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Riding the Wave: Spirituality, Creative Expression, and Adult Learning

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Keywords: creativity, spirituality, arts-based learning

Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between creative expression and spirituality, examining ways in which adults seek knowledge and/or make meaning through these connections. Four themes emerged from this research: trust and letting go of control, a sense of connectedness, flow and devotion, and creativity as a healing force.

*A lot of very stressful and difficult things were happening to me and my family and I was crying a lot. I was taking a sculpture class and I found myself wanting to put needles through eggshells and so I started working with eggshells and trying to do that in various ways and I think for me that was about my sense of safety and security being violated. Working with fragile objects, a lot of times was me trying to force myself to understand that no matter how careful I was I had no control over certain things. One piece had a gold strand and I hung the eggshell from the ceiling and the parts of it that were hanging would fall apart if it were handled. I **needed** to put the needles through the eggshells. Everything around me was falling apart. I wanted to cry but was happy at the same time that I was able to let go because I had no choice. Something needed to be healed. Art was a way to help me accept that I had no control.*

Adult learning is a holistic process of knowledge making that emerges in a variety of ways as illustrated in the above vignette. This process has spiritual, affective, somatic and cognitive aspects. Creative expression, or arts-based learning, is a way to surface this knowledge. We define creative expression as any active engagement with the arts (visual art, creative writing, dance, drama, music, etc). We see spirituality as a profound sense of the interconnectedness of all things that may or may not be related to one's religious practice. Previous research on the transformative role of creative expression (Simpson, 2007) identified spirituality to be a major theme. Art therapist and educator Pat B. Allen (2005) wrote a book called *Art Is a Spiritual Path*. We believe that this path is a way of knowing for many adult learners that needs to be brought to the attention of the adult education community.

Research Design and Methodology

This research was conducted from a phenomenological perspective (Van Manen, 1990) informed by arts-based inquiry (Knowles and Cole, 2002; Lawrence and Mealman, 2001). We sought to explore and understand the everyday lived experience of people engaged in the arts who self-identified as experiencing spirituality through their work. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, researcher journals and participant observation in painting groups and collage workshops. In-depth two-session interviews were conducted with seven participants. While these individuals did not identify themselves as professional artists they were however, poets, expository writers, fabric designers, singers, photographers and visual artists. An additional twelve women participated in one of two focus groups. While artists of all types were invited (including musicians and actors), ten were primarily visual artists and two were creative writers. Since this study was about creative expression, we also incorporated visual art and writing by our research participants as part of our data collection. Research questions focused on

the meaning of creative expression to one's life, the connections between spirituality and one's art and knowledge or meaning making created through such connections. Data were analyzed and coded through the processes of constant comparison and free imaginative variation.

Emergent Themes

A true artist is more than merely creative. He is a channel through which impressions flow and reemerge, bearing the mark of the spirits that have influenced him.

David Chetlahe Paladin 1992

We discovered through our research that the connections between creativity and spirituality are like the chicken and the egg. Creativity is often a manifestation of one's spirituality. At the same time participants felt a sense of spiritual awareness that emerged through their creative expressions. Four themes emerged from this research: trust and letting go of control, a sense of connectedness, flow and devotion, and creativity as a healing force.

Trust and Letting Go of Control

Childhood is often a time of free expression of our creativity. At some point in our maturation process we tend to become more self-critical and controlling of the outcomes of our creative process. It is as if we put a filter on our expression, carefully controlling the form and direction it takes. We become producers instead of creators.

Spirituality, for our research participants was about going inward, paying attention to soul and allowing intuition to guide intellect. Creativity was described as a primal experience of "expressing who you are". Accessing this level of creativity involves "working against the shoulds," those voices that tell us our work is not worthy if it does not look a certain way or does not conform to conventional norms. Participants described this process as "getting out of the head", "letting go of control and expectation", "surrendering to the process" and "stepping out of my own way", thus implying that we sabotage our own creative process by our need to be in control. As Allen (1999, p. 172) expressed, "To be in service to one's creativity is a form of spiritual practice. It requires an open heart, an accepting body, a quiet mind".

Leila, in the opening vignette talked about a time when she was going through a particularly difficult experience for which she realized she had no control over the circumstances. After a period of despair she turned to art: "Art was a way to accept that I had no control" Once she let go of the need to control the situation, the healing began. "I realized I had to surrender to the darkness. It's okay, it's a part of life. I realized this through painting".

Letting go of control is not easy. It involves a great deal of faith and trust. Julia described it as "learning to look through the eyes of faith rather than the eyes of fear". Creative expression from a place of trust involves allowing one's body, mind, heart and spirit to work together. It involves relying on guidance from within and allowing oneself to be surprised. Letting go of the need to control opens us up to liminal or threshold experiences where we are receptive to knowledge that comes from both our unconscious and from the world around us, what some people refer to as spirit. "This is where visible and invisible worlds overlap – the land of the soul. This is where individual consciousness and the collective unconscious meet and merge – where creative ideas and work are birthed" (Bolen, 1999, pp. 59-60).

Connectedness

Pat B. Allen (1995), in *Art is a Way of Knowing*, describes art's role in "knowing soul" and encourages readers to "remember that creating an image is a way of taking action to make your intention manifest". She encourages artists to "trust your inner knowing and let the image

instruct you...Images will reveal the nature of our relation to soul and spirit" (p.75). Regardless of whether they created for themselves or for the public, nearly all participants recognized this connection to "other" outside of themselves through their creative expression. They felt a "connection to nature" or "tapped into a universal energy". Involvement in their art also brought them a sense of belongingness when connected into a community with other like-minded souls.

In response to the question "does spirituality lead you to creativity or vice versa?" participants agreed it was "both and". Susan, for example, created a collage composition around a digital scan of a human spine and specifically connected the spine to a star-filled photograph of the universe. She said "our lives aren't just about us, but become a piece of the puzzle of the cosmos" and then later described a transformative time in her life when, through creative expression, "the whole universe opened up". Participants described "listening to the universe for guidance", their affinity with nature and that what they experienced is "nothing separate from the arts" as "the arts out here is the arts in here and so... it's a part of what we are as a human species." Wuthnow (2001) referred to this as "inward connectedness" (p.180).

Sharon, (a writer, knitter, women spirit drummer and hoola-hoop creator) linked her arts to personal holistic transformation. "I want to feel the connective tissue of life. I want to 'see God' as I understand that concept. I feel more and more the slowing of my physical [self] but the parallel opening of my spiritual. Now my transformation is living in the vibrant energy of wholeness, of being able to see it with open eyes, instead of squinting to find an image that makes sense". Cathy Malchiodi sums this in *The Soul's Palette* as she says "in creating images we call forth spirit, and in knowing spirit, we bring well-being to our souls" (2002, p.174). "Creativity requires drawing connections" (Wuthnow, 2001, p.89). Our participants connected creativity and meaning-making through seeking understanding about themselves, their life and the world around them. They explored their own identity, their spirituality and purpose. Many were not able to separate out their spiritual seeking from their seeking understanding through creative expression. Participants openly sought out knowledge and understanding from a wide variety of formal and informal sources; including courses and workshops, mentors and influencers, or through books and internet sources. Some felt their work was personal and not for others to see. For these artists the connection was with the process itself and not the end product.

Many participants found, however that interacting in groups surrounding their creative expression, whether in classes or informal gatherings, not only provided them tacit knowledge but, more importantly, provided validation of experiences they had thought may be unique to them. Some participants who had attended a painting retreat described this experience as "turning on a faucet" with an "excitement of the possibilities" and a discovery that "you are part of the whole and not someone singular." Others said they were able to "move further and deeper into their story of origin" and thus, felt a deep connection. As Margaret stated, "Connecting in groups about creative expression is where your soul comes out. Those are connections at the core".

Flow and Devotion

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defined "flow" as complete absorption in an activity where one lost track of time and space, and creative work seemed to emerge without conscious control. Participants in the study shared that they have experienced flow at various moments in their creative expression. They described flow as becoming one with the art, losing track of time, finding that nothing else mattered while in creation mode or as "riding the wave". As Bonnie expressed: "Sometimes, you're swimming, sometimes you're struggling, sometimes you're just

a wave.” Cathy understood flow as a time when “Everything else falls away. You don’t want to stop”. Jeanne Carbonetti talks about a similar experience in *The Tao of Watercolor* (1998, p. 74): “Once the painting has begun, there is no stopping, nor is there any rushing, only a steady pace of being present and responsive. . . There is only responding moment by moment, to each subsequent brushstroke and to the whole, always respecting the medium’s inherent nature, allowing ink, water and paper to behave naturally”.

Participants stressed the importance of letting their work speak for itself. Attempts to define or describe their creative expression using rational means seemed to somehow diminish it or constrain its meaning. “Like a dream, the more you try to define it, the more it disappears”.

Participants in the study saw flow as a spiritual experience, a sense of “one-ness” with the universe or “something flowing through me.” There was a sense that their creativity came from something more than themselves. As Margaret expressed “It’s not just me, not just my intention. There’s another dimension. There is an energy or flow or source that I don’t have control over”. Some participants indicated that their creative practice was an expression of devotion as contrasted with discipline. Lisa described this as a fluid process like a dance. “Devotion to the mystery, the source, reverence, the passion and fire within” .

Closely related to the concepts of flow and devotion is the notion of inspiration. Hart (2000, p. 31) describes inspiration as a form of “transpersonal knowing” or a shift to a higher level of consciousness. Inspiration comes from some place deep within when one shifts from rational linear ways of thinking to more intuitive modes. “Inspiration is the poet in the process of learning, the prophet beholding the voice of God, the artist hearing the Muse, and the ‘ordinary’ person becoming, if only for a moment, extraordinary” (p. 33).

It takes time to get into that creative space where flow and devotion happen effortlessly. Participants described how inspiration happens for them. Martha, a writer, talked about how “if nothing comes I just do garbage writing”. Jan, a visual artist shared: “I start playing with color. Sometimes I just have fun”. Others read poetry or listened to music for inspiration. As Diaz (1999, p. 182) described, “We enter creativity as a form of sacred play, focusing on the improvisational adventure of following our materials and trusting that a dynamic series of expressive gestures will happen through us”. All of the participants in the study agreed with the idea of creativity as a process of sacred play. Their participation in the arts ignited a passion within which often involved exploring the mystery of purpose and meaning in life.

Healing

“Bringing spirituality to the body through the arts can effect healing” (Wuthnow, 2001, p.194). Creative expression, (whether it be poetry, visual arts, dance, theater or music), serves as both a source and an expression of feelings, emotions, values and beliefs. While these forms of expression often reflect larger cultural norms, art was often a personal source and expression of emotions for our participants. It was a place to safely rant, express sadness and disappointment but also was a source of hope, joy and personal growth. The arts were an avenue for accessing “that which was within” and bringing it to a conscious level to reflect upon. Allen (1995) stated one reason for this when she said “Art making holds and contains me in the raw material of my feelings in a way I have rarely risked with people” (p.130). Thus, one of the benefits of participating in creative expression, is that it allows one to connect the internal to the external or that which is subconscious to that which is conscious.

Malchiodi (2002) suggests that “art as medicine can help you to manage illness, to reduce stress, and to heal...art making naturally taps your body’s inner knowing and can be your doorway to deeper understanding of illness or trauma, conveying powerful messages about your

physical being” (p.126). Our participants described a connection to learning about themselves and their situations which fostered healing. Creative expression became a means to work through unresolved issues such as grief, trauma or feelings surrounding illness and was a way to express these difficult emotions. As Sharon said when creating her artwork “you start seeing things in a broader way and a peace sets upon you. All the negativity falls away. I want to live in that all the time...it enhances the way you live”. Tim found writing to be “a place of solitude” while Susan had created some “premonitional drawings” about breast cancer before she was diagnosed. Her drawings pinpointed the cancer in her body before she or her doctors knew it was there. She also describes that during her life she was often conflicted. She found “poetry was a wonderful way as well as drawing to work things out”. Rachel described how, through her writing, she was able to process her internal feelings through metaphors derived by linking her observations of nature to emotional events happening in her daily life. Matt described his feelings about the role of poetry in his transformation and healing:

The worst time in my life was during the two and a half years I was losing my daughter. I have never felt so alone. I appreciated the sympathy and love from my friends and relatives, but largely this did not console me. It was something I went through alone...One outgrowth of this experience was that I became much more aware of my internal world. Over time this developed into an awareness of a powerful, mysterious, and very rich world inside myself. It was also during this time that I began writing. I discovered a creativity I didn’t realize I had. The development of my creativity seems in some way related to the development of my inner world.

Echo Bodine (1999) asserts “Creativity is one of the most valuable tools we have to aid us in our healing process” (p. 120). Our participants reflected this thought as they “come back to artwork when in spiritual crises to awaken the ‘genuiness’ inside” for healing exploration. To them, creativity releases “a huge outpouring of all the stuff inside” they didn’t know was there and when troubled with an issue “sometimes something just has to manifest itself”. In the process of creating that something, “the solution comes – it’s a full circle”. These participants felt that “as artists, in whatever you do, you’ve got to be willing to ask the questions. The questions makes it spiritual”. But, they warn, “You have to be willing to hear the answers when they come”.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

“How would my spiritual life be without images? How would I know? I know in images”

Leanne

Our findings confirm that adults learn in many different ways and that knowing has many dimensions. Learning is a holistic process that involves cognitive, affective, somatic and spiritual dimensions. The arts naturally engage us in all of these learning domains. Much of this learning is experiential. Adult educators can tap into the experiential learning of their students by creating opportunities to surface this knowledge. Additionally, we can provide our students experiences to create art as part of the curriculum. As Greene (1995) cautions, however merely being exposed to art is not sufficient to change lives. As we begin to unpack these emotionally charged experiences we expand the process of critical reflection beyond the cognitive realm by creatively imagining alternative possibilities. Cajete (1994) suggests “Such practices help students to establish a connection with their real selves and learn how to bring their inner resources to bear in their lives” (p. 225).

To be effective adult educators we need to have the courage to take advantage of all of the resources available to us. “Creative courage is the discovering of new forms, new symbols, new patterns on which a new society can be built” (May, 1975, p.21). Tapping into spiritual knowledge generated by participating in artistic processes and collectively examining the

meaning of those experiences can help us to envision alternative realities for a more promising future. In the words of one participant “You cannot divide the two – the human and the spirit”.

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