I encourage the artist to delve further, with more movement, art, sound, and writing involving that symbol. Sometimes I also encourage looking into references that describe the meaning as others have defined it.

Gail's Herringbone

A very meaningful piece of symbolism came from an afternoon session with my good friend and colleague, Gail Laird, who was at that time facing the grief of her mother's death. Personally moved by our work together, I wrote about it in my journal that evening. With her permission I offer you this almost verbatim account of that day to illustrate many of the methods described in this book. By looking at the dynamics of this counselling session as well as the spiritual symbol that emerged spontaneously, I then comment on many aspects of person-centered expressive arts therapy.

Overcoming grief takes time. The process is helped if the person in mourning is able to release feelings in the presence of a compassionate and understanding person. It is possible, of course, to grieve alone, but as many hospice workers know, the presence of a peer who can accept the kaleidoscope of feelings speeds the healing. Grieving has stages of denial, sad-

ness, anger, catharsis, acceptance, and finally healing of the wound of loss. The expressive arts are a particularly helpful means for releasing emotions and communicating to a trusted other. The searing pain of loss chokes words: they get stuck in the throat. At such times people can release their feelings through colour and line;

through images and metaphor in visual art, poetry, and journal writing, or released kinesthetically, through movement and sound.

Going into the well of grief means plunging into suffering. When experienced and accepted fully, this leads to a path of enlightenment and spirituality.

*Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief
turning downward through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe
will never know the source
from which we drink,
the secret water, cold and clear,
nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown by those who wished for
something else.*

•David Whyte, "The Well of Grief"¹

Gail had told me, "During the past three months I made trips to the East Coast to nurse Mother as she was dying. Then, after the third trip, my husband and I arrive home to get word that *his* father had died. Then Mother dies." She continued, "And, during the previous year, my very good friend - my colleague and mentor - was shot to death. And my former therapist died of AIDS. It's too much," she said, "*just too much!*"

Gail is an extremely competent, well-balanced professional, usually full of bounce and humour. At this point in time, she had *had* it! Since she had used her skills to help me through a very tough month in my life, I wanted to offer her some time in my studio. She had completed our expressive therapy training, so she knew how to use this work for herself and with others. We set aside a time. On the appointed

day, we began by sitting on two large cushions. Our agreement was that for the afternoon I would be her counselor, giving her the space to focus on any issue she wished.

"Would you like to meditate together for a few minutes?" I ask. She nods, yes. As we begin to settle into the quiet I say, "I think I'll guide us a bit to help us get here." She responds softly, "I'd like that. It would help me get into myself."

I guide us in a meditation something like this: Breathe deeply. Let your shoulders relax. Feel the support underneath you as you sit on the cushion, which is resting on the floor. Feel the support that comes from the floor and below the floor. You might imagine roots going down deep into the earth. Let those

roots spread out. If you like this image, imagine the earth's energy coming up through your roots into your whole body, giving you earth energy. Watch the energy as it rises through every cell, every organ in your body. {Pause}. Now imagine the clear blue sky above. If you like this image, imagine the sky energy coming into the top of your head and washing down through every cell, every organ in your body. Let it mix and mingle with the earth energy. {Pause.} Breathe. Relax. Now, check into your body. What feelings do you have? {Pause.} Where, in your body, are they located? {Pause.} Are there any colours or images that appear? {We are quiet for awhile.} Take your time, but when you are ready, gradually open your eyes and let me know.

We look into each others eyes silently for awhile. I feel compassion for the pain and exhaustion I see. She begins:

"I had an image of fish. It was hanging, vertically. It was in black and white, only. There was a head and a tail but the whole body was just a skeleton. The vertebrae and the ribs were visible but there was no flesh and no skin."

I sit quietly, allowing her image into my perception. She continues, describing it in more detail. "The sun has been on its bones. They are bleached white and dry." When she seems finished, I ask her to review that image, putting the description into first-person statements. This is a Gestalt art practice that we have found to be extremely beneficial and Gail

was familiar with it.

"I am a fish, hanging vertically. My head is intact. There is a link that holds my head part to my skeleton part." She slumps as she speaks. "I see that my tail is all there. But I see that there is only a skeleton in between. I have a vertebrae and bleached white ribs, and that is all."

"Can you say any more about that middle section?" I ask. She thinks for awhile. "Well, nothing is left of me. There is no liver, no intestines, no bowel, no stomach, no heart" (A long pause and a big sigh..) "I don't have any heart." Her voice is sad, silently weeping. "I don't have any heart, I am all intellect."

I am disturbed by her inaccurate perception of herself. After some inner debate, I decide to be congruent and give her my perception.

"I understand that you are feeling that you have no heart, now, and that you are seeing yourself as ruled by intellect, but I think if we asked your friends and colleagues if you have a heart, they would say you are a very heartfelt person. At least that is my perception of you. You always seem to come from the heart. *I do hear you, however* - that at this time, now, you definitely feel you have lost your heart."

Gail is upset about losing her heart. She describes the excruciating details of her mother's death: that her mother was gasping for each breath, not being able to get enough air to live, and not being able to give up, to die. The loving daughter felt help-

less yet stayed present for days. Gail speaks of the horror of watching her mother leave the world in this way. She weeps as she speaks.

I move around behind her and, kneeling at her back, place my knees at the base of her spine, giving her support. I am aware of not wanting to "comfort" her in the sense of making her feel better but to give her the necessary support and touch that will allow her tears to be unrestrained. I let my intuition and hands guide me. When I start to stroke her hair, she breaks into deep sobs. "My mother always loved my hair. When I was a child she would brush it and stroke it and tell me it was beautiful. Your hands found the right place. It feels wonderful." She continues to cry. My comment is simply, "It is O.K. to cry. You can let it out."

After awhile I ask, "Is there anything you would like to tell your mother?" Barely audible, she says, "I'll miss you, mother, I love you SO much. You were really wonderful to me." In a more cheerful voice she says, "By the way, your little dog is okay. She's with me." Then to me, she says, "I really finished all of my business with my mother during all those trips to the East Coast."

I am still supporting Gail with my body, stroking her hair. When I ask, "Could you tell your mother about your heart, what's happened to it?" A large pillow is sitting in front of Gail, and she talks to it as though this is her mother. "Mom, I've lost my heart, I can't feel it any more.

It's gone." A sad sigh comes forth.

"Where is it?" I inquire.

"I've left it with you, Mom. I left it with your body in the casket." Gail vividly describes the scene in the funeral parlor, saying, "When they closed the casket, it closed on my heart."

"What would your mother say to that?" I ask. Gail's voice changes, sounding rather perky and tough. "'You take your heart back right away!' she'd say."

"And what is your reaction to that?" I ask.

Gail replies to the pillow, wistfully, "Well, I'd say it may take some time, Mom. You were always more impatient than I. I'm afraid it will take some time before I get it back." A long silence ensues.

My own heart goes out to Gail as I empathize, reflecting back her conclusion. "Even though your mother may want you to have your heart back immediately, as far as you're concerned it will take some time." I am still at her back, letting her talk to the mother in front of her.

Gail offers, "I really feel her presence, here. She is all over this room!" We talk about it as a possibility. "I feel she has been present so often, in my dreams and actually around my house."

I admit, "I have to agree. I've been wondering about that possibility, here, myself. I've certainly been aware of some different quality in this room during this hour." It was true, I had felt the possibility of a "spirit" in the room.

Eventually I move back to sit on my own pillow. "You must be exhausted," Gail says, being protective of me.

"No, it may be exhausting for you, but to be with you through this sorrow feels very precious to me. I'm moved, not exhausted." She realizes there is more she needs to do. "I would very much like to try doing a picture of my image."

"Wonderful!" I respond, feeling the pleasure of being with someone who knows the healing aspects of the art process. She goes to the art table where a large pad of drawing paper, oil pastels and chalks are available. I suggest she first close her eyes, putting her hands on the paper to explore it in a meditative state. Then I also remind her that one effective way to approach the art process is to use her nondominant hand, thus eliminating the judgmental critic. "Thanks for reminding me," she says. Immediately, she is completely engrossed in the process.

I can see she would like to work alone, so I take her suggestion to do my own art. I go to the clay table, not having any notion of what to do. I take a hunk of cool gray clay, and with my eyes closed start rolling it gently. I realize I am in a very soft/strong mood, having been very centered and grounded during the last emotional hour yet extremely open to all that came in. Unlike Gail, I have no image in mind. I spend some time just playing with the clay, rolling and rolling, first a ball, then it becomes more of a cylinder,

then my fingers begin to open it. It is smooth on the outside. I open my eyes. There are some lines that appeal to me, I emphasize them with strong finger strokes. As I begin to open the cylinder, I wonder what it will become. Part of it becomes hollow, like a fat hollow log. Still, I just follow the shapes that appeal to me. The clay and I are mutually engaged in the "something" that is happening.

All of a sudden I see the beginnings of a woman's figure. In an abstract way, she looks like a Madonna. My fingers move to give her breasts and a lap. She already has an arm reaching out to embrace. She is cloaked with a large wrap. "Of course," I say to myself, "the title of this piece is 'mother.'"

I have been feeling very open hearted and embracing while Gail has been delving into her grief. Although images of my own mother's death occurred while she was speaking, I stayed focused on Gail's more immediate experience. Now, my art work is speaking for me. Lovingly I am creating not my mother, or Gail's mother, but Mother, in the best sense of the word. This clay piece brings my experience to fruition.

In the meantime, Gail finishes her picture and tells me she is going to do some writing. When we are both finished, we look at her picture. Again, I am moved. The image is stark. It fills the page. A large fish with a black head and black tail is dangling. Between the head and tail is a set of skeleton-white ribs held together by carefully drawn black circles for vertebrae.

TEARS OF MILLENIA (Driftwood)

*Mossy crevices
Hold tears of millenia*

*Long before the tumbling began
Before the rushing rambling river
I was a part of something
Something much bigger than me
I've been tossed around
stepped on
forgotten.*

*Born under a red sun
Scorched by the heat
Holding on
Holding
On
I've had many lives*

*Although I cast a different shadow
The stars remember
Hands
Reaching up to touch them*

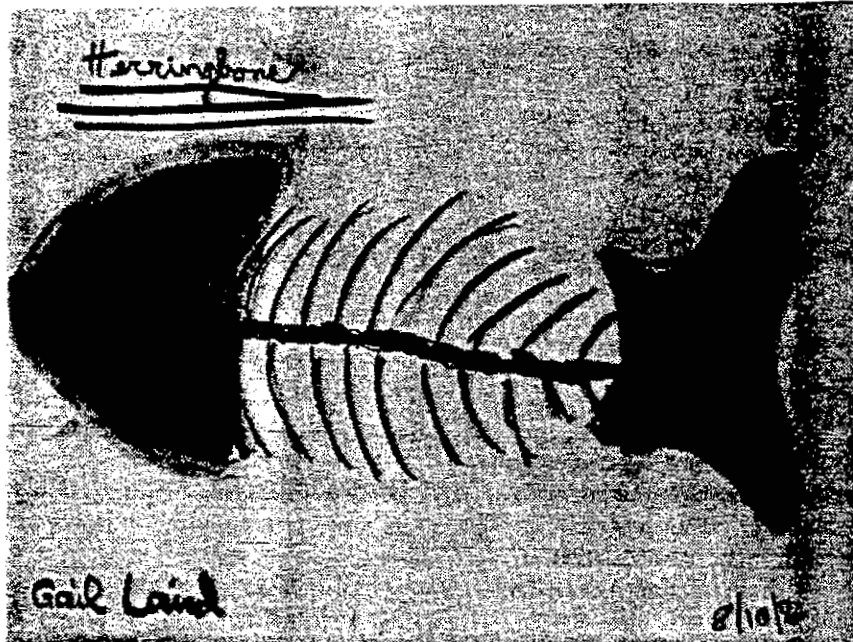
Ioana Lerchs

"How can it be?" she queries, "I'm no artist and I used my left hand and it came out exactly as I had wanted! I love it."

There is no need to discuss the art in depth at this point. She has "owned" every aspect of it through her verbal description. Although the picture gives a bleak im-

pression, intense focus as she created each detail with care seems to have lifted the dark mood a bit. I ask if she would like to do some free writing at this point. She likes the idea.

When we finish we go to the patio to have some iced tea. I show her my sculpture, and she reads her writing:



Imagery - Herringbone. Fish with head and tail intact, but no mid-section. Bones and vertebrae. no guts, no intestines, stomach, bowel, heart. NO HEART. I am a fish with a head and tail and no heart. So I can decide where to go; my tail will propel me there; but if I have no heart what will it matter if I go there? My heart cares, my head doesn't.

Where is my heart? I trace it to Mother's casket in the ground at Pulteney, Lakeview Cemetery. When asked, mother wanted me to retrieve it RIGHT NOW! However, I want it to stay there til I return to New York next week.

Sounding is vibration - the connection between heaven and earth. My singing and sounding has been good and clarifying - clearing me out - making space for thoughts, ideas, maybe making room for a larger heart when it comes back to me.

Natalie works so sensitively with me, gently probing, suggesting, - touching my back, my head, my hair. Was it Mother's spirit guiding Natalie's hands and fingers to my hair? Mother so appreciated my hair.

Thank you Natalie for this special time - time to be and time to do and for your depth so that I could trust and go so deeply myself. I am worn out.

As we finish the afternoon, one remaining topic is the symbolic meaning of the fish. Although neither of us are steeped in symbolism, we both know that the fish is a profound religious symbol, and that in the Christian religion, it is the symbol of Christ. I have since looked up some of the symbolism to share with her.

The fish symbol has a double aspect. On the one hand, it is a cold-blood creature of the depths and thus represents unconscious instinctuality On the other hand it is a symbol for Christ. Thus it symbolizes both the redeemer and that which is to be redeemed.²

The Process Reviewed

The vignette about Gail stands by itself as an afternoon of self-exploration through words and imagery in a supportive environment. Yet this example also embodies certain nuances of the client-centered art process as healing.

Empathic listening

Listening to the "music" as well as the words is the heart and soul of empathic listening. It is the counselor's task to hear the deepest nuances of the client's emotional statements. Feeding back those feelings to the client helps her look at them, as if looking into a mirror, to help her get perspective on herself.

How tempting it might have been to comfort (and thus smother) Gail's grief, or to take the side of the mother who said, "You need your heart back, immediately!" Let-

ting the individual be her own guide ("It will take time, Mom,") is what is ultimately empowering and healing for the client.

The importance of that moment was to accept and understand Gail's felt sense that she had really lost her heart. I came close to side-tracking that meaningful moment when I started to try to convince her she "really was a heartfelt person." Quickly I realized I was saying this out of my own need, and it was useless and possibly detracting input. I went back to the poignant point she was making: "You feel you have lost your heart." My acceptance allowed her to feel deeply understood - a rare event for people in emotional pain. Being understood on that level gave her strength to go one step deeper - to review the excruciating details of her mother's death and funeral. Being accepted and listened to on this level, she continues into her pain: "I'll miss you mother. My heart is in your casket."

If the therapist finds the agony of the story more than she can tolerate, she will unconsciously steer the client away from that pain. Although my heart was aching for Gail's sorrow, and memories of my own mother's death fleetingly intruded on my thoughts, I found my internal strength by focusing even more diligently on the depth of the experience for *her*. At a crucial point like this, my mind runs on several tracks:

"I want to be fully present for Gail."

"This chokes me up as I feel her pain and remember my mother's death."

"I need to refocus on her pain, not mine, and see to it she feels fully and deeply understood."

"Ah, that's better, I sense she is relieved as she feels accepted and understood."

"Now I feel in better control of my

own emotions having focused in appropriately on her."

Such mind-talk happens within seconds. I share it because therapists in training ask how I cope with my feelings. "How do you remain so present yet keep your boundaries?" As I reflect on this question, I realize I do not shield myself or put up a boundary. Being aware that I am feeling personally touched by the grief during the moment allows me to shift back intentionally to verbal and emotional acceptance of the client's experience, thus helping me contain my emotions. I feel so rewarded knowing that the troubled person confiding in me will find strength by my presence that I seem not to take on her pain.

Many colleagues and students have told me that absorbing the other person's pain is a serious professional liability. Some counselors meditate before each session, bringing in an image of warm protective light around them. Others image a protective suit which they "zip up" as a personal shield. Whatever method is devised, the counselor needs to be able to be fully present, or open hearted, without being a sponge.

Dialogue Practices

In this afternoon session, we also used the Gestalt practice of dialoguing with the imagined mother. This is a useful verbal practice helping to bring the absent person into the "here and now" through imagination and dialogue. In keeping with the person-centered philosophy, the structure I gave allowed the client to lead the way. Although I asked questions to stimulate Gail's dialogue, I had no predetermined notion as to a right or

wrong answer. Whatever she said to her mother, or that her mother said to her, was okay. The goal is to help the client discover more of her feelings and attitudes, whatever they may be.

Being Fully Present

Being fully present always sounds relatively easy. But in reality, putting aside our usual tendencies to advise, share our own past grief experiences, or interpret or analyze the art, takes a strong *intention* to be fully present for another. As friends, Gail and I make fun of each other's foibles and give advice as well as listen to each other. Here, we both knew that the unspoken agreement was that I would intentionally focus on her world as she was viewing it, experiencing it, feeling it. The client-centered process holds a basic trust that the individual, if deeply understood, eventually finds her own right path. This brings with it a sense of personal strength, self-esteem and empowerment. The vignette with Gail highlights part of the difference between being together as friends and being in a counseling session.

Physical Support

Touch was also an important aspect in our counseling session. With so many lawsuits regarding sexual advances on the part of therapists towards clients, many therapists are terrified to touch their clients at all. Although I loathe sexual harassment and the misuse of touch in counseling relationships, it is a pity that therapists have become so fearful of lawsuits that they no longer think they can

use any kind of touch. People are touch-deprived in this fast-paced society. During the afternoon with Gail, I did not hesitate to use touch, but I am always concerned as to whether my touch is of *help* or if it is a *hindrance*. An easy way to find out: ASK! "Is putting my hand on your back helpful?" "Is it okay to touch your hair?" If in doubt, take your hand away.

Readers may say, "This is not a good example of a counseling session since Gail was your friend — the relationship is different." In some respects that is true. Our trust was easy and mutual. We had no contract or commitment to continue. Yet much of the same process evolved, and it seems like an event from which we all can learn.

I also wanted to give an example of how one colleague can be of help to another. Wherever I live, I try to create my own support group of two or three people who, after establishing a close friendship, are available to each other in a deep, personal way. Women, particularly, establish support circles. To me this is one of the things friends, particularly therapist friends, do for each other. And we choose each other carefully.

Transpersonal Aspects

This discussion concludes by looking at the session's transpersonal qualities. The word, *transpersonal* literally means, "beyond the personal." Transpersonal and spiritual experiences are closely related. It seems that every time I am in this type of altered or nonordinary state of consciousness with someone, whether it is client, friend, or lover, very special things happen. They happen both internally and externally

(if there is an "external"). These experiences invoke the spirit, whether that spirit comes from within, or from another reality, or both. Who is to say whether a spirit is in the room with us? Or is it our own expanded consciousness that is filling the room? Who is to say whether a deceased person can return in another form to "fill the whole room"? What is helpful to the client is to accept these experiences in any way that fits with your belief system. What is non-helpful or non-healing is to reject the experiences completely.

Why is it that Gail, in going deep into her grief, comes up with a universal symbol of Christ — a depleted, suffering Christ with no body? Carl Jung would agree that here we have a religious symbol springing from the unconscious.

*...religious symbols have a distinctly "revelatory" character; they are usually spontaneous products of unconscious psychic activity. They are anything rather than thought up; on the contrary, in the course of the millennia, they have developed, plant-like, as natural manifestations of the human psyche. Even today we can see in individuals the spontaneous genesis of genuine and valid religious symbols springing from the unconscious like flowers of a strange species, while the consciousness stands aside perplexed.*³

One further point: when Gail suggested she draw an image, I wondered whether it would be of her lost heart, her fish, or her mother. How important it is to let the client choose the image to draw! The fish image came from deep within her unconscious and has continued to have significance for her. Again it is evident that psychological suffering, if deeply explored, brings forth a state of deeper consciousness. The process

seems to put the individual in touch with the collective unconscious.

I compare my own experience with that of Gail's. From being with both my mother and father at their respective times of death, I know that the experience of feeling (and perhaps even seeing) them leave their bodies — yet stay in the room — has changed my perception of death. As a young woman I always thought of death as the absolute end. Death was like entering a black box: no life existed after this life. Now my experience has me seriously questioning that assumption. After my parents' deaths, my months of grief, release, and healing through art, movement, and sharing with close friends led to important personal understandings of the meaning of death. As I try to accept death as a very different beginning (rather than a dead end) I find I become more totally present in life.

The Discovery Process

For some people, discovering higher (or deeper) consciousness and spirituality happens in a moment of revelation, for others it is a long, steady process of opening and unfolding, or becoming aware of forces beyond the self. Some people discover a higher self for the first time, others experience a new dimension of their spirit. It is also evident that the intense focusing and concentration on the creative process is in itself, sacred. When we are an environment of empathy and understanding, we use our creativity to journey inward to our deepest inner essence — bringing us a sense of peace. It seems miraculous that using movement, art, sound, writing, and drama will open a window of consciousness giving us a new per-

spective on ourselves - but it happens. One student described her sense of the creative process:

I have a sense of awe and a sense of it being something really sacred ... as if I were an estuary and the waters happened to flow into me. My significance comes from the creative force, not the other way around ... I think being a creative person has also had an effect on me spiritually and politically in that I can't act without being conscious in some way of having an effect. The creative force has incredible amounts of power and it's up to me with my little piece of it how I'm going to direct it.

I have often heard such statements. It is encouraging to know that discovering one's spirituality through the creative process activates a sense of personal responsibility in the world. Another student also connected the sacred nature of the self with others:

Creativity is, to me, the act of "becoming". It is the unfolding of unique patterns of expression — the Universal Impulse manifesting itself in an infinite variety of expressions. As we move into a conscious relationship with our own process of creativity, we begin to understand the sacred nature of ourselves and others.

The creative process is a path to finding the divine self. Discovering the capacity to love is profound. Discovering the ability to receive love, whether it is from a particular individual or a universal source, can be so awesome as to be frightening to some people. However, tapping into that ability or consciousness is both healing and revolutionary in that it changes the lenses from which we view the world.

(Editor's Note: This article is adapted from Natalie Roger's forthcoming book, *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing*).

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