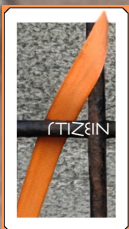


# ARTIZÆIN

Arts & Teaching Journal



## An Arts-Based Contemplative Pause *Part 2*



# ARTIZEIN

art (n.) early 13c., “skill as a result of learning or practice,” from Old French art (10c.), from Latin *artem* (nominative *ars*) “work of art; practical skill; a business, craft,” from PIE *\*ar-ti-* (cognates: Sanskrit *rtih* “manner, mode;” Greek *arti* “just,” *artios* “complete, suitable,” *artizein* “to prepare;” Latin *artus* “joint;” Armenian *arnam* “make;” German *art* “manner, mode”), from root *\*ar-* “fit together, join”



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### **This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Carl Leggo (Nov. 15, 1953 – Mar. 7, 2019)**

You left behind a long poem, a legacy of contemplative life, a new language of spirit full of resonances and gaps, fragments and sparks. Your eternal reminders of learning to live with love, long love, lasting love, love in education, love of the world and repeated calls for living poetically, living well, and living together fills me with "hope for each day's journey even in the midst of intransigent injustice, fear, and hatred to remain fully human." To live with conviction that the purpose of life is not the accumulation of gold stars rather living poetically with the clustered stars invites us to see the light.

Thank you for becoming a shining star.


– Momina Khan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 6     **Susan Walsh & Barbara Bickel**  
AN ARTS-BASED CONTEMPLATIVE PAUSE INTRODUCTION TO PART 2: CREATING  
RESTORATIVE AND CARING LEARNING SPACES
- 17    **Vicki Kelly**  
INDIGENOUS POIESIS: MEDICINE FOR MOTHER EARTH
- 31    **Yoriko Gillard**  
LIVING WITH A LIMINAL MIND
- 48    **Barbara Bickel**  
"METRAMORPHOSIS" A SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ARTS-BASED AND CONTEMPLATIVE  
INQUIRY
- 60    **Celeste Snowber**  
INCARNATAS: AN ARTIST IN RESIDENCE PRACTICE IN THE UBC BOTANICAL GARDEN
- 63    **Ariana Garcia-Fialdini**  
CONTEMPLATING ARTFUL MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY ART EDUCATION
- 73    **Momina Khan**  
LECTIO DIVINA: A CALL FOR SALAH & POETIC BEING
- 98    **Ashwani Kumar & Adrian M. Downey**  
MUSIC AS MEDITATIVE INQUIRY: DIALOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING AND  
COMPOSING INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC
- 122   **Robyn Traill**  
THE LION'S GAZE: FILMMAKING AS AN AWARENESS PRACTICE
- 136   **Peter London**  
CLOSING PAUSE



## SUBMISSIONS

 ARTIZEIN welcomes manuscripts addressing the consequence of understanding the state of our teaching of the arts relative to the arts themselves. We intend to offer articles, artworks, poems, essays, visual journals, etc. that;

- deepen perceptions about creative capabilities for a broad spectrum of the population, how this innate ability unfolds and develops in a wide array of ways, tempos, and settings,
- inform and engage readers in expansive thinking about what art and its teaching/transmitting/facilitating are, where it might occur, and the many effects the arts have on its practitioners and witnesses,
- direct attention to instructional approaches (some new and innovative, others neglected or forgotten) that are currently restricted by an emphasis on normalized art instruction in public schooling.

Please visit our website for specific information related to upcoming volumes:

[http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/atj/call\\_for\\_papers.html](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/atj/call_for_papers.html)

# AN ARTS-BASED CONTEMPLATIVE PAUSE

## INTRO TO PART 2: CREATING RESTORATIVE CARING & LEARNING SPACES

SUSAN WALSH & BARBARA BICKEL

### BIOS:

**Susan Walsh** is a writer/poet, arts-based researcher, and student of Tibetan Buddhism and contemplative photography. She is also a Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Susan wrote *Contemplative and artful openings: Researching women and teaching* (Routledge, 2018) and co-edited *Arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching: Honoring presence* (Routledge, 2015) with Barbara Bickel and Carl Leggo.

**Barbara Bickel** is an artist, researcher, and educator currently practicing in Calgary, Alberta Canada where she co-founded Studio M\*: A Research Creation Lab Intersecting Arts, Culture and Healing in 2017. She is an Associate Professor of Art Education Emeritus at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, USA. To view her art portfolio and arts-based research online visit <http://www.barbarabickel.com>

what is a contemplative arts practice?  
(not all arts practices are necessarily contemplative)  
awareness perception absorption  
attending to what's going on with self others relationships  
breathing sounding writing movement play stitch words

preconference as transitional space  
co-create collaborate transition together  
deepen strengthen individual collective practices  
opportunity to share collective wisdom  
experiences practices insights  
heartful connection

how do we speak?  
silence wonder uneasiness  
some solitude  
practices sitting walking stitching  
everyone offers a contemplation a reverie?  
gathering embodying performing creative scholarship  
what does *contemplation* mean?  
(may be different in different wisdom traditions)

invitations call for offerings  
what might they look like?  
question quotation song music  
urban setting walking moving  
outside dress comfortably

call for contemplative co-creation of spaces for  
silence gentleness wonder uneasiness

(found in notes from brainstorming/planning meeting with  
Carl, Susan, and Barbara, and Artifact A)<sup>1</sup>

We share with deep gratitude Part Two of this special issue of *Artizein: Arts and Teaching Journal* that attends to arts-based and contemplative practices in inquiry and teaching. Co-editing this two-part special issue entitled *An Arts-Based and Contemplative Pause*, has been a gift of co-labour that we have been transformed by. For as Lewis Hyde wrote so beautifully in 1979, “it is when art acts as an agent of transformation that we may correctly speak of it as a gift. A lively culture will have transformative gifts as a general feature.... And it will have artists whose creations are gifts for the transformation of the race.” (pp. 59-60). The 20 contributors to both parts of this special issue are part of a lively culture. Together with the authors and the journal layout designer Greg Wendt<sup>2</sup> we have co-created the ensuing two-part issue of *Artizein*, within the notion and practice of a gift economy that foregrounds love, gratitude, abundance, openness, and transformation.<sup>3</sup>

As we noted in the introduction to Part One,<sup>4</sup> a vibrant group of approximately 50 artists, researchers, and teachers gathered together for a day-long pre-conference event in May 2017 in Toronto, Canada, as part of the annual conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE). The pre-conference was commissioned by the executive of the Arts Researchers and Teachers Society (ARTS) as an opportunity to extend and deepen conversations about contemplative arts practices; the event was planned and facilitated by Diane Conrad, Carl Leggo, Barbara Bickel, and Susan Walsh. Central to the intent for the pre-conference was the desire to create a retreat-like space-time for colleagues to gather in ways that felt nourishing, restorative, heartfelt, compassionate, and filled with love and care for others and for ourselves.

We trust that you, as readers/viewers/listeners, will receive the gift and enter the *pause* of Part Two and, in doing so, extend the gifts within each of us further and further.

Our introduction to Part One focused on how we remodeled in a contemplative way the peer review and editing process of the journal. In Part Two, entitled *Creating Restorative and Caring Learning Spaces*, we offer insights and artifacts from our planning process for the retreat, as requested by some retreatants who felt that the latter would be helpful for others who seek to transform traditional academic conference spaces: indeed learning spaces of all kinds. In doing so, we share glimpses of what emerged during our planning process through found poems from some of the artifacts of the latter: meeting notes, the call for proposals, emails sent to retreatants, some notes from the day of the retreat, and our outline as facilitators (see Appendix A). Throughout the introduction we weave these found poems as remembered moments that emerged in a collaborative planning space held by clear intentions for co-creating a restorative, caring open retreat (as noted above)--a space that expanded and grew ever richer as the retreatants shared their work online in advance of the retreat and then gathered together as co-creators for the event itself. In this introduction, we also comment on the unique--and complexly varied “Canadian”--context of this special issue. We then introduce the authors and their work who collectively comprise Part Two.



As editors, we have been entrusted to share in the creative process of writing and revising with each of the authors in both Parts One and Two of this special issue. We have come to regard editing as a teaching and learning process that is a form of gift giving, that is, in itself a receiving of gifts that enriches us all and extends outward. We have appreciated hearing from many of the authors that they feel similarly inspired! Throughout the fullness of our editing process, we have often unexpectedly felt and at other times consciously invited the presence of our dear friend, colleague, co-retreat facilitator, and co-editor Carl Leggo, to whom Parts One and Two are dedicated. Sadly, he passed from this earthly realm shortly after Part One of this special issue was published. Part Two is offered as rich soil left by Carl, soil that he composted with diligence and care during his more than 30 years in the academy (Leggo, 2002). We recognize the seeds of his teachings embedded in the writing of the artist scholars in this special issue. His generosity of spirit resounds, rebounds, guides and inspires throughout these pages.<sup>5</sup> May we continue to cultivate the soil of transformation and change entrusted to&with us.

envisioning: creative collaborative space  
respite restoration

gratitude for proposal offerings deep appreciation  
rich experience heart wisdom  
share all offerings in advance online: please read

contemplative and artful engagements  
indoors and outside individually and with others  
afternoon co-curated open space  
sign up sheet to host conversations or  
lead small groups in contemplative arts activity  
not presentations participatory  
and everyone:  
please bring very short poem to share

in the spirit of co-creating  
a contemplative arts-based space together,  
Carl, Barbara, Susan, Diane

(found in emails to retreatants)

It is always a bit of a risk to plan a conference in a city you are visiting. As facilitators we gratefully relied on the ARTS Special Interest Group (SIG) preconference chair, Diane Conrad, to take care of the location and food arrangements. We (Susan and Barbara) arrived a day early to visit the space and to plan the set up for the next morning. Upon arriving at the space we found ourselves stepping out of the elevator into the centre of a beautiful open spacious room that was to be our retreat space. Simultaneously we realized that the quiet secluded sanctuary-like environment we had envisioned would not be possible in this open public space. Upon speaking with the friendly staff we found out that the large gathering room and kitchen were open and shared with members who might use it on the weekend, that two of the rooms on the same floor were booked for other events at the same time, and that there would be a move-in of a new organization taking place on that floor during the retreat day. When we expressed dismay that there was a contemplative

retreat taking place--and that furniture being carried through the space in the midst of it would be very disruptive--phone calls were made to arrange the move-in time for the lunch break with a promise to set up false walls in front of the elevator doors to keep some privacy.

We sunk down into one of the comfy couches, our minds racing on the edge of what felt like an imminent teaching calamity, took deep breaths and gave each other and ourselves permission to let go of the vision we had so carefully pre-planned for the retreat. This was an unexpected *Happening* and, as such, presented us with an opportunity to practice contemplatively and live creatively in the moment with open minds and flexibility. We contacted Carl, who in his calm and careful way assured us that all would be well, and went back to our dorm room to re-work the outline for the next day. Exhausted at the end of this long day we went to bed with the strategy to draw from our creative contemplative practices--such as ensuring group grounding practices during morning and afternoon transitions of the day, and to arrive earlier than planned for the set up of the space.

In the morning we awoke knowing we needed to be especially focused and grounded to hold the sacred intention of the retreat space, in what we now accepted would be a semi-private space for the more than 50 retreatants. Upon arriving with our two roommates we found the door to the building still locked and so spontaneously went to the park across from the building with a desire to connect with the land we would be spending the day upon. Standing in our small circle holding hands we took ourselves through a meditative grounding and centering ritual of calling in the four directions and supportive energies to be with us for the day-long retreat. Feeling clear and focused by this short ritual we greeted Diane and Carl who had now arrived and entered the building to begin preparing for the day. We met the facilitators of the workshops taking place in the other rooms and were happy to find that the workshops were in alignment with the spirit of our day--one on Indigenous perspectives and the other a therapist training workshop. Diane gave her attention to the kitchen and began the set up of food she and others had thoughtfully purchased to be nourishing and fresh, and we (Carl, Susan and Barbara) began creating small meeting nooks of chairs, tables and couches throughout the large open room. When the small gathering spaces were set up, Barbara went into the one enclosed room we had designated for large group gatherings and individual quiet space and began to lay coloured tape on the floor in the pattern of a labyrinth path: a creative task that is a meditative anchoring process itself of finding the labyrinth shape to fit the room: transforming the room into a sacred holding space for all those who arrived to walk and sit in its womb-like form. With Barbara still laying the path as people began to arrive, Carl, Susan, and Diane welcomed them. As people entered the space they greeted each other: new acquaintances were made, long time colleagues excitedly embraced, folks snacked on the breakfast offerings, and some wandered through the space, checking out the labyrinth room, and the outdoor patio. The retreat was beginning with an ease that was markedly in contrast to our initial distressed encounter with the space the day prior.

Music was woven throughout the day with Vicki Kelly playing her Indigenous flute to mark each transition, to assist the shift from small groups to large group, from individual contemplative arts practices to nourishment breaks, to the lunch and back again, and to the closing final gathering of the day. Diane was a steady cornerstone in the open kitchen area, a small central figure ever present, caring for any arising needs as she attentively watched over her colleagues throughout the day. Carl, having become familiar

with working collaboratively over the years with his two vigilant female co-facilitators, allowed us to take care of the details of the day's process and came in at his designated times in the outline. There were a few quick conferences between the four of us to make slight adjustments to the day's unfolding, but for the most part, the preparation and trust in the process and the openness and good intentions of those attending the day carried us all in its flow.

Numerous aspects of the pre-conference retreat came together to make it an event that those attending told us they would like to replicate in the future. To assist this, we offer an overview of qualities and aspects of the event that might shape future contemplative and arts-based learning spaces for conferences. First, a base of trust and willingness to flow with "what is" is essential for organizers. This can be supported by engaging arts-based and contemplative practices for short periods during planning meetings; starting the meeting off with these practices works really well. It is also helpful to have a commitment to one's own practices to draw from throughout the planning process and during the event. A combination of on-line conferencing, email communication, shared google docs where also part of our planning process.

embody and perform  
creative contemplative scholarship as Happenings  
relax into the day with all its moments  
whatever arises  
do so with gentleness  
care towards  
ourselves and one another  
silence solitude space  
walk labyrinth, sit, make art, write, walk outside, eat, pray  
nourishment for your body and spirit  
restorative reparative respectful  
a space of retreat

balance group with individual practices  
in the context of our own lives  
the world living in chaos  
not-knowingness  
peacefulness, confusion and feeling lots is okay  
notice that and  
notice the habit worn ways  
of doing conferences  
encounters with confusion, frustration  
it is okay to leave and go to another session  
whatever unfolds is exactly what should unfold

(found in Artifact B, planning notes of Carl, Susan, & Barbara)

The conference participants were also able to prepare and connect prior to the day of the retreat. To encourage their preparation for the day, with permission, we made available all of the short collaborator proposals in a shared google doc. online and recommended that everyone become familiar with the offerings. We had more submissions and participants



than we expected. The submissions included a diversity of contemplative arts practices such as semiotic choreology, body charting, Miksang photography, Tarot card reading, meditation, and sounding. We did not pre-schedule presentations based on submissions, rather we worked with an “open space” concept, and on the day had a whiteboard with blank boxes and times, where those who came prepared and felt called in the moment to present an arts-based and contemplative offering wrote it into the schedule. This meant that some who thought they would present did so, and others decided on the day not to present. Making decisions on the day can be stressful, and we encourage giving contemplative practice time for people to make decisions prior to signing up to offer a “gift.” Given that this is an unfamiliar way of conferencing, as organizers we were required to have a fair amount of communication with participants in multiple forms such as emails, and verbal instructions.

For the event’s physical space we found that having a variety of areas available for the day (some created and some already there) was helpful: small comfy couches and chairs, kitchen table small group gathering areas, a balcony off the main room, a downstairs area with tables and chairs, an enclosed room with a labyrinth, a kitchen, and a park across the street. If people wanted to be alone, they could be, and if they wanted to be with others there where multiple spaces available. They could be indoors or outdoors as they desired. The day was premised on taking care of ourselves as a foundation. Having multiple spaces and reminding people that they had freedom to move as they needed, assisted in allowing self-care, and, we believe, expanding the capacity for co-engagement and learning.

To bring the spaces alive, the day included an open gathering time, a welcome and group grounding and small group *Lectio Divina* practice, unstructured breaks in the morning and afternoon, 15 minute individual contemplative arts practice times in the morning and afternoon allowing for individual integration of the experience, two 45 minute engaged workshop sessions, an unstructured lunch break with wide choice of fresh and healthy food supplied, and a large closing gathering. As this was the ARTS SIG pre-conference, after the pre-conference there was a short break and the annual general meeting of the organization took place. This introduction to the journal includes as an Appendix the outline we created for the day. We share this with a desire that more conferences co-created as restorative and generative spaces of learning such as this can emerge in the field of higher education and beyond.

day of co-nurturance  
emptying ourselves to prepare to receive  
connection with new people  
receiving and listening  
attending to one another  
with open hearts

(found in Artifact B, planning notes of Carl, Susan, & Barbara)

This Two Part special issue was birthed after realizing that what was generated at the conference did not need to end with the conference. We invited all participants to submit arts-based and contemplative articles to allow them and others to dwell on the experience more deeply. We are delighted to have a total of 20 contributing voices extending the practice of arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching in this special issue.

“The circular nature of the process around the Medicine Wheel begins and ends with the centring place of inward awareness and contemplation”: this issue opens with Indigenous poiesis and *Vicki Kelly’s* offering of “an appropriate orientation to the world and to learning” that acknowledges reciprocal relationships with “all our relations.” With fragility and strength *Yoriko Gillard* offers up her tears that come from the oceans and rivers as a liminal space to reflect on painful emotions of the past and to contemplate giving service to society for a truthful future. Relationality, co-becoming and copoiesis stitch themselves into being through the socially-engaged art of *Barbara Bickel* where wit(h)nessing ourselves and each other leads us to known and unknown co-encounters within matrixial borderspace(s). The embodied ecological movement and poetic encounters of *Celeste Snowber* within a Botanical Garden lead us next into a place of deep connection with our bodies intertwined with the earth’s body.

giving is receiving  
receiving is giving  
breath – write – make art  
connect with yourself

(found in Artifact B, planning notes of Carl, Susan, & Barbara)

We trace the journey from one country to another in the writing of *Arianna Garcia-Fialdini*, where a visual and spoken rendering unfolds in *Mi historia, My story, Mon histoire* as she drinks tea and reflects on her immigration experience to Canada surrounded by her immigrant activist art community. *Momina Khan* poetically and visually shares her Muslim call for *Salah* in her *Lectio Divina* practice entered during the pre-conference, also the first day of Ramadan, that is an “epoch of unbridled spirit tenderly wrapped in creative and contemplative ways of being present in the moment.” Music leads us next into a meditative inquiry as it is dialogically and playfully engaged between *Ashwani Kumar* and *Adrian Downey*; Ashwani ponders the learning, playing, and composing process of Indian classical music, in particular the raga. Within their dialogue we are invited to listen to the sounds of the harmonium at play. The Buddhist teachings of the lion’s gaze through the lens of contemplative filmmaking as conceived and practiced by *Robyn Trail* brings us full circle in this issue to practices that enhance awareness and perception. He shares two examples of his contemplative films, giving us the opportunity to enter and experience the moving contemplative process of the filmmaker. As an American artist scholar responding to neighbouring Canadian artist scholars across merely human-made borders, *Peter London* becomes the weaver of both Parts One and Two of the issue; his is the last moment of contemplation as he offers his closing reflection on this special issue of *A Contemplative and Arts-Based Pause*.

The authors of both Parts One and Two of this special issue of *Artizein* speak from what is a rich, complex, and diverse “Canadian” context of those whose academic work integrates spirituality and art; theirs are the voices of graduate students, school teachers, artists, university professors--emerging and established--all of whom share deep commitments to being, knowing, and not knowing through contemplative arts practices. They bring differences in spiritual beliefs, culture, and language to their work. They represent an array of citizenship perspectives; some are Canadian born, some have emigrated to Canada, and some studied in Canada and then returned home. They create art in different mediums such as film, photography, music, dance, writing, performance and textiles. We believe

that the retreat that spawned this special issue demonstrates the possibilities for intentionally co-creating respectful and compassionate spaces for conversations across difference and similarity. A sense of yearning for such spaces clearly emerged at the end of the 2017 ARTS pre-conference retreat day. At the large closing group gathering, we discussed the question, “What are we yearning for?”--as posed by one of the retreatants. In the found poem below, we close our introduction by sharing with you the collective insights that arose in response to the question. We hope that these and other words and ideas resonate as open invitations to co-create together more intentionally compassionate and caring academic spaces--at conferences and everywhere. May we learn to co-create and gift each other in ways that are beneficial for the wider good and for the earth.

“... with gifts that are agents of change, it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude that finishes the labor (Hyde, 1979/2007, p, 60).

*what are we yearning for?*  
more time more connection more love (be the love)  
more days weeks that are nurturing supportive  
personal individual time for contemplative practices naps  
create what we want (do it!)  
  
(em)bodied practices something physical  
being outside soccer game hike  
writing with community  
specialist input to raise our skill levels  
working across generations in intentional ways  
conversations about building and sustaining collaborative  
contemplative artful communities in academic settings mentoring  
witnessing with&for one another’s work and being  
understanding our responsibilities as witnesses

*what are we yearning for?*  
to lift each other up affirm community  
create open safe(enabling) structures  
arts-based research in collective bargaining  
arts-based research considered in promotion and tenure process  
more full professors in arts-based research

we yearn  
to relax and flow together  
acknowledge generosity of spirit in others and ourselves  
plan more time together

(found in the notes collected from the final whole group gathering, ARTS retreat)



## Appendix A

### ARTS Pre-Conference Outline 2017

A Co-Emergent Arts-based Contemplative Retreat Day  
to Enter Radical Creative Possibilities

Developed by Carl Leggo, Susan Walsh & Barbara Bickel

#### Pre-conference Email to participants:

Invitation to attendees to lead an offering and bring any needed supplies for 5 – 10 people

Send: *lectio divina* chapter to attendees

Share link to all submitted abstracts with everyone

Bring: quote, comfortable clothes, and any articles or book chapters to share on contemplative arts practices

Bring: favorite short quote or short poem for a *lectio divina* practice

Bring: materials to work with on the day eg. art materials, writing materials, journal, musical instruments, computer

**Email** 10 people to lead a *Lectio Divina* small group process on the day

#### Prep & Set Up:

Visit the space the day before

Set up labyrinth (taped path on the floor)

Create a sharing space for eg. publications

Paper sheet on walls for afternoon session lists and for sticky-note responses

Print group process questions

Bring meditation bell

### OUTLINE FOR THE DAY

#### Morning

**8:45-9:00 - Participants arrive**

Music as people arrive

**9:00 - 9:10 - Land acknowledgement prayer**

**9:10 – 9:30 – Grounding practice – 2 – 3 minutes followed by 15 minutes**

**Individual contemplative (emptying) practice** of their choice eg. walk labyrinth, sit, make art, write, walk outside

**9:30 – 9:45 - Welcome - Vision for the day:** a retreat space that is restorative and reparative and respectful. This is a pre-conference day not the first day of the bigger conference – a day to take care of yourself. What do you need today? Receiving and listening and attending to one another with open attention. Following a similar flow of the book *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honouring Presence* – being in the energy and moment of the day.

#### **Explain co-curated offerings for the day**

“chart” on the wall with places for people to sign up (throughout the morning and lunch), if inspired, to host a conversation or activity pertaining to contemplative arts practices. Number of spaces based on number of attendees to the conference (3-10 people in each offered session).

9:45 – 9:55 – **Pair sharing** Introduction of name and embodied response to theme

9:55 – 10:15 – **Introductions** in large group

10:15 – 10:40 **Lectio Divina practice\***

Small groups of 4-5.

Engage a *lectio divina* together as a small group. Working with poems/quotes

10:40 – 11:00 – **Large group share insights** from the small group *lectio divina*

11:00 – 11:40 – **Small groups** (3-4 people) - discuss how the following questions relate to the offerings contributed:

What is a contemplative arts practice?

What does contemplation mean?

Why are contemplative arts practices important?

Write observations on sticky notes and contribute to group conversation (1 reporter from each group offering 2 insights that emerged). Sticky notes placed on a large wall chart so that ideas can be viewed by others throughout the day. People can take photos of these charts.

11:40 – 11:55 – **Large group sharing** of what came out of small group discussion on arts-based contemplative practices.

11:55 - 12:00 - **Contemplative practice** to transition into lunch.

12:00 – 1:00 **Lunch Break** – contemplative practice of eating

Food as nourishment for your body and spirit. Aware of how conversation during lunch is enriched by the food.

### Afternoon

1 – 1:15 – **Group grounding exercise.** Transition to silent **individual practice** of an arts-based contemplative practice eg. walk, sit, make art, write

1:15 – 2 - **Small theme group 1** with facilitated offerings from curated morning. Go to station where you are called to engage. Session areas are numbered.

2 – 2:15 – **Nourishment Break**

2:15 – 3:00 - **Small theme - group 2**

3:00 – 3:30 - **Large group** – shared reflections on offerings from the day. Reporting back from different groups. Time limited sharing from each group. Note taker

3:30 – 3:55 - **Where to from here?**

3:55 – 4:00 – **Contemplative closing** – sitting in silence – sharing gratitude and appreciations

\* Mesner, K., Bickel, B., & Walsh, S. (2015). *Lectio Divina: An invitation to readers*. In S. Walsh, B. Bickel, & C. Leggo (Eds.), *Arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching: Honoring presence* (pp. 20 – 22). New York: Routledge.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The found poems in this introduction were culled from various artifacts that were gathered during the planning process for the ARTS pre-conference retreat (Toronto, Canada, May 2017) and also notes from the retreat day.

<sup>2</sup> For a 5 minute video about Greg Wendt's process of the layout design for this special issue of Artizein, see <https://vimeo.com/331273254>

<sup>3</sup> See Introduction to Part One of the special issue for more about the gift economy (Bickel, Walsh, & Conrad, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Please see the full issue of Part One of this special issue of *Artizein* (Bickel, Walsh, & Conrad, 2018) at <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/atj/vol3/iss1/1>

<sup>5</sup> As previously noted, Carl Leggo was a co-facilitator for the 2017 retreat, a co-editor with Barbara and Susan of *Arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching* (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015), and originally, a co-editor of this special issue of *Artizein*. Carl passed from this physical plane in March 2019 because of cancer (see his writing about this in Part One of this issue, Leggo 2018). We and many others who knew him or were touched by his work and contributions to the fields of Arts-Based Research and Education continue to grieve the loss.

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# INDIGENOUS POIESIS: MEDICINE FOR MOTHER EARTH

VICKI KELLY

## ABSTRACT:

Indigenous knowledge practices are ecological encounters of profound ethical relationality that acknowledge the act of co-creating through living embodiments of Indigenous Poiesis. This radical participation in Indigeneity through the offering of our humble humanity allows us to move into the living intensity of profound reciprocal relationship. Through Indigenous Poiesis, art becomes ecological activism. This Indigenous Métissage weaves life writing, indigenous woodcarving, and experiences of native flute playing, and presencing Anishinaabe stories in the spirit of Indigenous oral tradition.

## BIO:

Vicki Kelly is Anishinaabe/Métis, and an Indigenous Scholar in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. She is an artist who plays the Native American Flute; she is a visual artist, Eurythmist/dancer, and writer. She has completed a two-year traditional apprenticeship at the Freda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art. As an art therapist she is deeply interested in Indigenous understandings of Health, Wellness and Healing.



Figure 1: *In the Discipline of Wind*. Video still from [http://www.joenorrisplaybuilding.ca/?page\\_id=1329](http://www.joenorrisplaybuilding.ca/?page_id=1329)  
© Joe Norris, 2014

*"It has become clear to me that how we live, how we organize, how we engage in the world – the process – not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation... Engaging in deep and reciprocal Indigeneity is a transformative act because it fundamentally changes modes of production of our lives. It changes the relationships that house our bodies and our thinking... If we want to live in a different present then we have to centre Indigeneity and allow it to change us."*

Leanne Simpson, 2017

Indigenous knowledge practices are ecological encounters of profound ethical relationality that acknowledge the act of co-creating through living embodiments of Indigenous Poiesis. What is provoked are potential encounters that ask us to fully engage in elegant enactments of making such that the ceremony of these sacred practices makes and unmakes us. This radical participation in Indigeneity through the offering of our humble humanity allows us to move into the living intensity of profound reciprocal relationship with the great flux of becoming within the circle of life. It is in such powerful acts of attunement that we entrain with the acoustic ecology of polyphonic creation. The human and the more than human are all living enactments or possible pathways of being and becoming; they are teachings offered, sounding through sonic resonance and reverberation. This Indigenous Métissage weaves life writing, Indigenous woodcarving, and experiences of native flute playing, with the evoking and provoking of presencing in the spirit of Indigenous oral tradition (for



example see [flute introduction](#) to Part 1 of this special issue). It is through returning to the ancient teachings of Indigeneity that we learn to radically re-imagine and re-animate our vision of the future for the generations to come. Through Indigenous Poiesis, art becomes ecological activism.

Creation longs for the alchemy of sacred acts, ceremony offered as medicine to our ailing Mother Earth. I ask: What are the Indigenous pedagogies of “Making” that can heal our broken relationships within our human communities, the more than human world, and ourselves? How do aesthetic encounters become sites or ecologies for social healing? How can Indigenous art as a knowledge practice create capacities that catalyze our consciousness towards a new vision of what it means to live on this land deeply relationally, such that it sounds with love songs created through the act of Indigenous poiesis?

Indigenous resurgence is ultimately an invitation to create spaces, ecologies of Indigeneity, that reanimate, revitalize and restore our respectful reciprocal relationship with “All Our Relations.” Thus, this article takes up the challenge offered by *Artizein*, and supports the journal’s notion of “preparing for the possible” by offering Indigenous Poiesis as a praxis that brings forth radical participation in ecologies of the possible as ceremonies of sacred enactment. I deeply appreciate the following linguistic links sited in the call: “*artem* (L.), meaning a skill or craft; *artus* (L.), suggesting a joining or fitting together; and *artios* (G.), describing that which is complete or suitable.” As an Indigenous artist/scholar I endeavour to develop the skillfulness or craft-ability to co-create an artistic practice that joins, or allows me to experience my being within the being of Creation such that I not only fit within the community of “All My Relations” but feel utterly at home and complete within its circle

of life and for life’s sake. The embodiment of Indigenous Poiesis as eco-poiesis, suggests a learning pathway, it offers teachings that can be gifted forward through artistic creation. In this Indigenous Métissage I share the weaving of the teachings gathered, thread by thread through my engagement in Indigenous arts-based and contemplative making through Indigenous carving and native flute playing. I braid these threads of lived experience with Indigenous aesthetics and Indigenous ethics to highlight a living alternative offered through Indigeneity and Indigenous Poiesis to the honourable harvest human beings can gift all creation. These teachings have proven crucial to my own Indigenous resurgence and search for spontaneous being as an Anishinaabekwe, an Anishinaabe/Métis woman.

If arts-based practice and contemplative practice are a pathway to “Artizein,” a way to prepare artful being or becoming as a work of art through practice, then what is the nature of the process? How do we as arts-based and contemplative practitioners become a creation such that our aesthetic and spiritual instrument of perception and understanding would acknowledge an “Artizein”, an artful being or one who is being artful through praxis? As an Indigenous artist/scholar this question lies at the heart of an essential existential inquiry and challenges me to be useful to my family of relations about how my reaching, my yearnings and my learnings have been about becoming fully human and healing. I have found medicine in the “making” and have had the honour of witnessing this profound process in others.

What are the first moments of preparation for artful being? What is the manner or mode that is suitable in the “making” or the joining together of ART and BEING? How have Indigenous Peoples or our Ancestors understood this profound process of

becoming through making or Indigenous Poiesis? What is the nature of the craft and/or what are the skills needed for the rendering of artful being?

I have been tracking Indigenous Poiesis or “making” as a profound participatory pedagogy, a process that makes and unmakes me. “Making” needs the soil of the soul to enact its active alchemy. In its unfolding it renders or transforms us, makes us available or resonant to the world around us. This sensitizing of our aesthetic sensibility creates an instrument that allows us to learn to entrain with the sounding of acoustic ecologies of being. Traditionally an Indigenous Knowledge Holder is one who has learned to hold knowledge such that they become resonant to and with the created world, or more specifically to the environmental and spiritual ecology of their traditional territory or lands. What is this process of becoming resonant, that I have

I grew up in the Anishinaabe territory of the Northern Ojibway or Northwestern Ontario. At that time the land was still untouched by development and thus profoundly potent, powerful and sublime. As a child, I grew up filled with awe and wonder, often utterly astonished at the beauty and magnificence of Creation around me. I was aware of the earth as Mother Earth and all of nature was animated with being and agency. During my adolescence, I became attentive to a subtle shift; my experiences of awe and astonishment at nature’s beauty and grandeur became an acknowledged sense of the presence of a moral agency that animates the natural world. Wandering alone in the wilderness, I had moments of profound spiritual reverence for what I sensed as a sacred landscape filled with being.

Indigenous People of all continents live within a tradition that fosters an awareness of the sacred being of nature and therefore show reverence before her, as Mother Earth. This movement from awe and wonder to reverence is foundational to understanding Creation as filled with moral and spiritual agency and being. Indigenous people have traditionally cultivated, through this Indigenous participatory pedagogy, a profound love and reverence for the land and “All Our Relations.” The environmental ecology is animated by a spiritual ecology of being. This living imagination or mytho-poetic tradition



Figure 2: Lake Lauzon called “Bindewaagagin ” meaning “Lake between the Lakes” by the Mississauga (Anishinaabek). © Vicki Kelly, 2015

learned through playing the Native American Flute in a place-based artistic practice?

(Cajete, 1994, 2015) is found in all the teaching stories of the Anishinaabe People. Through them we learn how to be the best



at being human from “All Our Relatives.”

I have also discovered what Zajonc (2009) and others call the path of reverence. This pathway is part of the participatory pedagogy of Indigenous Poiesis. The first part of this process begins with awe and wonder, foundational to all learning. As children, our radical openness and amazement leaves us awed and filled



Figure 3: *Path to Quetican or “Place of Unusual Beauty.”* © Vicki Kelly, 2015

with astonishment. This allows us to fill our senses fully through lived experience. Wonder changes to reverence when we feel and honour the powerful presence or force of agency that lies within the living phenomenon of the land, it becomes a sacred ecology. We feel the living presence of “All our Relations”; we sound and resound with the inner energy or sounding tone or voice of Creation. Through this we participate within the living effervescent landscape. Often, I was deeply moved by my experience of the northern lights or Aurora Borealis. I felt Creator moving within the luminous swirling choreography that danced across the sky. I was so absorbed in participating in the experience that I felt one with the flux and flow of luminosity over the snow-covered lake. I was absorbed by the embrace of the land and surrendered myself completely to the process, often feeling at one with the

natural world. This is when I experienced the land as sacred. Wonder, reverence, and the participatory pedagogy of being on the land, or in the canoe, gave rise to a spiritual experience of self-surrender and oneness with Creation. In living within the flux of energy that united me to “All My Relations” my instrument for knowing became resonant. The world offered itself to me, and as a young person I always felt I had to

learn how to fully or completely surrender deeply to the process of participating with the Circle of Creation in that place. My job was to withstand the intensity of my lived experience, to actively find my place within the family of life that surrounded me. The ancient granite, was acknowledged as a living part of Mother Earth; her ancient bones were some of the oldest rock on the face of the earth.

These profound experiences of reverence lead to a deeply felt ethic for and an ethical relationality to the land as well as to all the beings

or “All my Relations” living well in that place. The stories of the Anishinaabe created an imaginative landscape in which to honour these teachings and my inner imagination was created in symmetry with the land. This is the task of being human in that place.

In the Anishinaabe world the Creator, Gitche Manitou, imagined and fashioned Creation and sent the first or Original Human, our ancestor, to wander the world and to learn the name or essence of each and every being within Creation. The Original Human was to be open enough to receive the teachings or wisdom of each and every created being. The implicit responsibility was to fashion a relationship to the world, such that the created one, whether a plant being or an animal being would offer to share its essential nature or the teachings of its unique way of being. The dawning

of this wisdom in us is acknowledged as Illumination or knowing as a way of being. Often, in Indigenous Knowledge traditions, the knowing is understood: physically, emotionally, mindfully and spiritually. The wholeness of being human was gifted by these teachings through a beautiful process, an Indigenous Inquiry process. What does this process involve you ask?

It requires of us that we take up the teaching of humility which in Anishinaabe means “becoming like earth,” by offering our humanness to the participatory pedagogical process of becoming human and by following the teachings of “All Our Relations.” This is the experience I often felt while looking up at the northern lights, or at sunsets and sunrises. It was a reverence so profound I felt like I was kneeling in complete surrender

while watching or with-nessing. Seeing animals within their natural habitats, I felt blessed to witness their oneness with the land and how each contributed to the well-being of the Family of Creation. As I walked carefully or sat in my canoe drifting on the waters of a vast lake, a prayerful mood of humility was leading me to reverence for the gifts I received through my reciprocal relationship with the land. I felt deeply humbled and a profound sense of gratitude, an inward reverence through spiritual participation. My learning spirit was moved by and resonated with the land and all the beings living there. This prayerful way of “being with” was my humble offering to the land; a reciprocal recognition that animated me also animated the ecology in which I lived.

*Each day I greeted Mother Earth... Bozhoo... Aaniin*

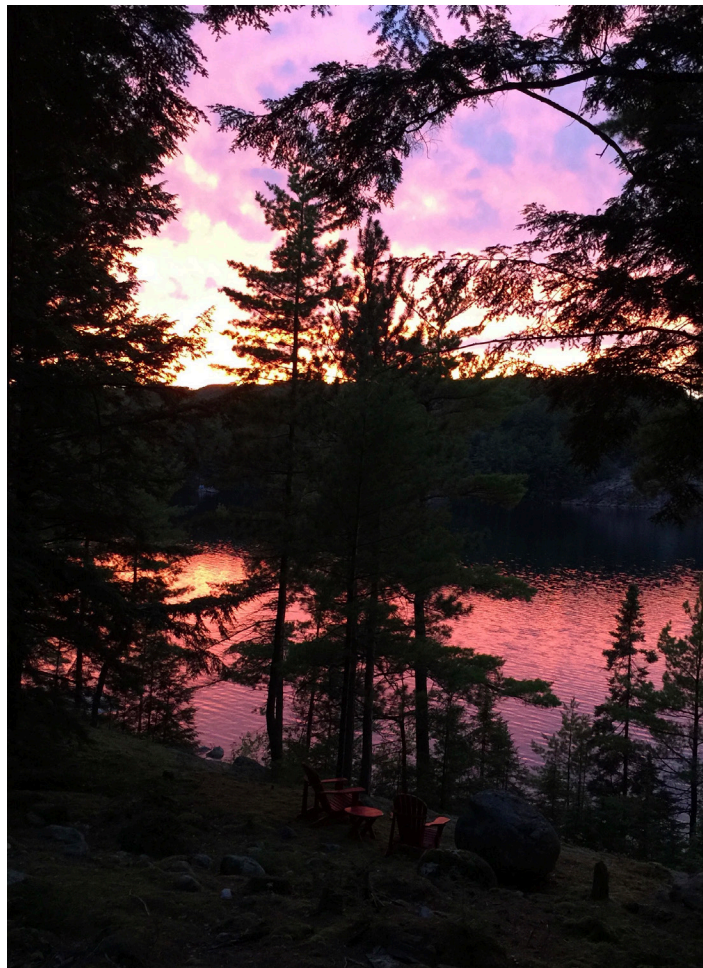


Figure 4: *Stillness*, Lake Lauzon called “Bindewaagagin ” meaning “Lake between the Lakes” by the Mississauga (Anishinaabek). © Vicki Kelly, 2016



What does Indigenous Poiesis or the Indigenous ceremony of “making” offer the soil of the soul? Well, it involves an Indigenous eight-fold pathway or way of preparation by circling the Medicine Wheel twice. It allows one to spiral deeply into the centre of our Indigeneity through embodied acts of ceremonial offering, asking, seeking, making, having, sharing, celebrating and being (Cajete, 1994). And through this process one emerges through a creative response to one’s existential yearning or longing for vision also known as the Vision Quest. One follows the great movement around the Medicine Wheel from the Eastern Doorway of wonder to reverence, resonance, to participatory pedagogy, to self-surrender and the oneness of deep attention and utter absorption. Indigenous Poiesis as a practice involves a series of processes or sites of activity. They are enacted within Indigenous Poiesis or “making” through the ceremony of offering, asking, seeking, making, having, sharing, celebrating and being. This is a process of inner inquiry and also of visioning within Indigenous knowledge traditions; Indigenous Poiesis offers a medicine way.

This learning or inquiry pathway begins with an appropriate orientation to the world and to learning. It acknowledges respectful reciprocal relationships; it invites the setting of intention and the focusing of volition through prayerful asking, seeking, creating and developing understanding, then celebrating one’s learning and emerging vision with reference to the central place of becoming and being. The circular nature of the process around the Medicine Wheel begins and ends with the centring place of inward awareness and contemplation.

*Offering* is the centering place of inwardness and reverence. This is the origin of prayerful offering where the souls’ intention is honoured and formed. The

longing for vision, dreaming, imagining or knowing is honoured in the energized intention to learn in a way true to our inherent nature and personality. This is honoured through the ceremonial offering of Tobacco to Mother Earth when gathering materials such as wood for carving or before playing the flute in place. One can also smudge with sage to prepare by washing ones being with the healing power of the rising smoke.

*Asking* is really a prayer. It is the beginning of the journey, asking for illumination, naming the quest, and essentially living deeply with a spiritual sense of intention or goal for the process. True learning requires deep motivation, down to the marrow of one’s bones, with one’s whole heart, soul and spirit. This initiates the process of making ready, preparing the ground, physically, emotionally, mindfully and spiritually. Asking is exploring new capacities and teachings with patience and conviction. One needs trust, faith and enduring patience. Asking is the initiation of the creative flow of energy, thought and imagination. The activity of asking is like preparing the soil, planting the seed, and asking for help and guidance. Each task undertaken develops capacity and skill, and a sense of direction for orientating oneself to the centre of the process. All this is done prior to embarking on the journey as an act of humility. One is asking for life’s sake, and for the gift of being awakened or transformed by the process and/or the journey ahead. Asking as a prayer may accompany the whole journey of “making;” it creates the good hands, good heart and good mind of the Indigenous Poiesis process.

*Seeking* is the actual process of questing, of looking for what one mysteriously yearns or longs for, that extends or augments one’s current capacity and sense of being. We may not know what we are searching for or

seeking, but we long for a gift, a song, a dance, a teaching, or finding a place or way of being, a felt sense of wisdom, or even a dream to live by. These are all expression of a yearning to learn or a longing for vision, a search for meaning or longing for capacity. In seeking, we are willing to undertake an arduous journey of transformation and are prepared to do what is needed. Often, one is willing to risk all and overcome great hardship, encountering many hinderances or obstacles on the adventure. One wants to learn to listen, to see, to know in specific ways, through specific and often multiple modalities. In seeking, we often learn lessons of caring compassion, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and humility. In my carving and flute playing, I am continually seeking, straining in my entraining, tuning to the sacred act of creating within Creation.

***Making*** involves creating new or novel creations as a result of one's visioning. Making is the work of good hands, good heart, and good mind; it creates a series of works of deep significance that symbolically or metaphorically inform one's knowledge of self and/or the world. We access our creativity and resourcefulness in making; we develop skill through the patience of practice. The song, dance, artifact, or effect that we create emerges from our vision and it changes not only our own lives, but the lives of others. Through the act of creating, we elaborate or fine tune what we have learned or cultivate the capacities we have developed. Making is magic, marvelous and mysterious. It is also hard work. Each of the first four stages is enacted as a prayer, with a mood of reverence and devotion to the process.



Figure 5: Vicki 'making' an eagle blanket pin for the regalia she is weaving. ©Aaron Nelson Moody, 2019

***Having*** is when we learn from enacting our vision or creating something, where our understanding is increased or we have learned something or honed our skill in some capacity. We also learn or develop a sense of our own selves, and witness how our own soul has developed capacities or sensibilities that extend or augment what we had or were previously. Through "making" we develop self-acceptance and/or find maturity in understanding through creating our own circumstances, by initiating our own process and participating in its pedagogy. Through "making" we come to have more maturity and become conscious participants creating our own worlds, inwardly and outwardly. We also develop the courage to accept the responsibility for becoming co-creators with others, with the world. We learn to re-cognize and manifest our unique potential; we learn how to apply our personal power and may even empower ourselves through what we make from our emerging vision. We can also empower others as well. This process may

also involve discerning decision making, and the cultivation of incubation time for implementing our vision within a specific context. Our having is always ecological to our “making” process; it is resonant to the forces that created it or gave it voice.

**Sharing** our vision and what we have learned or created becomes a part of the ceremony of life and the living spirit of community. We share the life we have sought or created with others, and sharing may involve a diversity of practices, forms and dimensions. It is essentially revealing or teaching others what we have learned or created. We are all teachers and we learn to generously share with others what we have gathered as songs dances, stories, rituals, or sacred art and also what we have become through developing new capacity. Teaching and sharing are part of the process of becoming more whole, spiritually mature and wise. The Indigenous act of witnessing or sharing in ceremony is when we acknowledge the act of carrying the teachings received with a sense of reciprocal responsibility. One is expected to tell the story of the sharing and spread the teachings through oral tradition.

**Celebrating** is the natural consequence of moments of “making,” having and spiritual sharing; it can appear in a diversity of processes, through protocol and ceremony. It can be an individual or community process and celebrate the mystery of life through creation. Celebrating honours the journey that each of us takes in our unique ways and lifts up the process through ceremony, and throughout this lifting up we celebrate ourselves like one does another in a traditional Blanketing Ceremony. Celebrating is a way of spreading the light, gifting the surroundings, often through ceremony. In the Indigenous world our response-ability is to complete the Circle of Creation through enacting ceremony and

giving back to the circle of life for life’s sake through sacred ritual.

**Being** is joyous and victorious, thankful and generous with deep inward reflection and honouring of the embodied gifts of the process. Indigenous Poiesis honours different, distinct and diverse states of being and acknowledges the journey of becoming, transformation, illumination, reconciliation, resurgence and healing. It allows us to access the centring place of our being with newfound clarity of purpose, soul maturity and heightened spiritual capacity. It strengthens our sense of the wholeness of self, our place in the world, and allows us to make more fulsome contributions to the circle of life and “All Our Relations.”

Finally, there are multiple modes or modalities for this process of Indigenous Poiesis; there are infinite paths and ways to walk this journey to the centre of our everyday lives. This process of the “ceremony of making” has been a part of all cultures and communities. It is also a very long and arduous quest of learning to be human that has been going on for millennia.



Figure 6: Becoming Thunderbird in the ‘making’.  
©Vicki Kelly, 2015

Why does the practice of Indigenous Poiesis and the honouring of our Indigeneity matter today? It is because it creates human beings



that are porous to the teachings of Creation and the circle of life. It allows us to fully participate, through our Indigeneity, in the ceremony of living with “All Our Relations.” Perhaps even more essential to the process of Indigenous Poiesis is that it creates an organ of imagination in which dwells the living signature or essence of being that we are gifted by Creation. We hold the gifts in our Be-Holding deep within the soil of our souls and spirits through the act of imaging or the act of knowing.

*Imagination has a place because imagination is a place, and because everything is connected to everything else, the encounter with the imagination is a living communication within a sentient landscape...where one has everything to do with who one is... When mind, spirit and land... are understood to be as they have always been, as coevolutionary, there emerges a principle that guides imagination in its duty to integrate nature's realities and ensure the perpetuation of those realities and so all of Life. The stories that perpetuate themselves through human beings are our environmental contribution. (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 370)*

We are an extension of the land and the land dwells within our inner world of imagination, thriving in our spiritual ecology of being. Ceremony can also be understood as an embodied enactment and as an act of imagination.

I walk the way of ceremony, through flute playing, carving, and being present with my relations; the pedagogy of ceremony teaches me the co-imagining of Indigenous Poiesis. Ceremony is a way of reciprocal recognition, of witnessing and walking with others in the act of deep reflective knowing. Responsible relationality gives birth to meaning... nested into each practice or ceremony is the practice of reciprocal recognition. When we witness each other in the act of celebrating Indigeneity, reciprocally, our possibilities of Indigeneity grow. We honour the heart of

our homeland as we welcome the resurgence of our original teachings; there we learn to love Creation as Creation was created.



Figure 7: Becoming Thunderbird is emerging. ©Vicki Kelly, 2015

Earlier, I acknowledged the Nishnaabowin word *Aaniin* that comes from *Aa*, the sound that places us in a spiritual context, or Indigenous universe. *Ni* is a taking notice of the sounding. *Aaniin*, as a greeting, is taking all the thoughts and feelings of your journey in the sounding universe and learning to see or recognize yourself. *Aaniin* also means that one transforms the capacities created through the journey as a way of perception, as a way of knowing in the act of reciprocal re-cognition. *Aaniin*, I see you through the capacity to re-cognize in you what I have learned within myself.

*Aaniin* is a continual process of unfolding, a commitment to the kind of relationality through which we dedicate ourselves to seeing and hearing the unique gift of all our lifeways as a practice, through



Indigenous Poiesis. Ultimately, *Aaniin* is way of honouring what has been given lovingly to us by the spirits and “All Our Relations” within Creation. Thus, *Maa maa ya wen du moowin* – is the process or art of recognizing, a practice of deep understanding and being fully aware; and *Aaniin* – the reciprocal recognition of seeing or hearing the essence of creation’s lifeways, and honouring Indigeneity as a transformative act is a pathway that ultimately leads to the practice of *Mino-bimaadiziwin* – living the good life, while serving the community of life.

Why does our attention to Indigenous Poiesis matter? It matters because without the capacities it fosters, we are not able to take up our greatest responsibility of being able to co-imagine our contemporary ecologies in a way that ensures their sustainability for future generations, for the next seven generations.

*Native American intellectual tradition still continues to express the North American Landscape in intellectual and spiritual reciprocity where the more-than-human grants qualities of mind to the human... Thinking with and believing in the diverse minds that assemble ecosystems allows humans to understand what their animal teachers, and spiritual helpers guide and instruct, in ways of “being” of the continent. (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 368).*

Indigenous people understand that Creation expects human recognition to perpetuate their appreciation in thankful acts of reciprocity. The spiritual ecology that is created (Cajete, 1994) is modernity’s guide to recovering the necessary relationship between healthy ecologies of land and human minds. Thus, to heal the earth, we would need to expand our collective imaginative understandings of Turtle Island, or North America. Here Indigenous Poiesis becomes ecological activism.

Indigenous Poiesis is a place or site of inquiry into a reciprocal recognition with the natural world so critical to our collective future and the next seven generations.

“All my relations!” “We Are All Related”

The pathway of being human is gifted by teachings from the being of “All Our Relations” and the great Mystery Gitche Manitou. However, today I sense we are not attending to the teachings fully. Thus, in closing I would like to share a teaching story that I think is deeply relevant to current situation and why this edition of *Artizein* as well as arts-based and contemplative practices in general are so needed in our time, and how they offer important Medicine to Mother Earth...



Figure 8: Becoming Thunderbird is awakening.  
©Vicki Kelly, 2015

Traditionally when there were troubling times, Waynaboozhoo appeared and taught his people how to offer tobacco to the earth as an act of prayerful reciprocity, and how to gift tobacco to fire, offering the rising

smoke as a prayer to Gitchie Manitou. He gifted the people with the sacred pipe wrapped with sage that he received after his life-long search for his father. The sacred pipe is often offered to those in the circle to seal peace and good will; it is used to offer prayer to Creator through the rising smoke. Creator gifted human beings with the Seven Grandfather or Grandmother teachings on how to live the good life and taught us the way of ceremony to help us stay on the Good Red Road.

However, time and again human beings find their way to war and destruction; time and again human beings forget the teachings and turn their backs on "All Their Relations." At such times, Gitchie Manitou threatens to flood the world, to once more wash it clean of our deep disrespect and destruction of Creation and its intentions. Creator becomes angered at how such a beautiful gift could be so twisted and corrupted. So, Creator instructed a very powerful spiritual being to destroy the Earth after the Sun rose four times. Some say that this being was the father of Waynabosshoo, and it looked as though all of life on earth would be destroyed again.

Just before dawn on the fourth day, the Mi-gi-zi (Eagle), flew out of the crack between darkness and light—that edge between night and day. He flew straight into the sky. He flew so high he flew completely out of sight. He flew straight toward the burning face of the Sun and to the Creator just as the Sun was about to come over the rim of the Earth. Eagle screamed four times to get the Creator's attention. Creator saw Mi-gi-zi and held back the Sun. At the time of this Be-da'-bun, false dawn, Mi-gi-zi talked to Gitchie Manitou and said: "I know the earth is full of evil and corruption. I have seen all this in my travels. But, I have also seen that there are yet a few people who have remained true to the original instructions. I still see the smoke of tobacco rise here and there from humble people, who are still trying to live in harmony with the created

Universe. I plead on behalf of these few, that you call off the destruction of Earth. Let me fly over the Earth each day at dawn and look over the people. As long as I can report to you each day that there is still one person who sounds the Waterdrum or who uses tobacco and the Pipe in the proper way, I beg you to spare the Earth for the sake of the unborn. It is in the Unborn that there is still hope for the Earth's people to correct their ways."

Gitchie Manitou pondered what Mi-gi-zi had to say. Creator then instructed the spiritual being to hold back his fury. Gitchie Manitou entrusted Mi-gi-zi, Eagle, with the duty of reporting to him each day the condition of the Earth's people. The miracle of the sunrise happened again for the Anishinaabe. We owe our lives and lives of our children to Eagle. This is why Mi-gi-zi, Eagle, is so respected by Indigenous people everywhere. This is why the Anishinaabe People make a whistle from the wing bone of the eagle. They sound the whistle four times at the start of their ceremonies. They do this to remember Our Relative, Mi-gi-zi, Eagle, his teaching and the role he plays in the preservation of the Earth and the People, The Anishinaabe.



Figure 9: Becoming Thunderbird. Made of Alder tree, acrylic paint, horse hair. ©Vicki Kelly, 2015



This story teaches me that our artistic/contemplative praxis matters to future generations, to the Unborn, and to Mother Earth herself. Indigenous Poiesis, or “making,” and such contemplative arts-based practices, are like the offering of Tobacco into the fire of Creation; they create the possibility of a medicine way. In the rising smoke our daily prayers are carried and offered humbly to Creator, Gitchie Manitou, the active agency of sacred being that we honour within Creation and in service of “All Our Relations.” I am filled with gratitude in bearing witness to my colleagues over the years, and especially at the retreat with colleagues this journal is honouring. It is this love of praxis and the radical participation in its pedagogy that has inspired me so profoundly. I have often felt the loving eyes of my colleague, Carl Leggo, as he so whole-heartedly mentored me into my life in the academy with such loving kindness and generosity of spirit. I feel such deep gratitude to the honourable harvest that is created by my colleagues, by my collegial family, celebrated and honoured here. May our words rise with love like sacred smoke and the offering of Tobacco.

*All My Relations. We are All Related. Aaniin*



Figure 10: Tending the Sacred Fire. ©Vicki Kelly, 2018

In my concluding, I would like to share one final Anishinaabe teaching and dedicate it to Carl Leggo.

Long, long ago, Mi-gi-zi carried the pleading prayers of an Elder and the Anishinaabe People. At a time when things were not well with Creation, Mi-gi-zi drew near to an old man sitting by the shore of a great lake. As Mi-gi-zi swooped down low he heard the earnest words of the Elder asking for Creator to help the People as they had lost their way and were starving and sick. Eagle decided to carry these prayers to the Gitchie Manitou, and so rose high into the sky and flew directly toward the burning face of Father Sun. Mi-gi-zi gathered courage and prayed that as they were carrying the good words and earnest prayers of the Elder and the People, they would be protected. So, summoning courage, Mi-gi-zi made a mighty swooping arch right into the backside of the Sun and there cried out four times to the Creator asking that the prayers be heard. Creator considered all this and decided to send Mi-gi-zi back to the Anishinaabe to remind the People of the teachings of the offering of Tobacco, the ceremony of the Pipe, and the medicine way to healing. As Mi-gi-zi was about to leave Creator spoke: “Because of your courage and service to the People, I am going to transform you into a Thunderbird, Animikeekaa. Your voice will be like thunder and your keen eye will now flash like lightning across the sky. From now on, you will be the one who hears the prayers of those who pray for the People and you will carry my gift to them in dream and the power of Vision.” And so, Mi-gi-zi, now Thunderbird, or Animikiikaa, flew back to the People and offered the gifts and blessings of Gitchie Manitou. Since that time, when the Thunderbird, Animikiikaa, shakes the world with thunder causing lightning to flash across the sky, when the thunder roars and lightning strikes the earth, the wise ones know Thunderbird,

Animikiikaa, is near and then they make offering and pray for a dream, a vision to live by. They gather the sacred medicines to make their Medicine Bundles for the healing of the People, themselves and Mother Earth.

The first teaching story, and its call, the cry of the Eagle, was with me during the time of Carl's last days and passing. Each morning, and often throughout the day, I would take my flute and turn toward the West, the place of the setting sun. I would acknowledge the proud presence of Mount Baker, look across the mighty Fraser River towards Richmond, to the ocean at Steveston and beyond. As I played and prayed to the Seven Sacred Directions, I was aware of Carl doing the work of laying down his beautiful life like tobacco in offering to Creator and placing it carefully before the Community of Life he loved so dearly. And as he did this work, my dear colleagues and I did our work through prayers, poetry and poiesis. We honoured Carl because we knew him as an Elder who prayed for his people; through his wisdom he saw clearly. Courageously, he held a dream and lived a vision, and in so doing he honoured the teachings of Thunderbird, Animikiikaa. Carl, in his prayerful reaching as poet, artist, scholar, Grandpa, and most importantly beautiful human being, was doing as he has always done, indicating the medicine way of love and healing that is our human work, our offering to our People and for "All Our Relations." He, and yes, we, are living in prayer and making our humble offerings. I believe we are called to heed Eagle's call and have the courage, as Carl did, to ask Thunderbird to gift us with visions and a volition that acts like medicine

for our times. I believe that we, like he, do the work of Indigenous Poiesis for the People, and that we walk prayerfully in ceremony each and every day to discover the medicine that will heal Mother Earth, and in so doing heal each and every one of us.

Throughout his life Carl gathered his Medicine Bundle; he offered ways and words that did indeed touch our hearts and imaginations. Offered in love, they have worked like a precious alchemy in the soil of our souls, and germinating there they will inspire us to reach for the light of day and gift Creation with new life and healing.

*For life's sake All Our Relations Aaniin*



Figure 11: Becoming the Offering. ©Vicki Kelly, 2018

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is the third in a trilogy of pieces. The first is a chapter in the book "Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence" co-edited by Susan Walsh, Barbara Bickel and Carl Leggo in 2015. The second is a sonic and visual introduction in Part One of this special issue entitled "An Offering and A Prayer" linked in this article.



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# LIVING WITH A LIMINAL MIND

YORIKO GILLARD

## ABSTRACT:

Learning to be an educational storyteller entails using every creative skill I learned since my childhood and has allowed me to connect with others especially those in pain. This paper is a reflection of my emotional past. My tears are coming from the ocean and rivers in my liminal space. In this space, I contemplate my hopeful future and seek its contemplative challenges to discover what I still do not know and could learn as an educator. My sincere contemplation to serve society shall be a poetic reflection of who I am becoming each step of my life. Creative writing is the truthful voice of my soul. I, a contemporary artist, avoid making art unless my heart screams its pain and allows these stories to take flight. Memories of pain are seeded throughout my liminal space where water overflows and swallows them occasionally. The beauty of ambiguity is inside grey pavements and reflects the multi layers, which are subtle and bold at the same time. I shall become free with my sense of belonging that is connecting to my soul and history.

## BIO:

Yoriko Gillard is an artist, poet, researcher and teacher. After receiving heartfelt

support and care and mentorship from Dr. Carl Leggo, she advanced to PhD Candidate in Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC, Canada in June 2018. While teaching Japanese language, Japanese culture and visual arts through a variety of creative practices in various educational communities, she tries to connect with people in the *Kizuna* way, which Gillard defines as a respectful, affectionate, and trustful reciprocal relationship. 絆(きずな: *Kizuna*) is a Japanese word which connotes a strong feeling of belonging to one's communities, people, lands, and nature. The concept is well known in Japan especially since the Great East Japan Earthquake struck the country in March 11, 2011. In 2017 she worked as a student researcher for [Landscapes of Injustices](#) at Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre in Burnaby where she uncovered the resilient *Kizuna* stories of Japanese Canadian communities from 1942-1949. Her desire in education comes directly from her mentor, Dr. Leggo's words; "Live creatively and poetically" to reach out people with her liminal storytelling practices.

There is always a shadow beside my eyes where I see the greys<sup>1</sup>, the color of wisdom in my liminal mind. My liminal mind is where I allow myself to be free to think of anything truthful with intuitive sense ... in my liminal space. My liminal mind guides my living and thinking processes of a relationship among 'contemplate,' 'contemplative,' and 'contemplation.' It is my way to wander a world full of opportunities that occasionally seem promised, smooth, and secure, yet sometimes disappointing, rough, and bumpy ...



My liminal space, a safer place  
allows me to play with  
a lingering verb 'to contemplate'  
a hopeful adjective 'contemplative'  
a wishful noun 'contemplation' ...

The verb 'to contemplate'  
an action to gather thoughts from the  
past  
imagination in the present  
the path to our 'contemplative' future  
with others to serve society ...

Let me hold my passion ...  
let me seek trusting relationships ...  
let me feel hearts of care and kindness  
...  
my way of living with a liminal mind  
another story to weave a grey journey  
I am mending in my liminal space ...



It hurts<sup>2</sup> me  
still ...  
truly tragedy ...  
earth shock  
oceans awoken  
tsunami warned  
humans crying  
technology ... radiation ...  
our broken silence  
March 11, 2011,  
the day I will never forget ...



I am connecting  
with souls ...  
tears still screaming  
my careful selection takes time  
outside the academy I stay  
where am I?  
where do I belong?  
inside the academy?  
liminal mind circulates ...

“... you need to stop thinking  
am I good enough ...”  
Mentor’s words <sup>3</sup>  
wisdom,  
care,  
medicine  
for many I know  
contagious  
genuine  
his trust  
circulating ...

2018, seven years later  
my contemplation  
messy  
people care  
humanity  
inside and outside the academy  
many  
feel the pain  
many  
see the pain  
many  
hear the pain  
tears  
fill my heart ...

Life and death  
belonging or not belonging  
life long contemplation  
circulates ...  
my liminal space a safer space  
since childhood  
living with a liminal mind ...

“I might not live long ... dear ...  
I teach everything I can now ....”

Mother’s voice echoes  
my heart aches to survive ...

attentive to life  
my mother her teaching  
heart still beating  
danger a teacher she says  
smiling at school  
hiding my fear of losing her ...

A girl sobbing  
alone at night  
still ...  
my forever friend  
my forever teacher ...





My liminal mind  
a guide  
to feel and hear voices  
pain of others ...

Learning journey  
memories of liminal space  
taking me far  
deep reasoning  
my actions  
dancing together ...  
I am alive ...

walking head down  
    thinking life  
with others ...  
    staring cracks  
    in the street  
    reflect my life  
with others ...

Every street has its history ...  
snowstorms  
frost heaves  
the earth lifts our sealed pavement  
us relearning  
the power of nature  
can we command ...  
street full of gray patches  
telling us stories of  
negotiations and contemplations  
driving quickly  
responsibilities  
missing the chance to learn  
again and again ...



Several promises to myself

in staying in the academy ...

- 1) Admit I do not know many things
- 2) Be honest with my inner voices
- 3) Follow people I trust only
- 4) Be humble and stay away from envy
- 5) Seek help for reciprocal growth
- 6) Contemplate to serve society

there

are

more

to

come ...

The world seems two-sided  
right and wrong  
life and death  
accepted and declined  
gain and loss  
success and failure  
trust and distrust  
binary concept continues endlessly  
creating multiple perspectives  
rightness reversed into wrongness  
"I like – " and "I hate –"  
multiplicity ...  
binary collections

Vancouver  
myth of a multicultural dream city  
full of ethnic foods  
different languages echo on streets  
are we belonging?  
are we understanding?  
are we feeling?  
are we listening?



are we learning?  
are we comforting?  
are we caring?  
are we sharing?  
contemplation keep moving ...

Yes or No  
Black and White  
Up and Down  
Right and Left  
In and Out  
Good and Bad  
Correct and Incorrect  
endless binaries ...

Nikkei National Museum<sup>4</sup>  
a place that holds memories for  
many  
from 1942 to 1949  
Japanese Canadian injustice  
still hurting ... haunting  
many Canadians  
they were called enemy aliens

my elderly friends teach and cry  
silently and humbly  
living with us  
past/present/future  
many ignore  
many unaware  
many disbelieve  
many uneducated ...  
still ...

My own ignorance  
guilt and shame  
this my force  
a reason to stay in the academy ...  
seventy six years  
long past already...

My commitment  
research the past<sup>5</sup>  
to the future  
in present ...  
fifty letters from 1942 ...

Japanese calling me  
to belong  
to understand  
to feel  
to listen  
to learn  
to comfort  
to care  
to share  
contemplation connecting us ...

Japan to Canada  
Canada to Japan  
unimaginable pain  
travels with my liminal mind  
binary problems  
existing  
still ...

Contemplative processes  
break my heart deeply  
crying helps

perhaps  
crying reminds me pain  
emotion our pure sense  
who decided who does not belong  
in the academy ...  
crying many times  
with my broken heart  
walking around Fukushima ...  
translating letters from 1942 ...  
who has the right to say I am weak?  
who can decide crying is weak?  
I am alive  
to feel the pain  
in my liminal space  
with a liminal mind ...

I am a human walking on earth full  
of greys  
I am a person who cares about pain  
of others  
Is this enough to stay in the academy?





“... you are an artist ...  
why do you care about the academy ...  
you should belong to communities ...  
you are a social activist ...”

I hear well

I feel well

what is the academy anyways ...  
contemplation circulates ...

Education ...

in the heart of our lives

within society including the academy ...

Pavement cracks  
    history ...  
layers, mendings  
    history ...  
Fukushima  
Japanese Canadians  
    history ...  
strength gained from survivors  
    irony and truth  
resilience, dignity, forgiveness ...  
    history of hopes  
circulate with my liminal mind ...

Meandering  
living with a liminal mind  
stumbling all over the places  
get hurt and carry scars  
memories connecting souls to care  
pain guiding us forward ...  
this is my love letter to the academy ...



[Link to video](#)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Photos (Still Images) in this chapter are selected from the video created by the author. Gillard, Y. (2016), Living with a Liminal Mind.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0166942>

<sup>3</sup> Heartfelt words of encouragement given by Dr. Carl Leggo, my PhD Supervisor

<sup>4</sup> See <http://centre.nikkeiplace.org/research/japanese-canadian-history-in-brief/>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.landscapesofinjustice.com/>





# “METRAMORPHOSIS” A SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ARTS-BASED AND CONTEMPLATIVE INQUIRY

BARBARA BICKEL

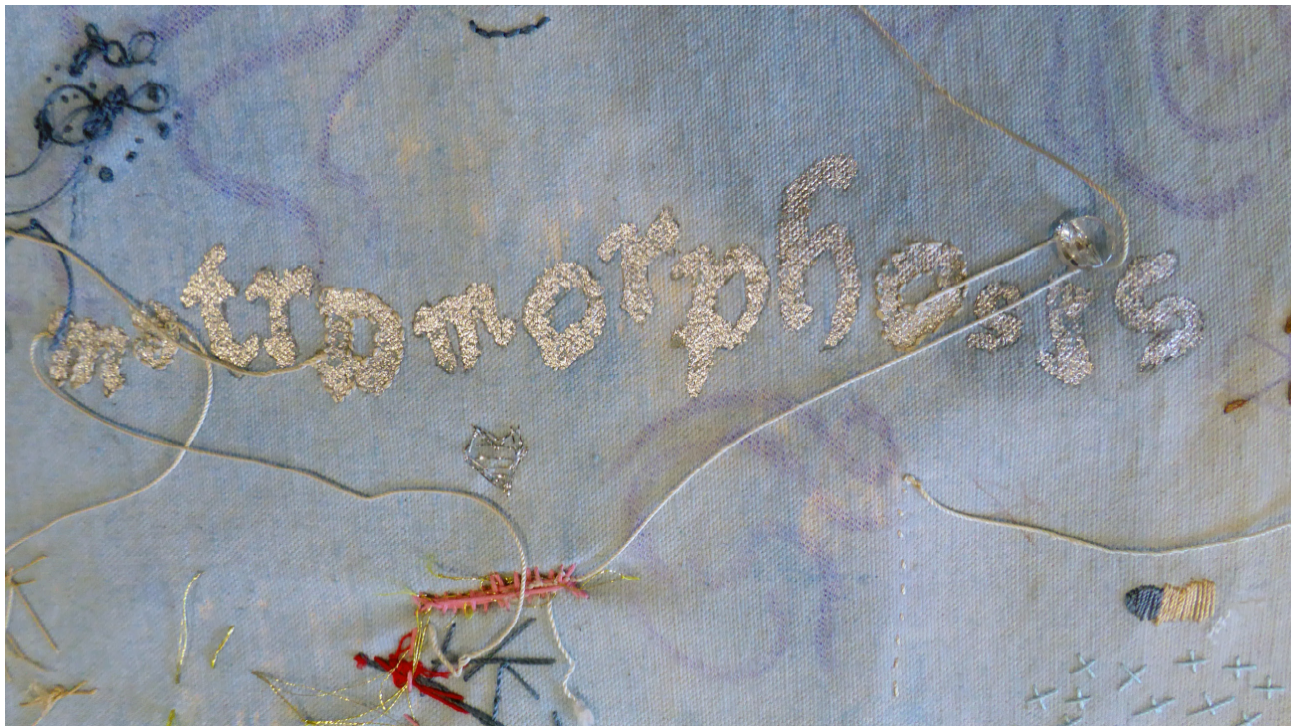
## ABSTRACT:

The birth story of the *Metramorphosis* book begins in 2010 at an artist residency on Toronto Island. The book is bound with buttons allowing the cloth pages to be unbound and bound over and over again. In this way it is read anew each time, as it is never re-buttoned in the same order. After a year of stitching into the book I realized it was not my book alone to complete, as the study of matrixial theory (Ettinger, 2005) I was contemplatively engaging in the book making is about relationality, co-becoming and copoiesis. In 2012, I began to carry the book with me while traveling. In the generative state of co-becoming, the book has taken on a life of its own. The 2017 Arts Pre-conference and call to write this article prompted me for the first time to write about this living matrixial

book as an on-going socially-engaged art/inquiry/contemplative co-event. This article includes images of the book pages, Ettingerian quotes, my reflections on the lived experience with the book, and a poetic rendering of the matrixial trance that lies beneath the book’s journey.

## BIO:

**Barbara Bickel** is an artist, researcher, and educator currently practicing in Calgary, Alberta Canada where she co-founded Studio M\*: A Research Creation Lab Intersecting Arts, Culture and Healing in 2017. She is an Associate Professor of Art Education Emeritus at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, USA. To view her art portfolio and arts-based research on-line visit [barbarabickel.com](http://barbarabickel.com).



*Metramorphosis*<sup>1</sup> is the “turning of subjective boundaries into thresholds” through the creative process of co-becoming (Ettinger, 1999, p. 165).<sup>2</sup>



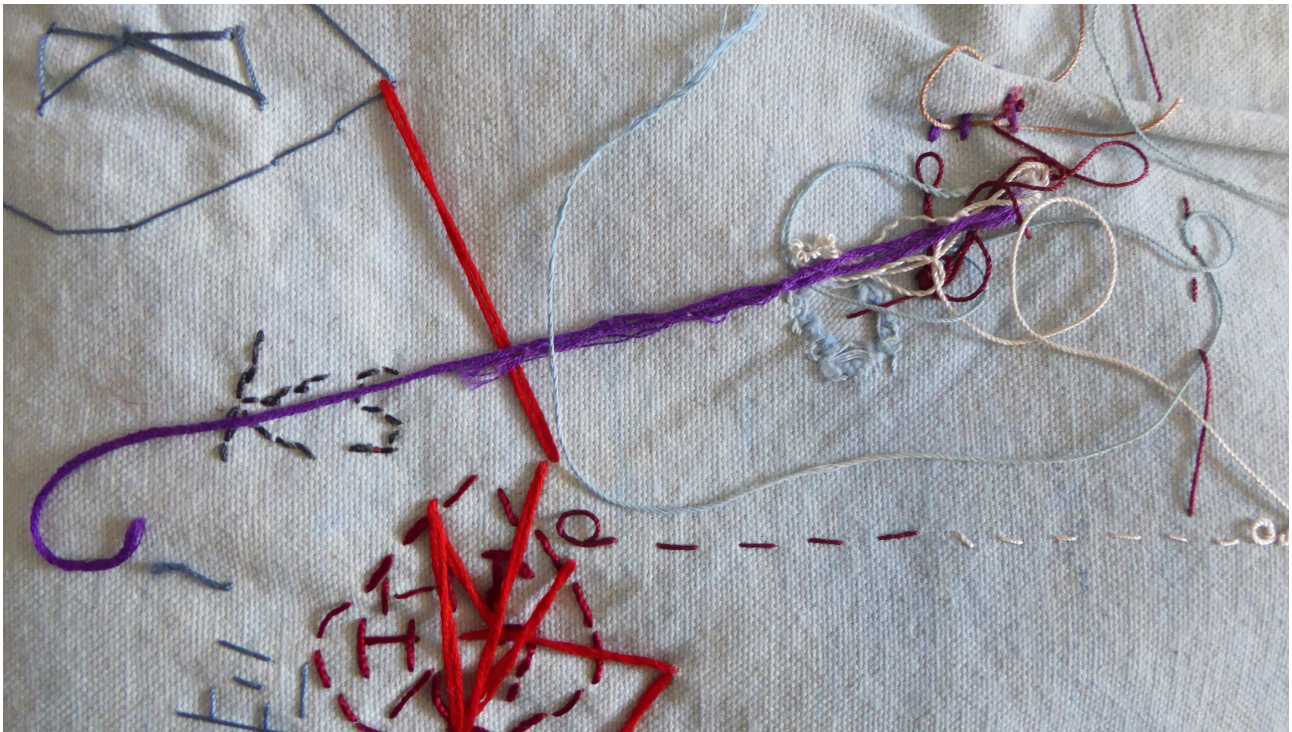
I sit alone on the couch in the middle of the big open room with the cloth *Metramorphosis* book<sup>3</sup> resting on my lap. This is my offering for the ARTS pre-conference retreat taking place in Toronto in 2017. I do not know who will choose to join my arts-based and contemplative experience embedded in this ever-evolving living *matrixial*<sup>4</sup> book. A handful of curious artist-teachers tentatively join me on the couches, and I hand them each a page that I have unbuttoned and detached from the book's binding. I invite them to pick up a needle and thread and to stitch themselves into the conversations found in the "aesthetic and ethical unconscious paths: strings and threads" awaiting them on the cloth page (Ettinger, 2005, p. 703). I tell them there are no rules as to how they do this except to not stitch the buttonholes shut. I ask if anyone knows how to sew, and those that do begin to assist the threading of the needle of those who do not.

The evolving story of the book *Metramorphosis* is encountered and the threshold is crossed in this way – bringing collected memories of the *I and non-I*<sup>5</sup> into a place of co-becoming. This begins entry into "*matrixial border spaces* [where]... the artist as a partial subject takes part and testifies to/for an unknown other, or rather, it is the matrixial threads of the artwork which testify" (Ettinger, 1999a, p. 93-94). The book *Metramorphosis* has become a testimony with the threads of my own co-becoming woven within it. As a woman artist, always partial, and always becoming the book making process has gathered and extended memories in the forming and unforming dance between my own *I* and *non-I* relations.



*Differentiation-in-Jointness* as "taking responsibility for the other" (Ettinger & Virtanen, 2005, p. 700).





*Separation-in Jointness* takes place within matrixial border space “where distance-in-proximity is continuously reattuned” (Ettinger, 2004, p. 76).

It is a simple gesture, offering a page to another and inviting them to touch and engage with the book and consequently to *wit(h)ness*<sup>6</sup> all unknown connected others who have stitched into the pages before them. It becomes an opportunity to engage with *primary compassion*, a knowing of the other before we are known (Fisher & Bickel, 2015). As primary compassion is too fragile for the phallic sphere, it resides in the matrixial. This piece of writing is an invitation into the matrixial sphere of primary compassion.

I invite you to step into the border spaces with me and to be with the matrixial terms, the visual images, the trance and writing about the journey of the book pages while holding a matrixial gaze. A gaze that “is a touching gaze,... never purely visual, a[s] it enters and alters the screen of vision which by definition is im-pure and inseparable from other unconscious dimensions of the psyche, informed by different sources of sensibilities, and mainly, connected to and affected by the unconscious of the Other and the consciousness of the Cosmos (Ettinger, 2005, p. 710).” In engaging art through a matrixial gaze we can touch primary compassion in the process of contemplative inquiry. This is potentially a fragilizing process that can open one to the consciousness of the Cosmos and co-becoming.

In a Pacific Coast time zone two years earlier, in 2015, the cloth book, to which the ARTS pre-conference artist-researchers were adding their stitches, found its way to a weekend writing retreat where the co-authors of another book gathered<sup>7</sup> and contemplatively added their stitches to the same cloth pages. Each book chapter author brought a contemplative practice to share, co-creating the writing and performance generating processes of the group at their writing retreat. This book was my contemplative arts contribution to that day. This earlier collaborative writing retreat became the template used for the invitational and emergent facilitation structure of the 2017 ARTS pre-conference.



*Psychic Strings* "covibrate and traces are stored in sharable threads" (Ettinger, 2005, p. 704).

Remembering 5 years earlier, in 2010, during a summer away from my tenure-track university position in the USA. I was at an artist residency on Toronto Island, Canada one of my favorite places to make art<sup>8</sup>. I recall the birth story of the *Metramorphosis* book. It began as a place-based trance journey I undertook with Lake Ontario for an art piece that would be part of a larger project that would be entitled *Wit(h)nessing Eyes Close(d)*<sup>9</sup>. It was a troubling and pivotal year in my art practice of deeply questioning working with the female body and creating art for 'the wall.' I had lost trust in my ability to hold the greater purpose of my art and art practice of freeing the human body from the colonizing gaze of a toxic hegemonic patriarchal worldview. My creative optimism was in much need of adaptation to the collapse I was experiencing and witnessing in the world, and in the world of art and visual culture around me. During this artist residency I was intuitively seeking an alternative.

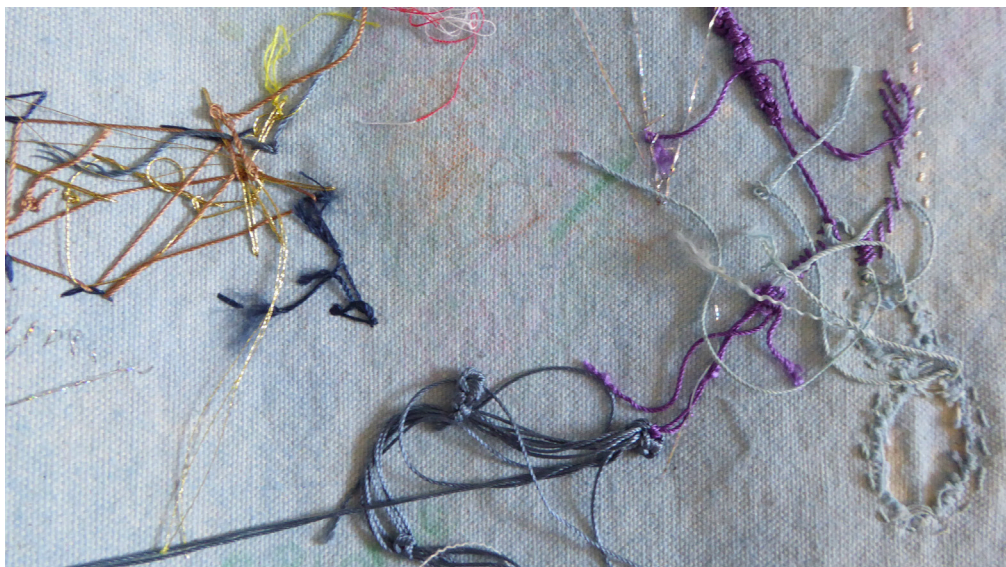
While reading an article on the art of women artists I discovered the work of artist, theorist, activist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger.<sup>10</sup> Her articulation of "art as a transport station for trauma" (Ettinger, 2000, p. 91) re-ignited my commitment to making art as a healing gesture for both the creator and the viewer. I created seven large canvas tapestry-like pieces in this project working with images of my own aging body and lake-inspired trance journeys. I exhibited the four artworks created at that residency in a studio showing surrounded by supportive artist friends. But one particular piece I was not satisfied with, as I did not feel it worked aesthetically. After I returned home, inspired by a cloth book I saw created by the early iconic feminist artist Louise Bourgeois, I made the decision to cut up the aesthetically "failed" art piece from the Ettinger inspired series into twenty-two small pieces. In this way I transformed the lake-womb trance-generated art piece into a personal contemplative study book of some of the many perplexing terms I was learning from the language of Ettinger's matrixial theory. What I did not know at the time of cutting the canvas into smaller pieces was that this simple act was to do much more than repurpose my original "failed" art piece, allowing it to be viewed as a book in the big city art gallery. It was to become a companion book for me to learn from and to travel with, into the future and back. A rich metaphor from which to make, inquire and teach into. It was a way to hold my partial subject self, my *I* and *non-I*, in relationship to my known and unknown relations with others and my often times conflicting selves in its gentle soft pages.



I secured the book with buttons allowing pages to be unbound and bound over and over again. In this way it is read anew each time, as it is never re-buttoned in the same order. I entitled the book *Metramorphosis*, based on my understanding of Ettinger's articulation of the word—as the turning of “the subject's boundaries into thresholds” where meaning is encountered and in process, not fixed (Ettinger, 2005a, p. 165). After a year of stitching into the book I realized it was not my book alone to complete as matrixial theory is about relationality, co-becoming and *copoiesis*.<sup>11</sup>

When the book was exhibited in the art installation in Chicago it was an interactive art piece and others were invited to stitch into it. I remember vividly the artist talk I gave in the gallery to a group of seniors with Alzheimer's disease-- individually handing a page to them, and the delight and enthusiasm they shared when invited to stitch into the cloth page. I began to carry the book with me on my travels, offering it as an *encounter-event*<sup>12</sup> with many others in a *matrixial border space* (Ettinger, 2006, p. 219). Since the fall of 2011 the book has traveled to 15 different cities in 3 different countries (USA, Canada, and Egypt). In this way the book has come to dwell in the physical and metaphorical border spaces of ongoing threshold crossings.

The book is a peoples' book that has been added to by hundreds of others at the time of this publication. The many co-authors who have stitched into this book have participated through a diversity of venues: 3 artist talks, 4 conference presentations, 11 university art, education or women, gender and sexuality studies classes, 8 art installations, and 3 retreats (including the 2015 retreat for the writing of the book *Arts Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence* and the Arts Preconference in 2017). The crossing of thresholds this book has enabled for myself and others is both known and unknown, revealed in its pages and not revealed. The book continues to be held, opened, gazed upon and stitched into and through. It compassionately holds the parts with the whole, the one and the many in its pages.



*Fragilization* is the “effect of borderlinking to a wound and co-emerging with an-other” (Ettinger, 1998, n.p.).



In the generative state of co-becoming the book has taken on a life of its own. The pre-conference and call to write this article prompted me for the first time to write reflectively about this living matrixial book as an on-going socially-engaged art/inquiry/contemplative co-event. As I dug through my many files and photographs of the book project in preparation for writing, I discovered the transcript of the source trance that preceded the making of the original art piece. This trance had been temporarily lost to my conscious self, forgotten due to my curating decision regarding the artwork as incurable in the aesthetics of the phallic sphere of the art world. That original trance did not accompany the book into the gallery space, as did my other six trance recordings, and consequently was never shared with others. In re-reading and re-connecting with the threads of the trance as I write this piece, I am brought to the awareness that during the many years that have gone by, the original trance has been gestating in the matrixial sphere of metamorphosis *within* the book itself.



*Archaic m/Other* as “the gestating and birth-giving mother, the begetting mother... as poetic Event and Encounter” (Ettinger, 2004 p. 69).

I share the journey of co-becoming in this writing as an invitation for others to cross the thresholds that too often appear as barriers in our segmented lives as artists, learners, teachers and researchers. In understanding and welcoming art as a transport-station of trauma, as “matrixial threads of testimony,” we are given an opportunity to re-integrate non-conscious parts of our being that are preserved and never forgotten in the matrixial realm. This wisdom is available for those willing to enter, even if temporarily, into copoeisis with unknown others.

In closing, I return to the beginning. Here the experience of transporting the trance memory of the *I* and *non-I* into co-becoming through the *transcryptum*<sup>13</sup> and my culling of the original trance journey into a found poem is offered as a gift. I share the poetic writing as a healing trace of the matrixial origin story of the book with the com-passionate *matrixial gaze* it contains. This matrixial origin story enters a threshold journey that crosses time, memory, place, space and the human with the more-than-human. A space where the “erotic aerials

of the psyche... as joint gazes assemble, disperse, transmit and conduct the stranger into a compost of trans-subjectivity" (Ettinger, 1999a, p. 90).



"The place of art is for me the *Transport-Station of Trauma*... [art] supplies the space for [transport]" (Ettinger, 2005, p. 711).

### Wit(h)nessing Metramorphosis

*Deep breath*

Waves crashing  
I walk out onto the cement pier  
step over charred remains  
residue of the burning phoenix  
night ritual now past  
I lean over the pier's edge  
dive in to meet a wave

Sightless descent  
swimming  
with strong strokes  
into the deep  
I meet sand  
plant my feet spring  
straight up

Through water calm  
head surfaces  
encircled in moon spotlight  
I look around in all directions  
light trickles across the water  
traces a path

toward the island    small  
in the distance

I float  
moonlight resting  
on my face  
water so warm  
I am deeply deeply relaxed

Underneath me  
a large whale emerges  
I recline on its back  
as it swims  
not quite sure where?  
each gentle movement  
of the whale's spine  
shifts my body  
as we glide through water  
toward the horizon

At the horizon's edge  
a waterfall    stops  
the whale    who  
presciently rolls on their side  
I tumble    down the waterfall

*Deep breath*

I turn into mist

Mindful of people    walking  
along a ledge  
behind the waterfall  
alert to a presence  
I re-cognize my 6 year old self  
I come near  
my mist enveloping her

She unaware    of the mist  
the protective gift from her future  
self    wrapping around her  
small body  
walks behind her mother  
her grandmother

Insulated  
my young self has no aversion  
of underworld spaces  
where water and earth reverberate

*Deep breath*



Unknowingly  
wearing the mists' protection  
she lives without fear

Facing the falls  
looking outward she feels the power  
deep intake of breath  
she inhales  
the force of the water

Now my future self has seen  
her younger self embody  
the gift  
of water  
taken in the protection  
task complete  
my mist self returns  
into the falls

Connected to the power source  
this young self is  
sheltered for the work  
for travel  
in to transformative terrains  
in to altered states  
assured now  
the mist drifts upward

At the top of the falls  
the whale awaits  
the mist  
hovering over its back  
returns to human form

Redelivered to the whale  
we retrace our way  
to the pier  
the moon still  
luminous on the lake  
the water still  
so calm  
I thank the whale  
for transporting me  
to my younger self  
reconnecting me  
to protective elements  
supporting my lifework now

*Deep breath*

Leaving the whale  
I step onto the pier



face the moon  
let it wash through  
infusion of my body

I turn walk  
pass the coal-black remains  
of the burnt phoenix  
leave black footprints until  
they wear out  
at the end of the pier

I walk follow  
the shoreline feet sinking  
into wet sand  
find the tree-arched path  
turn and walk  
toward the arts center  
enter the building  
walk down the hallway  
open the door  
of my studio  
step through  
a second door  
to my studio porch  
where I sit  
returned to present time



*Artworking in matrixial borderspace* is where “the artist as a partial subject takes part and testifies to/for an unknown other or rather, it is the matrixial threads of the artwork which testify to the traumas of an-other in wit(h)ness” (Ettinger, 1999a, pp. 93-94).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Ettingerian terms found in bold italics in this piece of writing are the original words I hand wrote into the cloth book as part of my study of these matrixial words. It should be noted that Ettinger is continually expanding and altering her definitions of the matrixial language she is birthing.

<sup>2</sup> All photos of the cloth art book are taken by Barbara Bickel.

<sup>3</sup>The book *Metramorphosis*, begun in 2011 is an ongoing socially engaged soft art book (12 x 15.5 x 1 inches), it holds 22 pages including cover & back page. It is made of canvas, paper, acrylic, conté, graphite, crayons, pencil crayons, ink, silk thread, metallic thread, string, buttons, and paper. When displayed, the book is accompanied by a book-wrapping and display canvas cloth (51 x 32 inches) with signatures and drawings of those who have stitched into the book, written onto it with pencil crayons, crayons, ink, and graphite. Accompanying the book is an 8 x 5.5 x 1.25 inch pin cushion, made of canvas, sponge, thread; spools of thread (silk, cotton and metallic); pencil crayons, sewing needles, a thimble, and a pair of scissors.

<sup>4</sup>*Matrixial* is premised on the psychic space of the womb, a space of becoming-m/Other. "The matrixial is an aesthetical and ethical compassionate environment, which is, for each becoming-subject, the Cosmos" (Ettinger, 2006, p. 220).

<sup>5</sup>*I and non-I* - "I and an extimate - intimate- unknown - non-I share an ephemeral, unpredictable and singular alliance, in which each participant ... is partial and relational in differentiating jointness" (Ettinger, 2002, p. 236).

<sup>6</sup>*Wit(h)nessing* = witness + being with (Ettinger, 1999a, p. 91 & Pollock, 2010)

<sup>7</sup>In the process of co-editing the book *Contemplative and Arts Based Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence*, Carl Leggo (one of the co-editors) with Susan Walsh and myself hosted the authors of the chapters on the University of British Columbia campus to engage an arts-based and contemplative day-long retreat during the writing of the book and in preparation for conference performances. This retreat was a precursor to the ARTS pre-conference on which this essay and special issue of Artizein are based. I am grateful that Carl Leggo's stitches still dwell in this book following his passing from this incarnate world on March 7, 2019.

<sup>8</sup>Artscape Gibraltar Point Artist Residency is part of the Artscape organization that hosted our pre-conference retreat in the city of Toronto. See <http://artscapegibraltarpoint.ca>

<sup>9</sup>To learn more about the exhibition that took place at a women's gallery called ARC in Chicago, Illinois see <http://www.barbarabickel.ca/withnessing-eyes-closed.php>

<sup>10</sup>See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracha\\_L.\\_Ettinger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracha_L._Ettinger)

<sup>11</sup>*Co-Poiesis* "is the aesthetical and ethical creative potentiality of borderlinking and of metramorphic weaving" (Ettinger, 2005. p. 705).

<sup>12</sup>*Encounter-Event* is the field where the I and non-I have the opportunity to co-emerge and co-fade "so that absence is desabsented, and presence diminuated but not extinguished (Ettinger, 2000, p. 96-97).

<sup>13</sup>*Transcriptum* is "when in art a memory emerges the occasion for that memory, enfolded in amnesia, to come to light" (Ettinger, 2006a, p. 167).

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# INCARNATAS: AN ARTIST IN RESIDENCE PRACTICE IN THE UBC BOTANICAL GARDEN

CELESTE SNOWBER

## ABSTRACT:

This article shares poems from my artistic practice as a site-specific performing artist in the UBC Botanical Garden, where I was Artist in Residence for two years. Here I created and performed poetry and dance out of each season as I created amidst the various species of plants and trees which are both indigenous to British Columbia, and from all over Asia. As a dancer, poet, and scholar my task is to listen to the change and growth of creation in the garden, as well as research the botany of a garden. I explored embodied and poetic ways of inquiry where everything living informed my practice, performance and poetry. I offered full-length performances to the public, where I was able to share diverse ways of walking into wonder; literally they were walking performances. The garden offered multiple lessons to me and continues to be a place to attend deeply to the connections between the arts and ecology. The poems in this article sprung from my practice of going in the garden with feet, hips, hands and heart and may they encourage you, as the magnolias did for me, to bloom in impossible times.

## BIO:

Celeste Snowber, PhD is a dancer, poet, writer and award-winning educator who is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. She has written extensively and her books include *Embodied Prayer*, *Landscapes of Aesthetic Education*, and *Embodied Inquiry: Writing, living and being through the body*. She has authored a collection of poetry called, *Wild Tourist* and co-authored with Sean Wiebe a collection called, *Blue Waiting*. Celeste is a site-specific performing artist and most recently was the Artist in Residence in the UBC Botanical garden for two years, creating and performing poetry and dance out of each season. She also continues to create full-length shows, sometimes collaborating with other musicians, combining dance, poetry and comedy. Celeste has three amazing adult sons and lives with her husband outside Vancouver. Celeste can be found dancing and writing between the edges of land and sea or at [celestesnowber.com](http://celestesnowber.com).

### How do you know your own blooming?

How do we know our own blooming,  
the beauty in each of us?

as much as you gaze  
on the magnificence of magnolia  
robust rhododendrons  
passionate paperbark maple  
dove-tree & lily of the valley bush

buds are growing within you  
slowly, perceptively  
asking to be watered.

The soul, the body thirsts  
for air and water as do  
the greening in the garden.  
You are a garden  
a hybrid paradox of beauty  
fragile tendrils lie  
in the soil of your heart.

Now is the time  
to let the life you lead  
be the mulch  
of your own ripening.





Figure 1: ©Chris Randle

## Getting lost

I let myself get lost  
in your twist and turns  
come upon another corner  
of lush vegetation, outgrowing  
the last time I peered  
in your majesty. Only a few  
weeks and you change  
to another garden I revel  
    in your shifts, different shoots  
    leaves falling, fresh blossoms,  
    colors and hues changing by the day

time has another form here  
in the territory of fertility  
where timelessness and time are lovers  
you teach me what matters  
where an afternoon is a week  
inside your canopy

## Garden is our classroom

ardisia pulsia  
clethra delavayi  
delavay summersweet  
melliodendron xylocarpum  
cotoneaster  
betula albosinens  
crataegus and sorbus

you are the true organic  
classroom, teaching us  
that you thrive on the edge of salt  
fresh air through our pores  
your trees, plants, species  
live side by side, intercepting  
each other's branches and  
you thrive  
in each other's presence  
you cooperate with your own nature  
and ask nothing else of us  
some of you oh botanica  
have been taken from the wild  
but you do not forget what  
blooming you were made for  
teach us to bloom again  
towards our own beginnings  
so we can live into the  
colors we were meant to be.

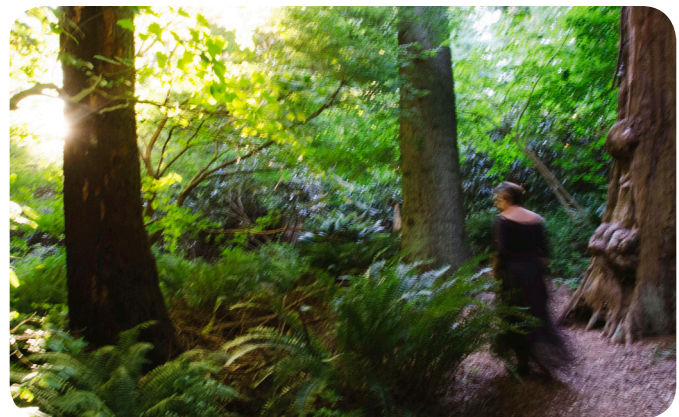


Figure 2: ©Tamar Haytayan





Figure 3: ©Yuka Takeda

### Fertile Voice

Let your senses teach  
what catches you in the garden

Here is the place to bring  
the lens of your eyes and heart  
sounds and silences,  
textures and terrain to the earth.

Plants, trees and birds  
leaves, moss, flora and forest  
have a language unto their own.  
Ancient before breath,  
they have a fertile voice.

Our task is to listen  
to the linguistics of creation  
in a garden of wonder.

### The bench's perspective

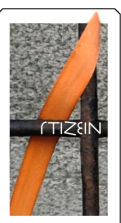
I wait in the space  
between dawn and twilight  
for small beauties  
tiny miracles to unfold

one leaf at a time  
twigs snapping  
burgundy vines  
magnolia in B flat  
sonata of falling petals  
scent of salt on cedar  
cantatas of camellias  
bold bamboo  
ghongshanese rehderodendron  
a horizon of maples

on the edge of the university  
I wait for a human  
to support their torso  
while groundwater is ambient  
look at the decay beneath my feet  
the earth opens its soil  
let the forest floor carry you  
and know strength and fragility  
are faithful partners.



Figure 4: ©Chris Randle





# CONTEMPLATING ARTFUL MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY ART EDUCATION EXPERIENCES: *INTER-INTRA*

ARIANNA GARCIA-FIALDINI

## ABSTRACT:

This article explores an evolving experience of shared artistic creation based on lived encounters with immigrant communities throughout Montreal from a personal stance. I will be sharing how this project allowed me to reflect on my dual position as practicing artist and immigrant living in the community, persuading me to challenge my evolving studio practice and question how I navigate my dual identity through the experience of art creation by acknowledging and visually expressing/representing some of the realities and hurdles involved in migrating to a new unknown culture. This article highlights my story as an immigrant co-participant artist by sharing personal art work made for this collective piece in the form of images and sound files, offering my oral story as an entryway into the artwork and the project. The ways in which I interpret, represent and share these stories with wider publics both encourage and require an ongoing and self-reflexive process of contemplation due

to the nature of my specific positionality in relation to it as an artist, educator, immigrant, and more recently, an aspiring researcher.

## BIO:

Arianna Garcia-Fialdini is a visual artist/educator and Doctoral candidate at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, working predominantly in paint and print media. Her research/studio practice concentrates on translating diverse oral histories of hope and justice movements into multi-modal images that agitate and inspire. Working closely with issues raising awareness on social change and gender violence, she explores the conditions of women, immigrants and refugee claimants while observing and commenting on social realities. Her teaching and studio practice aims to serve as an alternative platform from which to reach and project marginalized voices and stories. Professional webpage: <http://garfiart.com>.

Capturing silhouettes of the urban landscape and making use of visual fragments inspired by diverse migration stories: two aspects of *Inter-Intra* that are an evolving experience of shared artistic creation based on lived encounters with newly arrived immigrant communities throughout Montreal. *Inter-Intra*, as a community art project, explores the city landscape via storytelling and mixed media art processes, and uses portraiture of immigrant citizens to examine the complexities of the migrant experience. Through reciprocal sharing of stories and encounters, the project allows me to reflect on my dual position as practicing artist and immigrant living in the community. It has also urged me to challenge my evolving studio practice and continuously question how I navigate my identity as both immigrant and

artist through the experience of art creation.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it aims to acknowledge and represent the realities and hurdles shared by a group of newly arrived individuals, through various art making processes, techniques and endeavors: visually expressing the challenges involved in leaving one's country of origin and integrating into a new unknown culture.

Although the larger project focuses on many immigrant stories, this article highlights my story as an immigrant co-participant artist. I share personal art work made for this collective project in the form of images and sound files and I will be offering my oral story as an entryway into the artwork and the project. The ways in which I interpret, represent and share these stories with wider publics both encourage and require an

ongoing and self-reflexive process of contemplation because of my specific positionality in relation to it as an artist, educator, immigrant, and more recently, an aspiring researcher.

## Context

The success and ongoing development of *Inter-Intra* has been facilitated and supported by a small albeit strong artistic/activist subgroup that is presently tied to a larger not-for-profit organization in Montreal, Quebec. This community and volunteer run activist art group was co-created by immigrant workers and intended for them to share stories of dignity and resistance in diverse struggles. This artistic community has embraced my search for solidarity and identity with fellow immigrants through accepting my offering of introductory mixed-media art workshops and storytelling.

As a practicing artist, facilitator and collaborator with this group, my relationship to the community and site involves a deep investment of time and energy that can be difficult and somewhat emotional at times. From an artistic standpoint, there are very real logistical and conceptual challenges to maintaining a healthy equilibrium and constructive tension between the ideas of community collaborators who bravely share their stories as part of the art project and my own artistic vision.

I have made a conscious choice to share my artistic decision-making process with interested co-creators since embarking on this collaborative project. At times, however, this can disrupt my initial artistic idea. Nonetheless, it has consistently offered me reassurance that I am fulfilling the overarching goals and intentions of this community.

## Listening and contemplation within a community art project

Throughout the process of working on this project and in my own collaborative studio exploration and contemplation, I have become increasingly cognizant of the ways in which *Inter-Intra* inadvertently adheres to the structure and approach of research-creation (Vaughan, 2015; SSHRC, 2016). My previous artistic experience with the practices found in this methodology has allowed me to make a strong link between the idea of “listening” and the contemplative artistic practice that is central to the collaborative creation of this artwork. I have noticed, for example, that Maxine Greene’s ideas about challenging dominant systems and discourses of knowing in order to acknowledge and build awareness around lived experiences of others and to shape a more holistic representation of different communities (Greene, 1995), resonate deeply with this project. Greene’s emphasis on listening encourages me to work towards a more mindful and contemplative studio and research practice. This is closely connected to the idea of paying greater attention to the diversified histories that surround us, in order to more earnestly take into account new potential innovative endeavors that could conceivably and ideally enhance our personal characters as learners.

Celeste Snowber (2005) similarly advises that the interchange between listening to others and self-listening is essential in order to expand our approach to artistic inquiry. The underlying idea is that this would in turn support and assist diverse learners/makers in viewing and integrating different ways of being and knowing more holistically as collaborative and evolving artistic creations in themselves. It is this priority on reflection, given both to “listening in the creative process as an artist” (Snowber, 2005, p. 345) and to making stronger links to one’s



life and learning, that resonates most with my own pedagogical background as a practicing artist and emerging researcher.

Another important theory that impacts my emerging system of thought as both artist and emerging researcher is Henk Borgdorff's ideas on "artistic research as a form of knowledge production" (Borgdorff, 2010, p.1). Borgdorff points out that "artistic research seeks not so much to make explicit the knowledge that art is said to produce" but rather "provides a specific articulation of the pre-reflective, non-conceptual content of art," encouraging us to embrace "unfinished thinking" and "thinking in, through and with art" (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 1). This perspective simultaneously asserts and corroborates other forms of arts-based research (Conrad & Sinner, 2015; Snowber, 2016; Vaughan, 2009) and, in this way, strongly could inform the process behind *Inter-Intra*. Contemplation figures into my art practice in terms of how I understand my own migration and imaginative journey. My practice, in turn, allows me to reflect upon the conditions under which I arrived here and make sense of where I've ended up, physically and spiritually (the journey itself). It also gives me insight into how this journey has influenced my identity as an immigrant and impacted my integration into my new surroundings (the destination).

### **A small glimpse into, *Mi historia, My story, Mon histoire*<sup>2</sup>**

As briefly mentioned earlier, in late 2015 I came across a remarkable non-profit organization located in Montreal. At the time, I was actively looking for a volunteering opportunity where I could offer my art making expertise in exchange of becoming part of a new community in the nearby neighborhood where I had recently moved.

To my luck, it became quickly clear to me that this specific organization had a small

sub-group that concentrated on advocating for community activist art, co-created by workers and for workers internationally to share stories of resistance and dignity in struggle through art-making/artful exchanges. As an immigrant, community artist and educator by profession, I committed myself to this wonderful and open-minded community where I was immediately welcomed with open arms and hearts. Fortunately, my artistic history and expertise have been able to continuously aid and contribute in small ways to this organization's visions to attain and artistically express its goals with specific project campaigns; I have also been offering introductory techniques and approaches through various artist talks and workshops on a weekly and bi-weekly basis (Garcia-Fialdini, 2018).

Since 2010, my artistic practice has consisted of indoor and outdoor mural projects, paintings and prints that focus on stories/storytelling and explore socio-political issues aesthetically, allowing me to add my voice to the conversation and raise awareness. Some of these topics include, but are not limited to, supporting human rights, promoting social change and ending gender-based violence. A large part of my work examines and comments on the circumstances and experiences that immigrants, refugee claimants, children and women are subjected to and limited by.

The specific organization I collaborate with is composed of members that have bravely migrated from Latin America, the Caribbean, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Africa amongst other places, and diverse members hold status in Canada as temporary migrant workers, undocumented citizens and, at times, refugees. Generally speaking, members share in common forced migration under diverse circumstances, leaving behind most if not all of their personal belongings and loved ones, and uncertainty as to when they will be able to return to their

homelands. The diverse members of this community often have little or no art making experience. Nonetheless, in my experience, the members of this community tend to share a strong interest and belief in art's ability to empower, influence and at times even heal disenfranchised communities regardless of language barriers.



One of the courses I was taking at Concordia as part of my PhD program was "Issues in the History of Art Education: Theory and Practice," offered by Dr. Anita Sinner. The course outlined an assignment based on the premise of sharing an artful expression of a personal story in the form of a summative research paper that would bring together theory and practice using the framework of artist / researcher / teacher to identify educational issues that relate to personal experiences in historical, social and/or cultural contexts. Dr. Sinner's guidelines ignited me to think about my ongoing collaboration with the non-for profit organization. The intent of the course assignment was adapted theoretically to my existing community art teaching and making practice.

A number of the group members were similarly inspired, so we decided to follow up and develop the group's next small project, giving a specific and more developed purpose to our weekly/bi-weekly meetings and workshops. I proposed that we collectively discuss the diverse individual

migration stories that brought each one of us to Montreal, our new home. What followed were a series of intimate, emotional and private group meetings full of conversation, tea and baked goods where we each took turns sharing our journeys in arriving to Montreal, as well as the hardships and joys behind making the big decision of turning it into our new living destination. The project organically and beautifully evolved into what we now call *Inter-Intra*.

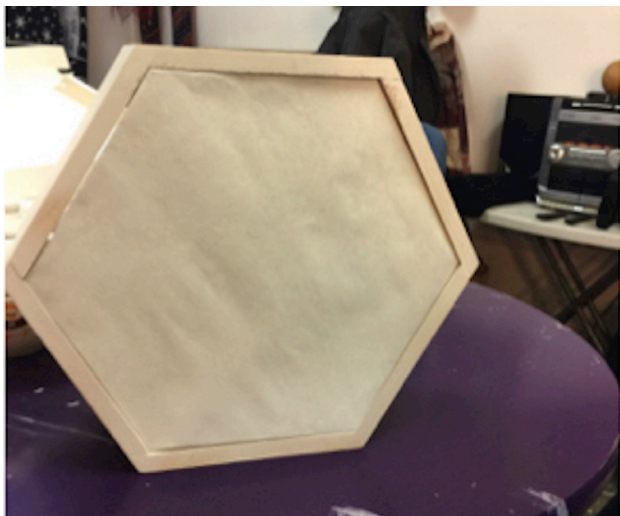
In order to get the ball rolling I decided to start off by sharing my own migration story, and I brought in a prototype of an image I had made that represented *my* story, the place on the island where my decision to immigrate was made and a power pose that could symbolically suggest how I felt about my decision at the time. I decided to visually and compositionally insert myself strategically in the landscape in order to accurately represent my feelings at the time about the decision I was making. Additionally, I purposely kept the tea bag I sipped on while I shared my story with the group and used it to stain the background of



my image (which later turned into a workshop on how to integrate diverse and



affordable artistic background techniques into a composition). At the same time, I brought in a wooden three-dimensional sculpture in the shape of a hexagon that I built to both frame my image and story and to show the group a different way to frame a visual composition. As a result, this simultaneously turned my wooden vessel into a sound box that was able to encase my story as well as a light box when inserting a small light bulb behind the image (needless to say, a workshop was later offered on making these and other vessels for framing purposes).



My prototype was able to successfully ignite a momentum to *Inter-Intra's* development. To date we have accumulated and completed approximately 15-20 vessels with more to come. For the purposes of this article, I have included my personal vessel encasing my migration story in Spanish, English and French. My life in Montreal is carried out in these three languages that reflect my professional life as well as the one at home. I am originally from Mexico City, and I moved to Canada in 1999; I left for two years in between and then decided to permanently live and migrate to Montreal in 2012. My journey so far has been nothing short of wonderful, emotional and overwhelming. Unlike most members of this community, nonetheless, I was fortunate enough to be able to have my immediate family join me here in

my new life a few years ago, a huge privilege and fortune that I am grateful for each day.



Upon making my final relocation decision, I found myself walking by Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel in the old port of the city. As I looked up at the beautiful architecture and red sky that day, I decided to call Montreal my new home away from home. I have since gone back to photograph the place where I remember making my decision. The power pose I chose for my silhouette composition tries to evoke fear and courage through standing close to the edge of the chapel to suggest a defiant look at what lies ahead.



[Arianna Garcia-Fialdini; \*Mi Historia\* sound file \(2016\)](#)





[Arianna Garcia-Fialdini; \*My Story\* sound file \(2016\)](#)

### Project specifics and a multi-media practice: Story telling, audio and pictorial renderings

My engagement with Inter-Intra contributes to my ongoing investigation of displacement, resilience and identity through visual storytelling. As an artwork, it functions and stands as a quasi-interactive sculptural installation work. The languages captured in the project's audio recordings beyond my own include Arabic, Italian, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Mandarin, Persian, Serbian, Hindi, Vietnamese, Russian and Dutch. Each individual wood-cut mono-print is printed on hand-made acid free paper and then dyed in tea, which has been collected from having personal conversations and sharing stories with the specific individual whose migration story is represented. After introducing the group to my personal story, creative process and prototype, each participant was encouraged to physically walk with me to the exact site on Montreal island where they contemplated and

decided to make the city their new living environment. When we arrived at this location, I would photograph the view and later transform it into a silhouette landscape woodcut print. As I did in my art piece, the storytellers were then asked to choose a pose and use body language to visually embody how they felt about their decision to migrate at the time. These portraits were also photographed and later incorporated into each landscape silhouette woodprint.



[Arianna Garcia-Fialdini; \*Mon Histoire\* sound file \(2016\)](#)

The aesthetic decision to include silhouettes of the participants was collaboratively decided in order to fully illustrate memory, absence and trace by suggesting a symbolic and valuable mark or trace that was left on both the landscape and the storytellers' recollection of something past.<sup>3</sup>

The final important component of the project was deciding on the shape and format of the container that would encase each person's recordings and script. A group of participants gathered on numerous different occasions to brainstorm different ideas and eventually settled on a hexagon. The reasoning behind this choice was that hexagons, as balanced multi-sided figures, are seen to represent harmonious interactions, equilibrium and co-existence. All of these concepts can be equally applied to *Inter-Intra's* goals as a

collaborative project, designed to foster community, much like bees in a hive do. It is worth mentioning that the majority of those who shared stories with me and inspired the *Inter-Intra* project reported not having access to a consistent support system of any kind while making their migration decision and upon arrival in Montreal, making this symbol of community all the more relevant.



By the same token, the hexagon is personally meaningful to me as a metaphor for exchange and solidarity in my personal approach and view towards art making. I continuously aim to foster and cherish the exchanges that are made possible in collectives and collaborations such as this one. This kind of engagement mindfully and vigorously encourages a reciprocal interaction amongst co-creators; it requires continuous conversational negotiation and active listening, which, although challenging at times, is ultimately rewarding and encourages giving and receiving (Snowber, 2010) throughout the journey.

### Insights and thoughts for the future

Many of the stories I have come in contact with over the development of *Inter-Intra* have been difficult for collaborators,

including me, to share and to hear. As I reflect, one of the most valuable lessons I have learnt from this ongoing creative collaboration has been that narratives help people make sense of difficult experiences, and stories provide insight into people's conceptualizations of the world. This includes understandings of identity and integration in new contexts and settings, cultures, communities and even realities. As Alessandro Portelli (1991) reminds us, "storytelling is a natural part of the human experience" (Portelli, 1991, p. 50).

Throughout the process of being witnessed when sharing my story and given the myriad functions of storytelling, I am continuously learning that the ways in which immigrant newcomers tell stories about difficult experiences can and does reveal relational and cultural qualities, sensibilities and struggles. One of *Inter-Intra's* main goals is to focus on how a relational context relates to sense-making behaviors as immigrants recount stories of their difficult migration experiences through oral history and art-making. This kind of collaborative art-making helps to fill gaps in our current knowledge base of what it means to be an immigrant from a particular social class in a given time and place. There are numerous newcomer experiences that have not yet been represented, and which could be better understood by sharing stories of detainees, individuals affected by labor exploitation and other migrants in vulnerable situations, for example. In this way, previously excluded groups can share their valuable knowledge, by providing rich glimpses of the different contemplative processes pertaining to identity struggles and the challenges encountered when integrating into a new culture.

*Inter-Intra's* capacity to merge aesthetic components with storytelling has served as an important way of understanding memory construction as it is actually happening. Furthermore, this collaboration has an



ability to tap into the intersection of personal experience, historical circumstance and cultural frame. In the creative work that *Inter-Intra* enables, the main objective is to reveal problems stemming from systems of oppression and inequity.

Throughout the making and evolution of *Inter-Intra*, I have contemplated the stories shared about difficult truths of displacement, injustice, persecution, discrimination, detention and inequality. Listening to these stories repeatedly has helped bridge gaps in my understanding and guide me through my own contemplative and self-reflective migration and identity process. Narratives convey emotion, beliefs, life experience, values, and more that people can relate to. As a result, *Inter-Intra* intends to share difficult stories with the objective of challenging people's understanding of the world and realities around them through deep and active listening. In addition, this objective intends to assist in creating a supportive ground with the hope of starting a dialogue from which organizing and activist action can spring forth. Participants sharing their difficult accounts of forced migration, detention and challenges pertaining to integration can perhaps catalyze people to challenge the broader societal narrative on this issue, or at least offer an alternative understanding of a situation.

Throughout this experience of telling my story and creating my art piece, I learnt that, as an artist, I must learn to listen with precision and attentiveness that is far more rigorous and nuanced than one would typically use in daily life. This led me to questioning previously held ideas and my understanding of social reality by making me more aware of the potential and the power that contemplative and self-reflective mindful practices hold. I feel that this experience has pushed me to further understand that we must train our minds and ears to hear the stories of others—not

just the words, but also the meaning, the emotion and the silence—and to listen to the narrator and to ourselves. This process can involve questioning previously held ideas, concepts and categories that frame our understanding of social reality. In this way, the entire collaborative process has the potential to be transformational for all involved. This was in fact the case for me from the perspective and the privilege involved in being a collaborative artist, developing researcher and community educator. As *Inter-Intra* keeps developing, we as a group of collaborators hope the project will continue to effectively use mixed media arts and storytelling to position immigrants and refugees not simply as victims telling their stories of survival, but as educators, theorists, analysts, and social change agents who overtly demand accountability, responsibility, and responsiveness from viewers. We aim to shift the perspective of audiences, by representing these marginalized groups as knowledge holders rather than objects of pity (Hesse-Biber, 2010). As Marie-Jolie Rwigema (2015) suggests, “testimony will be most effective in creating change if survivors direct the uses to which their testimonies are put. In the very instance of claiming voice and authority, a colonial relationship is unsettled: their position as victim is transformed, and the process of social change really begins” (Rwigema, 2015, p. 100).

From my perspective, this ongoing community art project continues to accomplish this; my experience working within this community has been deeply humbling and has revealed the importance of staying open to different ways of knowing, sharing and making sense of difficult stories and events.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I write this article solely from my position as a practicing artist and art teacher within the community.

<sup>2</sup>Images and sound links are included in the text as a concurrent visual/audio narrative of the creative process: from community building through art workshops to drinking tea, to creating the wooden vessels to visiting Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel in Old Port, Montreal, to the completed art installed in the gallery with sound. All photographs are taken by Arianna Garcia-Fialdini (2016-17) in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

<sup>3</sup>After the first 10 hexagon vessels were completed and their respective stories collected (and approved by each storyteller), a group of 10 participants worked collaboratively on a script intended to capture a more general and shared overview of the experience of migration to Canada based on the collection of individual narratives. The group decided unanimously that making the life-altering choice to emigrate was itself the biggest challenge, a sentiment which is captured in a final collaborative script.

Once the script was complete, each participant chose a different sentence or two from the script, and translated and recorded this excerpt independently in their native language. At a later date, each participant went back to record the entire script in their language of origin; this set of 10 audio clips is currently housed in one of the hexagons, and it encases all 10 different passages combined into 1 recording read by different participants in different languages. Ten other hexagons (and growing) house the same reading of this script in different languages. Overall, *Inter-Intra's* goal continues to be to help depict at least a portion of the abundance of cultures and ethnicities that inhabit Montreal and hold it as a new home and community.

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# LECTIO DIVINA: A CALL FOR SALAH & POETIC BEING

MOMINA KHAN, PHD

## ABSTRACT:

I reflect back on the ARTS Pre-Conference 2017 of the Canadian Society for Studies in Education. It was a day full of non-linear knowledge exchanges, conversations, creations, contemplation and arts-based activities. Collaborators dwelled in, engaged, and emerged together spiritually, poetically, and musically to rekindle their learning, coexistence and mystical understandings. I was in my fasting state with dry mouth, hungry stomach, and thirsty soul combined with contemplative sessions, plus my scholarly and poetic inspirations in the flesh. It was purely an epoch of unbridled spirit tenderly wrapped in creative and contemplative ways of being present in the moment, with the flawless beauty of a flute in the backdrop. I stood in a single corner of a square room. I began my *Lectio Divina*. I entered *Salah*. I reached contemplation through praying poetically.

## BIO:

Momina Khan is a mother, poet, and researcher who recently received a PhD

in Education in 2018 from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. In life and scholarship, as a mother and woman of color she engages in constructing counter stories through interweaving narrative and poetry. The narratives of her experiences from immigration to citizenship, from multiculturalism to eurocentrism, from parent involvement to parent engagement, and from a racialized mother to a researcher are narratives of gaps, silences, and exclusions shaped in the bumping places children and families experience in schools. She strives to re-conceptualize the dominant aspects of mandated curriculum by decentering the eurocentric perspective, knowledge and content. She challenges curriculum makers, educators and teachers that there are alternative perspectives of knowing worthy of inclusion. Her work & poetry invites and entices schools and educators to become leaders in eradicating barriers to racialized students' sense of self, sense of hybridity, sense of belonging, and sense of citizenship.



Figure 1: Before I bow: the prayer mat [Khan, digital photograph]



## ARTS Pre-Conference CSSE 2017

May 2017 ARTS Pre-Conference at Ryerson University in the city of Toronto, Ontario, where my first ever footsteps were carved on Canadian soil. My steps and status as an immigrant to Canada inscribed a new chapter of life history written on pieces of myself and soul.

### **Nomadic bodies**

bodies in philharmonic momentum  
the scent of age upon pages as we  
cross and write a cosmos of  
complex mobilities and interconnections  
in the throes of space, place, time  
diaspora dallies into daily lives &  
moments split-cell into senses of orientation  
*dinner for two: the home & the host*  
understanding and outlasting kingdom of ties  
handcrafted filigree within & across  
national & international borders  
kinship ties, telephonic relations  
home in the heart or in the heat  
*fractured families*  
geographically dispersed homes, habitats  
sounds on the move in the sweet grass  
morphing into momentous velvet images  
*nostalgic living*  
the fringes and frontiers of intersection  
ideas, philosophies  
relations, bonds  
humanities, civilizations  
histories & identities of I  
self-understanding sleep  
*belonging is coming and going*  
beyond the boundaries  
(dis)location, (re)location  
exit there enter here  
interweaving the lexicon of travel  
dualistic (dis)positions, (re)positions  
bifocality of daily rhythms and encounters

*competing loyalties & realities*  
entanglement of local and global experiences  
disrupting and unwrapping the familiar  
re-doing the spine of being, belonging  
*dual citizenship dual nationality dual identity*  
traveling & transcending the topographical  
borderlands of place and pace  
sociocultural, historical, political  
economical, communal, temporal  
ontological, geographical  
(inter)subjective and (inter)sectional  
(inter)mediate and (inter)dependent  
dimensions - *a new birth*

The preconference day brought back all those faded memories to the forefront, my youngest son's birth at Toronto East General Hospital away from our families, my husband's first job at Toronto Pearson Airport as a qualified doctor, my pushing of a four-seat second hand stroller filled with my four babies, my eldest daughter's first day at kindergarten without any knowledge of the English language, our frequent trips to Goodwill stores, our constant conversion of dollars into rupees, our shopping for discounted clothes and toys for the kids, the excitement on our kids' faces when swinging on the swings in public parks, our first apartment on the third floor of the Cosburn Avenue building, and many more.

ARTS... renovates  
the illusion of memory  
both past and present  
overlapping the gap  
tension & restoration  
the  
absolute difficult  
befalls  
the  
absolute possible

## ARTS-Day Rhythm: Ramadan Begins

An Arts Pre-conference day, full of conversation, creation, contemplation, non-linear knowledge exchanges and arts-based activities. The first formal fast, Ramadan's beginning. Ramadan, the most sacred month for Muslims in the Islamic religion. Muslims all around the world observe strict fasting from dawn to dusk for thirty days. Fasting in Islamic faith is a physically and spiritually uplifting experience of self-reflection, self-restraint, and self-purification in order to attain divine-consciousness. In my fasting state combined with contemplative sessions, plus my scholarly and poetic inspirations in the flesh, it was purely an epoch of unbridled spirit tenderly wrapped in creative ways of being present in the moment, with the flawless beauty of a flute in the backdrop.

As the elevator door opened, there was a kitchen right in front of my eyes at the heart of the space. I put my bag and laptop at one of the tables organized for the collaborators. The space began to feel full as more and more collaborators entered. The kitchen and food were at an arm's length distance. Everyone mingled and munched together. Some of them knew each other as reflected through their comfort level. I did not know any one: I was not a poet, I was not a scholar, I was not an expert, I was not white, I could not eat food, I could not shake hands, and I could not explain what I was feeling. A young female participant brought her hand forward and greeted me with a lovely smile. She also had an accent; my anxiousness began to turn into ease. I was sitting on a couch smiling and chatting through my eyes. They were eating, and I did not want to disturb them.

The euphoric sound of the flute called for reunion, direction, and duration. With every note that it hit, we journeyed to an unknown activity within a known space. The flute became everyone's reliable friend and finest guide physically for the day and spiritually for ever.

ARTS .... the collapse of the distinction  
eternal love between flute and food  
flute mutates into food  
a mighty melody  
whistling nutrition  
for my soul  
food morphs into flute  
an immortal tune  
crooning nourishment  
for my body



it fills me  
bit by bit  
my hungered soul  
my dry mouth  
my vacuumed stomach  
throughout the day  
today  
&  
everyday  
unfolding  
silence  
begins to sing  
like a flute  
in the air  
and  
hunger  
begins to blaze  
like food  
on the flame

### Favourite Quotation

We, as the conference collaborators, were asked to bring a favorite short quote or short poem as part of a Lectio Divina process together. Jalaluddin Rumi who was a 13th Century Sufi mystic and Persian poet is a great inspiration for me. In my *Urdu* school textbooks and among my family members who read his poetry aloud when making references, I grew up with him. I did not know why I picked particularly this quote; perhaps my vision and intention subconsciously mapped a series of intense concepts found within it.

*“Observe the wonders as they occur around you. Don’t claim them. Feel the artistry moving through and be silent. Don’t grieve. Anything you lose comes round in another form.” (Rumi, n.d-a)*

I observed the following tiers enclosed within this quote:

**1. Observe the wonders**

I see wonders in places, faces, people, symbols, things, thoughts, landscapes, and the universe. I keep wondering and pondering till I become part of that wonder. I align my curiosity to intense gazing.

*I reach poetry through the incidental and accidental "wander for wonders."  
(Leggo, 2003, p.12)*

**2. What occurs around you**

I see everything breathing, moving, colliding and vibrating: the rhythms, actions, experiences, life, breaths, heartbeats, nature, water, bodies, sight, blood, day and night. I align my heartbeat with movements.

*I reach poetry through motion, rhythm and location.*

**3. Don't claim them**

I see the ugly game of dichotomous claim: the claim of knowing, beliefs, expertise, legitimacy, entitlement, authority, and supremacy. As poet Leonard Cohen (1993) advises, "Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets through" (p. 373). What I know is not all, what others know could be a call. I commit to rise through enlightenment rather than sink into entitlement. I align my knowing with unlearning.

*I reach poetry through imaginative and elevated thoughts.*

**4. Feel the artistry**

I see and feel the artistry in metaphors. From a particle of dust to a star shining in the sky and in between is all abounding in metaphors. I align the sprinkled dust particles on the earth and the scattered stars in the heavens to "hear the melodies of [my] temperature" (Barba, 1995, p.162), the tunes of my eternal spirit and musicality of my internal silence. I align specks on earth with stars in heaven.

*I reach poetry through divine and metaphorical understandings.*

**5. Moving through**

I see a crack in everything as there is no such thing as walls of cement, and between those cracks, wonder, imagination, knowing, understanding and experience travel and leave traces of light in their wake. I align rupture with refill.

*I reach poetry through transition and in-betweenness.*

**6. Be silent**

I sit in silence to feel the eternal pull, gravity anchoring me to the ground further and farther to the core—more silence. I hear, see, touch, and feel silence and confront imposed compliance. I enter a liberating space where I move to action (Fels, 2002) to unmute my voice and to confirm my presence. I align loud silence with quiet noise.

*I reach poetry through inner voice and wide-open words.*

**7. Don't grieve**

I see gain and loss as natural and ordinary phenomena of our humanly life

experiences. As a result, the emotions of grief and happiness accompany us. Grieving upon losing something or someone from our life is an inevitable process, but our reactions and responses towards grieving play a central role in this venture. Sustained grieving can turn into suffering while contained grieving can turn into healing. "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional" (Murakami, n.d). I align my wound with nonlinear life and the "renewal that washed upon my soul" (Rajabali, 2017, p. 53).

*I reach poetry through the broken and bandaged pieces of life.*

#### **8. Anything you lose comes round in another form**

I see that giving, not receiving, is a reward. Giving is receiving. I lose myself in humility, I receive tranquility. I lose myself in care (for others), I receive self repair. I lose myself in prayer, I receive miracles.

*I reach poetry through losing myself in the humming of birds and words.*

### **People of Metaphor**

We, the people of intuition not institutionalism  
the people of metaphors not literalism  
the people of conception not commercialism  
the people of spirituality not secularism  
the people of mother earth not capitalism  
the people of magnificence not narcissism  
the people of consecration not consumerism  
the people of evolution not materialism  
the people of sacredness not fundamentalism  
the people of imagination not pragmatism  
the people of soul-full-ness slit from isms

We, sans isms, sans time-frames, sans leakages  
we, a bloc of hoping humans  
texture becomes us  
the cartographer's wrought  
in flesh, bones and blood  
muting & mapping & marrying  
desires of the corporeal body  
released from pollution  
and dissected imitations  
redemption  
a mystical puzzle



to find the sojourning soul  
filling the metrics of life  
may be  
60, 70, 80  
or perhaps ninety  
from end to end

five times a day  
1,2,3,4,5 (×) 30 (×) 12

turning & returning & yearning  
backward, forward  
inward, outward  
upward, downward  
horizontally, vertically

falling	rising	dipping	dropping	moving	leaning
imagining	reciting	merging		bowing	kneeling
earthing		centering		grounding	

an interminable journey  
trodden primrose path  
towards mystery  
searching for ichor

### **Lectio Divina: Process and Progress Together**

As part of contemplative practice, collaborators were sent a three-page introduction to the *Lectio Divina* practice to read prior to the day of our assembly. I was hearing about *Lectio Divina* for the first time, and read the lines and links, words and keywords written in the introduction text carefully and contemplatively. I could understand and feel it clearly, and although I had heard about it for the first time, it was not my first encounter with it.

*Lectio Divina* is a contemplative path into reflection on a text—either Biblical or contemporary (Mesner, Bickel & Walsh, 2015, p. 20). It is “a form of devotional reading in which we allow God to ‘read’ us and respond to our deepest desire. . . . [it is] slow, deliberate, meditative reading in which we allow the words to penetrate our heart and question our spirit” (Nouwen, Christensen, & Laird as cited in Mesner et. al, 2015, p. 20). According to (Mesner et. al, 2015), “traditionally, the process involves reading (lectio), meditation (meditatio), prayer (oratio), and contemplation (contemplatio)” (p. 20).

The found poem below is extracted from (Mesner et. al, 2015, pp. 20-21) asserted stages of *Lectio Divina* and (Paintner’s, 2010, pp. 12-13) steps that are stated in brackets.

~~Reading 1: Lectio~~ (“settling and shimmering”) ~~We invite you to sit with the text in silence and to simply let it sink in.~~

~~Reading 2: Meditatio~~ (“savoring and stirring”) ~~What word/phrase or aspect of the image stands out to you? Try to let this word/phrase or aspect of the image simply emerge organically.~~

~~Reading 3: Oratio~~ (“slowing and stilling”) ~~What is particularly evocative or resonant to you in this text?~~

~~Reading 4: Contemplatio~~ (“summoning and serving”) ~~What is a call to action that you hear in this text?—~~

*Lectio Divina* has roots in both ancient Jewish Haggadah and Christian Benedictine traditions. It continues to evolve and to be applied in a wide range of spiritual traditions beyond the Judeo-Christian (Mesner et. al, 2015, p. 20). As a Muslim woman following and practicing the third mono theistic religion of the world, Islam, I extend *Lectio Divina* beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition by focusing on *Salah* (prayer five times a day). *Lectio Divina* involves specific and contemplative readings of text and scripture, however my verbal recitation of the Quranic text which I read with inner eye and reflect on while praying my *Salah*, is the way in which I practice *Lectio Divina*. Since the day I began incorporating it more and more into my *Salah* practices, my intent for *Salah*, recitation of verses, movements of prayer, contemplation, attentiveness, and spiritual connection to God took a new direction. I began not to focus on what and how I am praying, rather what prayer is doing to me and giving me. I begin to eliminate my sense of self right from the moment I enter *Salah*. I let the prayer seek and speak, conceive and receive, bond and respond to my intentions, utterances, movements, motions, and rhizomatic connections. It takes me to the aporetic space of silence where I become vigilant to listen to and engage with reverberations echoing what lies beyond and in-between *Salah* and the Creator. This led me to a new kind of careful hearing, peace, affirmation, animation, and the total removal of self from my physical body in order to feel my bonding and belonging to the eternal source. I began to pray poetically, and *Salah* became my own daily *Lectio Divina*. I interweave a Judeo-Christian-Muslim perspective on *Lectio Divina* which is encircled in the process, movements, manifestation and lifespan.

### Lectio Divina: Judeo-Christian-Muslim

1. <b>Lectio</b>	<i>Niyyah</i>	Entering	whilst	Reading	<i>Child</i>
2. <b>Meditatio</b>	<i>Qiyam</i>	Centering	whilst	Pondering	<i>Youth</i>
3. <b>Oratio</b>	<i>Ruku</i>	Kneeling	whilst	Responding	<i>Adult</i>
4. <b>Comtemplatio</b>	<i>Sujood</i>	Feeling	whilst	Attending	<i>Elder</i>
5. <b>Eximo</b>	<i>Salaam</i>	Rising	whilst	Submitting	<i>Ageless</i>

sans Steps      sans Self      sans Whilst      sans Source  
 light & wind  
 re (evolve)  
 Eternity

#### Food for Thought, Flute for Soul

Noon. The flute whistles once again. Food for the stomach, and food for the soul, my *Zuhr* (noon) *Salah* began in a quiet corner on a hungry stomach. I stood in a single corner of a square room: therapeutic and thera-poetic space. I began my *Lectio Divina*. I entered *Salah*.

*Salah* is an Arabic word meaning, bowing, worship, prayer. *Salah* is the obligatory Muslim prayer, performed five times each day by Muslims. A “prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of creative imagination” (Corbin, 1969, p. 248) by unveiling of negligence from the soul to restore purification and enlightenment. Prayer is a “theophanic imagination” and poetic manifestation of light, “which determines a relationship between Creator and creature, imply the unity of their being (because it is impossible to conceive of any being extrinsic to absolute being)” (p. 246). Prayer is the divine epiphany manifesting a “theopathic union between divine Compassion and human passion” in which “divine solitude and human solitude: each delivers the other by joining itself to the other” (p.254).

when He shows himself to me, my whole being is vision<sup>1</sup>  
 when He speaks to me in secret, my whole being is hearing<sup>2</sup>  
 when He guides me to a pathway, my whole being is movement  
 when He whispers to me in silence, my whole being is prayer  
 when He nudges into my spirit, my whole being is renewal

Creative imagination in the service of creative prayer through deep concentration



and manifestation of divine unity regulates movements for the celebration of prayer and behind all movements and manifestations is the perfect spirit, the spirit of repair, renewal and wisdom (Corbin, 1969; Khan, 1994).

### Times Five a Day

who says my five is a number  
I + IV no more  
VI - I is none  
boundless addition sudden deletion  
flimsy abstraction curt subtraction  
to be alive  
to strive & thrive  
the cure of the fall  
to rise in a papered fall  
love without death  
the sun and the moon  
visible gears invisible  
invisible nears visible  
it's a suave encounter  
a carapace  
of you and me  
of soul breathing in earth  
Allahu Akbar, God  
in the seven seas  
in the seven skies  
in everything low & high  
poetic, meditative, contemplative  
religio-spiritual  
it's a true call  
a Prayer  
my daily *lectio divina*  
reciting with poetry  
superior, sensorial, symmetry  
listening to the melody of my soul  
speaking to movement  
body abounding  
from dawn to dusk

dusk to twilight night  
kiss and kneel  
pry open the core  
Creator and creature  
capsule of self & soul  
Five is infinity  
five is *Fajar*, dawn  
five is *Zuhr*, afternoon  
five is *Asar*, evening  
five is *Maghrib*, dusk  
five is *Isha*, night

the eternal love between a celestial pair  
sun and moon  
makes me begin

\. *FAJAR - the dawn*

*Silent lullaby lay  
warm in night's comprise  
the moon is rebirthing  
to bestow somewhere else  
a sheen in the cosmos  
veiled sky, serenity at its crux  
faded stars: grey and blue  
preparing to revel in a musical silence  
a birthing sun  
holding a pallet  
the hue of realization  
opaque mindfulness  
ready to paint a paradise for the eyes  
piercing the darkness  
enlightening  
soul hearing the melody that ears cannot  
celestial tune to the earth of earths  
quietude and stillness  
night dew meant to cling to the soil  
sweet vapours rise from the earth*

*glorious rise  
restorative remembrance  
of all truths  
Prayer is superior than sleep*

I step on the prayer mat  
I enter Fajar salah  
*Allahu Akbar*  
Standing  
Kneeling  
Kissing  
the ground  
*God's truth*  
*is beauty*

**٧. ZUHR - the afternoon**

*the sun charioteers the day  
radiant heat hastening  
to give abundant light and love  
amidst the verdant blinds  
righting the rays  
Ascending  
movement, motion, moisture  
voices and choices  
the sound of weighty winds  
a coterie of creatures  
rhythm in the curve of trees  
beauty in the bow of flowering petals  
spinning wheels on the highway  
thinking, feeling, feeding, doing  
speaking, listening, trusting  
busy mind, busy body*

I step on the prayer mat  
I enter Zuhr salah  
*Allahu Akbar*  
Standing  
Kneeling



Kissing  
the ground  
*God's power*  
*is immortal movement*

Ϛ. **ASAR – the evening**

*the sun sinks low*  
*behind the bend of life*  
*sculpted radiance in a divine setting*  
*gold splashes everywhere*  
*the commotion begins to repose*  
*chirp metamorphoses into whisper*  
*home is the beginning and end*  
*fluttering of day's delight*  
*winding down*  
*the falling light*  
*neither vivid nor dark*  
*in the middle*  
*of transitory time*  
*in a state of losing*  
*day, time, light*  
*moments, movements*  
*descending*  
*time is limited*  
*and so is our worldly stay*

I step on the prayer mat

I enter Asar salah

*Allahu Akbar*

Standing

Kneeling

Kissing

the ground

*God's glory*

*is absolute*

ϛ. **MAGRIB – the dusk**

*On the brink*

*the sun sojourns into  
night and fading light  
luminosity growing dimmer  
painting veins of indigo  
sapien strokes of most blended colours  
on the canvas of today  
shuttering close  
coming to rest  
calm simplicity  
a moment of change and chance  
the gifts and guises of today*

I step on the prayer mat  
I enter Maghrib salah  
*Allahu Akbar*  
Standing  
Kneeling  
Kissing  
the ground  
*God's might*  
*is eternal*

◦. **ISHA – the night**  
*the moon rolls in mirth  
silvery & heavenly light  
crooning a little symphony  
to the squealing stars  
in the dark  
dripping in tranquility  
listening to my heart  
speaking to my mind  
stroking my conscience  
deeming my wonders  
knowing my deepest yearnings  
seeking my inner divine nature  
permeating into my being  
descending to the depth  
of my innermost core*

*agony bequeaths depth  
ecstasy endows height  
I see the light*

I step on the prayer mat

I enter Isha salah

*Allahu Akbar*

Standing

Kneeling

Kissing

the ground

*God's in me*

*and so it shall be*

.....

I begin in prayer

I end in prayer

I am born

with & in

prayer

I will die

with & in

prayer

I see

a pattern

my day keeps

evolving

& revolving

with & in

a circle

and so too

does my salah

*Allahu Akbar*

*I enter*

*&*

*re-enter*



Figure 2: *Lectio Divina*: spiritual states of ascension [Khan, digital photograph]

### Sacred Salah

Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem – بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

in the name of *Allah*  
I begin in harmony  
with *Divine Presence*  
the most gracious  
the most merciful  
ruby rug oriented on a line with the *Qiblah*



holy house in the desert  
standing in humility  
in the direction  
of the *Kaaba in Mecca*  
reacquainting myself with  
the earth beneath my feet  
on the verge of  
motion

rhythm

repetition

submission

I enter *Salah*

\*The LECTIO

*NIYYAH*

raised hands

instruments of prayer  
touching the soft of the ear  
the foundation resides in the entry of my heart  
intention is a tapered door on the holy house  
in a state of personal divine service  
I intend to pray without ceasing  
the act of gazing, uttering, hearing  
listening with my passionate ears  
I reach concentration  
*Allahu Akbar*

\*The MEDITATIO

*QIYAM*

overlapped hands

lowering my eyes & head  
overlapped hands on my chest  
standing upright leaps in faith  
as lips read & read  
pondering upon, dissecting quietness  
Centering  
unveiling my consciousness  
now entering peace  
the words are with my eyes  
feeling with my heart, my mind, my soul  
*Allahu Akbar*

\*The ORATIO

**RUKU**

Kneeling

grasping my knees  
sincerity and humility to God  
humility is in God  
I bow down and complete submission  
showing reverence solely to my Creator  
real emancipation sits  
in unconditional devotion  
effusion of being  
created being creative being  
my dissociated self  
from this world and the hereafter  
only  
God's word and God's presence  
hearing Allah's word within my soul...  
an intimate dialogue  
you made me me so I could be me  
I am grateful  
when the heart is alight in trust  
&  
He surely responds  
*Allahu Akbar*

\*The CONTEMPLATIO

**SUJOOD**

I prostrate

hands and forehead deep into the earth of earths  
I feel the highest degree of obedience and servitude  
I place on the earth the loftiest part of my body  
in the presence of the Omnipotent Authority  
I feel You, I came to the world from the dust  
&  
I will again return to the soil  
to be back with you  
I belong to You  
I am blessed

weeping inside out and outside in  
lamentations are saving me from the clutches of sins  
an utter wordless contemplation  
in a divine mirror  
seeing infinite in finite form  
divine voice vibrating  
unity of divinity-humanity  
I feel His tender love and transforming embrace  
I raise my head  
Resurrection, the Day of Judgment  
I will rise up from the 'dust of my tomb'<sup>3</sup>  
and be summoned without end  
*Allahu Akbar*  
*ascending descending transcending*

\*The EXIMO

**SALAAM**

I exit

I depart  
in two/into parts  
turning right  
my right shoulder  
first *Salam*  
turning left  
my left shoulder  
second *Salam*  
a mount of sanctity  
*peace & security*  
*mercy & blessings*  
be upon you  
salutation  
the recording angels  
my deed sheets  
re-turning  
to the thoroughfare of  
being & body  
transcending

## Transcendence Manifesto

I intend yet my prayer *seeks*  
 I begin yet my prayer *enters*  
 I view yet my prayer *reads*  
 I recite yet my prayer *speaks*  
 I utter yet my prayer *reveals*  
 I stand yet my prayer *ascends*  
 I move yet my prayer *journeys*  
 I bow yet my prayer *submits*  
 I perform yet my prayer *fulfills*  
 I feel yet my prayer *touches*  
 I focus yet my prayer *deliberates*  
 I realize yet my prayer *enlightens*  
 I sense yet my prayer *meditates*  
 I face yet my prayer *encounters*  
 I cease yet my prayer *captures*  
 I ground yet my prayer *heals*  
 I finish yet my prayer *completes*  
 I rise yet my prayer *transcends*  
 I accomplish yet my prayer *conquers*

Prayer \_\_\_\_\_ re (occurrence) re (formation)  
*Creator's Creative Creation*

### What does contemplation mean?

Contemplation, neither a clever engagement nor a crystallized awareness, is “being present- in the moment” and an attentiveness and openness to what is “not yet known” (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015, p.1). It is a “momentary glimpse into another world” where “the moon stays bright when it doesn’t avoid the night” (Rumi, n.d-b), such a “glimpse has the potential of rewriting the world” (Fels, 2002, p. 5). It is by solely living on the “edge of chaos” (Taylor & Saarinen, 1994, p. 9), where there is something more than what we experience with our senses.

Reborn  
 deep down  
 in the ocean  
 I can't  
 hear



see  
touch  
taste  
smell  
speak  
*at last*  
I can  
breathe  
evolving  
no senses  
writing  
no words  
sinking  
no vibration  
I see  
a sea  
of waves  
within  
I hear  
a tear  
of ace  
within  
in (fusing)  
re (turning)  
be (coming)  
be (longing)  
be (ing)  
inter (being)  
for (ever)  
a (live)

I initiate and practice contemplation by distrusting what I already know and believe, by rejecting entitlement, by repressing quest for certitude, by actively stepping into the threatening and unfamiliar, by consciously seeking beauty in broken things, by recognizing haze in light, by finding light in chaos, by accepting messy moments, by feeling peace in clutter, by losing self to uncertainty, by deliberately giving up liberty, by spreading my being flat on the surface of lucid evidences. Finally, by evading my caged body, becoming a formless being, releasing the spiritual person from ready-made testimonies and allowing my flowing breath to fall into a choking beat, I reach “contemplative states of [super]consciousness that include a witnessing

aspect” (Walsh & Bai as cited in Guiney Yallop, 2016, p. 285). I witness collision, interconnectedness and interdependence of body, mind and soul by “suspend[ing] assumptions” and “purposefully delay[ing] conclusions” (Wiebe, 2016 as cited in Sameshima, Miyakawa, & Lockett, 2017, p.48). In witnessing the “collision of light and life” (Keshavaraz, 2006, p.112), I experience the mergence and emergence of the “infinite relational resonance” (Neilsen Glenn, 2010, p.6). I intuit the loss of my sense of rational self in the sea of divine love, I synch self and soul with relativity and feel recomposed. I begin to comprehend the melody of relativity of my body, mind, heart, soul, people, and the world in which I exist. I intend and begin to think rhythmically, pray mystically, and “live poetically” (Leggo, 2005). I engage in being an interbeing, and I exist with energy. The paroxysm of prayer, mysterious sign of recognition, “the beat and the pulse of the heart, the inhaling of the breath” (Khan, 1994, p.74), the exhaling of the words and verses, and the synergy and symbiosis of the creature and creator, drifts me toward “the perpetual and elusive process of [being], [interbeing] [and] becoming” (Gide, 1970, p. 197). This quality of self-awareness and heightened reflexivity expands and extends the boundaries of my being and interbeing to live well for existence and coexistence through “working towards the cessation of suffering for all beings” (Sameshima, et. al, 2017, p.49). My contemplative exercises of *Salah* move upwards and downwards and inwards and outwards; they run in lightness and darkness, and echo in silence and noise; they emanate an uncertain but peaceful awareness-mindfulness. In attuning to this seamless unity of the moment and movement of my spiritual flight, I become indifferent to earthly affairs through experiencing both the “unification of will and feeling, and unification of [divine] essence” (Corbin, 1969, p. 109).

Contemplation galvanizes a unification of epiphanic moment, theophanic imagination, divine response, mystical rhythm, and eternal benevolence. I had always searched for contemplation in quietness, stillness, shadow and shade and with a high attentiveness to run away from both inner and outer noises, but my repeated *Salah* practices taught me that contemplation is a melody of an action not peace. Contemplation is an act of being in a “state of perpetual ascension” (Corbin, 1969, p. 206) where ascending movement of renewed and recurrent creation never ceases. By juxtaposing my inner noise to outer roars, I hear the ultimate sound –

no vibration.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sufi cited in Corbin, 1969, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup>Sufi cited in Corbin, 1969, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>Corbin, 1969, p. 283.

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# MUSIC AS MEDITATIVE INQUIRY: DIALOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING AND COMPOSING INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

ASHWANI KUMAR & ADRIAN M. DOWNEY

## ABSTRACT:

This dialogical paper explores Ashwani Kumar's concept of music as meditative inquiry and its implications for teaching, learning, and living. The notion of music as meditative inquiry is rooted in Kumar's journey of learning, composing, and researching Indian classical music. This paper makes use of an emerging methodological framework called *dialogical meditative inquiry* (DMI), which has been theorized by Kumar. Due to its emphasis on meditative and holistic listening, DMI goes beyond a usual interview where the intent is to elicit specific information. Through employing DMI to explore Kumar's ideas regarding music, meditative inquiry, and creativity, this paper engages with the following themes: 1) the role of rigour, discipline, and passion in learning music through the meditative inquiry approach, 2) the pursuit of music for spiritual and meditative exploration as different from using music as a means of entertainment, and 3) the implications of music as meditative inquiry for teaching, learning, and living with particular emphasis on the importance of creative play, experimentation, and originality.

## Bios:

**Ashwani Kumar** is Associate Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His teaching and research focus upon meditative inquiry which is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach to teaching, learning, and

living. He has conceptualized several key curricular and pedagogical concepts, namely, *curriculum as meditative inquiry*, *teaching as meditative inquiry*, and *music as meditative inquiry*. He has also developed a contemplative research methodology called *dialogical meditative inquiry* to conduct subjective and inter-subjective qualitative research. He plays the harmonium and sings and composes Indian classical music. His current project focuses on researching the theory and practice of Indian classical music and their implications for the field of education. He is the author of two scholarly books: *Curriculum As Meditative Inquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Curriculum in international contexts: Understanding colonial, ideological and neoliberal influences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019a).

**Adrian Downey** is a Mi'kmaw PhD Student at the University of New Brunswick, Canada, where he works in the following areas: curriculum studies, arts-informed research, poetic inquiry, Indigenous education, music education, environmental education, and spiritual philosophy. He has undergraduate degrees from Bishop's University in Music and Education, as well as a MAEd focused in curriculum studies from Mount Saint Vincent University. Before returning to graduate school he taught grade six and elementary music with the Cree School Board of Northern Quebec. In his spare time, he plays jazz guitar and listens to punk music.



Figure 1: Ashwani Kumar singing and playing the harmonium. Photo by Kapil Vyas.



Figure 2: Harmonium. Photo by Ashwani Kumar

## Introduction

This is a dialogical paper between myself (Ashwani Kumar) and Adrian Downey, which seeks to understand my idea of *music as meditative inquiry* and its implications for teaching, learning, and living. It provides an autobiographical and meditative exploration of my experiences with learning and composing Indian classical music (ICM)<sup>1</sup> and how it has informed my views regarding the meaning and purpose of life and education.

My creative, existential, and intellectual pursuits of exploring the interconnections between meditative inquiry and education have led me to venture into a new dimension of learning and discovery. While I have always been interested in ICM and the spiritual and meditative quality of the raga-based music,<sup>2</sup> it was in the year 2013 that I started my journey of learning Indian classical music. So far, my transition from being a “non-artist” to becoming an “artist” has been an incredible journey. I have not only begun to learn to play the harmonium<sup>3</sup> and to sing and compose raga-based compositions, but also to see the relevance of ICM for teaching and learning. My engagement with ICM has allowed me to conceive and theorize what I call *music as meditative inquiry*.

*Music as meditative inquiry implies an existential, creative, and spiritual perspective of music.* It underscores and celebrates the significance of freedom, intrinsic intelligence, independence, and originality in learning and experiencing music. Music as meditative inquiry is rooted in my exploration of the work of Indian philosopher and educator, J. Krishnamurti<sup>4</sup> (1953, 1954, 2002), my philosophical and pedagogical work on curriculum and teaching as meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2013, 2014; Kumar & Downey, 2018a), and my experiences of learning and researching ICM.

I theorize the notion of music as meditative inquiry in this paper by means of a dialogue with Adrian Downey. In this dialogue we employ a novel research methodology that I call *dialogical meditative inquiry* (DMI) (Kumar & Downey, 2018a, b, c). I developed DMI to conduct a larger project entitled *Reflections on Education, Creativity, and Life: A Dialogical Meditative Inquiry* (The Dialogue Project). The current paper is one of the outcomes of that project. Because this paper has emerged from The Dialogue Project, I discuss its purposes and the methodology below.<sup>5</sup>

I conceptualized The Dialogue Project in order to explore and theorize my ideas regarding teaching, learning, curriculum, meditative inquiry, dialogue, the work of J. Krishnamurti, and music. Such exploration was to be dialogical in process and rooted in my previous writings including my book, *Curriculum As Meditative Inquiry* (2013), my practices as a teacher educator in Canada, the dialogues, workshops, presentations, and retreats that I conducted with academic and wider audiences,<sup>6</sup> as well as my pursuit of and research on ICM. The dialogical significance of the project was appreciated by Adrian Downey, who was then a master’s student in the curriculum studies programme at Mount Saint Vincent University. Adrian agreed to work as my research assistant for The Dialogue Project and accepted the role as the questioner for seven dialogues held over the summer of 2017. Adrian’s background with Indigenous spirituality and holistic visions of life, as well as his interest in my work and the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti, proved deeply significant while conducting this project.

Before each dialogue, Adrian prepared a series of questions after significant engagement with the literature surrounding the topic being discussed. In the case of this dialogue, Adrian, who has an extensive background in Jazz and Western classical music, prepared the questions after viewing a documentary on ICM called *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009) that I suggested he watch. He also read work on music from a spiritual perspective (e.g., Wooten, 2008), my own writing on the subject (Kumar, 2013, 2014), as well as one of my grant proposals that focused on ICM. The preparedness of the questioner and his or her ability to engage thoughtfully in the moment is crucial to the successful employment of the DMI method.

While Adrian asked prepared questions during the dialogue, he also asked extemporaneous and emergent questions. I did not see any of the questions prior to any of the dialogues, as I wanted to ensure that my responses were authentic and that the dialogic engagement was mutual. Adrian articulates his role in the dialogue thus:

Dialogue, as framed by Freire (1973) and other critical pedagogues, is rightly articulated as an equitable conversation. However, I also believe there is far more to how we engage with the world and

with each other than what we say. In this dialogue, my role was to ask, to listen, and to engage. I listened to Ashwani's words with my mind, yes, but also with my heart—it was a holistic, whole body listening. By holding this attentive space for Ashwani, he was given the freedom to be fully alive with his thoughts and feelings. My interest in Ashwani's musical journey was intense and genuine and lent itself well to deep listening.

The livelier Ashwani became in sharing his thoughts, poems, and compositions, the more closely I was able to listen. In those moments my mind would clear of all my preconceived questions, and I would become totally immersed in what was being said. I walked away from each of our dialogues with a richer and fuller understanding of the material we were discussing, but also more in tune with myself and the world around me. These meditative dialogues allowed me to experience a slower internal rhythm, one which helped me perceive the movements of my ego, be patient with those around me, and listen attentively to the silences of everyday life.

In this particular dialogue, I sat near my harmonium and often played selections to illustrate the concepts I spoke about. During the dialogue, I read poems and sang compositions that I had recorded on several scraps of paper. This article showcases some of my original compositions and poetry.

As the dialogue project adopted a unique methodology, DMI, it is important that I provide a brief discussion of what DMI entails.

I see DMI as a growing qualitative research methodology that can be employed to conduct subjective and inter-subjective research. It is theoretically informed by my previous research on the concept of meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2013, 2014) and appreciates Pinar's concept of "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2012). Elsewhere I wrote,

DMI is ... [an] open-ended and emergent process. It is a holistic and spontaneous engagement where questions and answers emerge in the moment, guided by the meditative inquiry and understanding of the participants. The core of DMI comprises listening holistically and learning from silence .... In this kind of meditative listening, one hears completely and through silence and openness rather than with preconceived notions, which hinder deep understanding. Holistic and meditative listening creates the ground on which people can connect and communicate deeply, beyond judgements and a sense of "otherness." Such listening enriches us and brings about mutual understanding .... The deep listening and spontaneous silences that are central to DMI allow that space where authentic and meditative insights and responses emerge freely. Listening and silence create the possibility of an open and vulnerable state of being, a more comfortable place for deeper engagement, so that inner thoughts and feelings may be expressed in meditative awareness. (Kumar in Kumar & Downey, 2018a, p. 55)

DMI is thus a research methodology which is concerned with connecting to oneself and one's deepest understandings through the art of dialogue.

Using DMI, this paper explores my notion of music as meditative inquiry in a conversational manner. The dialogue is best taken as a whole, where elements of research are woven together in the flow of conversation, music, poetry, and meditation. This dialogue invites the reader to be part of the intimacy of DMI as an approach to research.

This dialogue on music as meditative inquiry explores the following key questions which have emerged from engaging in the process of DMI and subsequent re-readings of the conversation transcript:

- 1) How did Ashwani Kumar become interested in Indian classical music, and what challenges and opportunities did he face on his journey of learning music?
- 2) What is the role of rigour, discipline, and passion in learning music through the meditative inquiry approach?
- 3) How is the pursuit of music for spiritual and meditative exploration different from using music as a means of entertainment?
- 4) What are the implications of music as meditative inquiry for teaching, learning, and living?



## Dialogue on Music As Meditative Inquiry

**AD:** My first question is biographical. Everyone has a unique life history with music, and I am interested in yours. How did you come to Indian classical music?

**AK:** This autobiographical aspect of my music journey is very important. It will allow us to explore many issues and themes that are relevant to understanding the meaning of concepts like creativity and learning, and how factors such as support and discouragement of other people influence one's growth and development.

The role of parents and teachers is not merely to teach, but to engage with children in exploring what their potential could be and allow them opportunities to grow their potential. In my case, nobody saw my potential, including myself. When I was growing up, I was very close with one of my extended family members who had some training in Indian music. When he would play music, I would often ask him to teach me, but he never would—I don't know why. When he would play, I would tap on something using a natural sense of rhythm. My brain was naturally attuned to rhythm which I realized and discovered much later in life. He, however, even discouraged my tapping at times as my tapping might have been disturbing his playing. He supported me in so many other ways, but he would not educate me in music. However, I loved listening to him playing music, and we also listened to a lot of music together, which, I think, contributed to my developing a sense of musicality.

One of my aunts and her family used to live across from our house in New Delhi. My aunt's husband, Mr. M. C. Gotan<sup>7</sup> was deeply musical. At that time, I was seven or eight years old and my relationship with my uncle was not one where I could learn or experience his music. He would often keep to himself, and by the time I was a teenager, he was transferred from New Delhi to Rajasthan. My uncle has now been retired for a while and lives in New Delhi. A few years back when I visited India, he and my aunt came to visit my family. As soon as he realized that I like music and that I am learning music, he asked me if we could go to the upstairs room as he wanted to see what I have been learning. Given my short stay in India, he could only give me one lesson, but I was so happy that he actually wanted to teach me. I knew that professionally he was an engineer and that he had interest in music, but I had no idea that he had studied Indian classical music formally and that he is an excellent harmonium player, a violinist, and a composer. He also composed music for various programmes when he was posted in *Doordarshan*.<sup>8</sup> The following year, in 2016, when I went to India and visited his house, he played some music for me and said that he would start visiting my house and would teach me music. This was the first time I had someone who fully recognized my potential in music. He told me that I could learn very fast. He also appreciated my compositions and offered feedback to refine them. Last year, in 2018, I went back to India on my sabbatical to conduct a project on Indian classical music and stayed there for about six months.<sup>9</sup> He taught me with utmost sincerity, seriousness, and openness. He encouraged me to learn in a way so that I could perform in front of other people. At our wedding, my wife and I gave a music recital (it was my first and our first together),<sup>10</sup> which would not have been possible without his encouragement and support. When I am in Canada, I continue to learn from him over the phone. I have seen very few people who are as passionate about music as he is.

Back to my childhood now! In Canada, even in public schools you sometimes have a choice to learn a musical instrument or pursue your interest in arts and crafts. As a child, I went to one of the Indian government schools which are highly deficient in resources. There was absolutely no culture of taking part in sports, music, or the arts at my school. For me, there was no exposure at the university level either because of a lack of prior experience. I could not learn privately either due to lack of financial means. In India, the population is so large that one becomes focused on getting a job and good grades. My artistic side could not develop formally. No one really appreciated my voice either; I started doubting myself. In my thinking, I was really singing well, but no one seemed to appreciate it except on occasions when I thought my friends liked my rendition of some specific songs.

**AD:** It is interesting that ego, which is so central to everything in our lives, gets tied up instantly.

**AK:** Yes. Your heart is invested in it; your whole being is invested in it. It is a matter of your love for something and, thus, a very sensitive matter.

Others may have stifled my musical interest externally, but inside it never stopped. I believed in a few things



that helped to sustain me. One was that I have an ear for music, and I listen for things that some people may not – especially when it comes to composition. I kept this capacity to listen deeply to myself, of course. Second, singing for me was a meditative experience. I would close the doors, put on the songs I really love, and sing along with my full heart.

**AD:** Were you singing Indian classical music then?

**AK:** No. I thought Indian classical music was boring, other than some music with flute and santoor!<sup>11</sup> You have to develop an ear for ICM. It is a highly nuanced and developed form of music. What many people outside of the Indian subcontinent may not know, however, is that a lot of Bollywood music (especially the old Bollywood music) contains shades of ICM. Indian film composers from the golden era<sup>12</sup> would train in ICM and attempt to make their music melodious and appealing to the masses without compromising the quality of music.<sup>13</sup> I was always inspired by music that was rooted in classical music, but I didn't know that. At the time, it just touched my soul, but now I am discovering that all those songs were rooted in and inspired by the raga music.

Here is an example:

**Audio 1 Aansoon Bhari Hein Yeh Jeevan Ki Rahein (The Journey of Life is Filled with Tears)<sup>14</sup>**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-1-aansoon-bhari-hein-yeh-jeevan-ki-rahein-the-journey-of-life-is-filled-with-tears>

This is an old Bollywood song sung by the late Mukesh, one of the most beloved playback singers from India.<sup>15</sup> The song is based on a raga called Yaman Kalyan.<sup>16</sup> When I started to learn it recently, I realized it was based on a complicated rhythmic pattern – a ten beat cycle (Jhap Taal),<sup>17</sup> but because I loved the song, I was eager and able to learn it. *If you really love something, the creative production happens.* Of course, you can also produce when you hate something, but it will never bring you any happiness or satisfaction.

I started ICM classes in August 2013. By that November, I was already creating simple compositions, but I couldn't tell anyone because they wouldn't believe me. I would not even show my compositions to my teacher because it is unusual that someone who doesn't have a musical background and cannot sing exact notes is capable of composing – but the art of composition came naturally to me. The desire to compose and the compositions happened like an explosion; I was enthralled by music. It was only recently that I started playing my own compositions in the class where I study music.

A few days ago, I was playing raga Bhairavi<sup>18</sup> in front of my teacher, Mr. Vijay Vyas,<sup>19</sup> in Halifax, and then he was inspired and started singing a different raga called Gorakh Kalyan.<sup>20</sup> That touched me, and when I got back home, I started composing a tune. Here is an instrumental rendition on harmonium of what I composed.

**Audio 2: Raga Gorakh Kalyan Instrumental in Teen Taal (16 beats)**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-2-raga-gorakh-kalyan-instrumental-in-teen-taal-16-beats>

Indian music places tremendous value on rhythmic cycles.<sup>21</sup> Your composition has to be in a rhythmic cycle. From the very beginning and until now, it has never happened that I made a composition that did not fit one of the many rhythmic cycles. Initially, I received help from one of my classmates (who is now my wife), Nayha Acharya, in figuring out the rhythmic cycles in which my compositions could fit, but later on I was able to do it myself.<sup>22</sup> It took me some time, and I benefitted a great deal from the iTabla Pro App.<sup>23</sup> This app contains a plethora of rhythmic patterns, and it is the tabla accompaniment from this app that I have used in the audios recorded for this paper. I would compose my songs and then sing them along these rhythmic patterns to figure out the exact cycle and its variation that would be appropriate for my tune. Slowly, I became very proficient in figuring out the patterns, and now I can do that very easily. My desire to learn music also opened my mind to technology. Without this musical app and other free material available online, I am not sure if I would have been able to progress much in learning music.

Previously, when I was at the university doing my Bachelor of Education degree (2004-2005), there was a music group, and I always wanted to go and join them but never did because of the lack of time and also uncertainty as to whether they would accept me. Likewise, when I was teaching at a private school in India, there were musicians who were employed by the school because the management had resources to offer music classes to its students. I would always ask the music teachers about what they were playing. There was so much curiosity in me, but I had been told repeatedly by then that I could not learn music and, of course, I didn't have time. I had come to Canada to do my PhD in Education.

I came to do my PhD at the University of British Columbia in 2007. It was a year later, after I had completed my course work, I told my friend and classmate Mindy Carter, now an arts-based educator at McGill University, that I was interested in learning music, but that I didn't have any background or clue as to how I could start learning music. She taught me a few Western songs on the piano. She told me that I was learning fairly quickly, and that gave me more confidence. Eventually, however, we both became busy and stopped the lessons. At that time, I would sing all the time and play rhythms on any object possible. Mindy recently sent me an email:

I often am reminded that after the lessons stopped, you always played drums and percussion with Harrison [her son] .... The Eastern rhythms and tunes that you taught him he still sometimes hums. So more than this aptitude for learning music early on, it was always a part of your being. Remember sitting on the floor by the kitchen with Harrison and playing music? Also, when I tried to show you the formal piano techniques (scales and chords and songs), you wanted to write your own songs....it seemed you were more interested in composition even then. (M. Carter, personal communication, 2018)

When I went to Halifax in 2011 as an Assistant Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University a few years later, my inner desire to learn music was intense. I would sing all day. I was staying with a friend, and I asked him if my singing bothered him. He said "No, no! Your voice is good; it is soothing. It is not necessarily my style of music, but I like it, so keep singing!" That was, for me, another vote of confidence, and he pushed me a little bit. He often told me that I should take formal lessons. So, I started looking for a teacher of ICM, but I couldn't find anyone in Halifax. There were three more events that happened between 2011 and 2013 which gave me more confidence and pushed me to look for a teacher. All of these events involved me playing Djembe (West African drum) with other musicians, first at a friend's place in Halifax, then at a campsite in Cape Breton, and another time at the Krishnamurti Educational Centre in Ojai, California. It was a complete surprise for me; while I had no formal musical training, I was able to jam with these musicians playing Western music and had no problem following the rhythmic patterns. In the first of these two events, it was Kevin Hayes, Mindy's former partner, and a very talented musician, who encouraged me to participate in and play with him and other musicians. These experiences also gave me some confidence that I had the ability to learn music.

The obsession to learn music, and therefore to find a teacher, was becoming more intense every day. Given the positive experiences with Djembe and without any possibility of finding an Indian classical music teacher in Halifax, I ended up taking a lesson with a Djembe teacher on a recommendation from Susie Brigham, my colleague and friend at Mount Saint Vincent University. After the first lesson, which went very well, I realized that there is no possibility of being able to play Djembe in my apartment because of its loud sound. With that, I also realized that what I wanted to learn was Indian music, so I needed to find a teacher. I kept trying to learn by singing along with the songs I liked the best and hoped that one day I would find a teacher.

During the summer of 2013, Susie Brigham asked me to attend the Indian festival in Halifax with her family. I did that, and while there I started exploring and asking around if there was an Indian music teacher in Halifax, and someone told me that there was a teacher who had been teaching music at the Hindu temple.

A few weeks later, I went to the temple and asked about the music teacher. When Mr. Vijay Vyas, the music teacher, came, I asked him if I could sit in the class. In that first lesson, I was terrible because I was unable to hit the right notes. I did not even know what it meant to sing notes and solfège! I was singing very poorly at the top of my lungs! The people in my class thought I was strange, but I was really inspired by what the teacher was doing. I needed to sing! That passion has deepened as my singing and musical understanding

has improved.

The friends, including my wife, that I have made from that class thought I was a bit crazy. Why would I sing so loud when clearly I was not in tune? Of course, they were pleasant enough that they didn't mind. I was so moved by that first class that I touched my teacher's feet, which we do in India. I asked him to allow me to attend the class, and he said yes. Even though he knew that I wasn't good, he didn't discourage me – that was a very important moment, and since then, I've just kept working at it out of my own passion. Sometimes, I've had to hide things from him because, again, I started composing after three months and no one would believe that this is possible. I was just so touched by music. Now, my playing has gotten better, my singing has gotten better, and my own conceptualization of music has become richer – and the passion that existed in the beginning is still there. This music class, along with online materials and books related to ICM, oriented me towards the framework of ICM and opened the possibility of my self-exploration of music. It was a sheer fortune to be able to find a class like this and a knowledgeable teacher of ICM in Halifax!

**AD:** Why do some people feel the need to discourage others? There is this hierarchy that implicitly states one must learn the basics before one can be creative: that is not the message of your educational philosophy.

**AK:** No, of course not. There is a definite hierarchy. It may be worse in India because there is a revered and entrenched system of guru and shishya (teacher and disciple).<sup>24</sup> That system may become stifling at times because students would always work under the shadow of their teachers and follow the system laid down through tradition. I, however, told myself from the beginning that I would learn from everybody, but I would not sell my soul to anyone. I wanted to keep my individuality and my identity as free and independent as I could, rather than be dominated by a figure of authority. In other words, I was, and still am, totally devoted to music, but not to any particular figure of authority.

Rather than worrying about seeking approval from the authority figures or following the defined stages of learning music, I intuitively sensed my potential, and I carried on learning and composing music. I told myself throughout this process that I have to continue to explore music no matter what others may think – this is what I call *intrinsic intelligence* or an intuitive trust in life. People very close to me have tried to discourage me, but I always trusted my intelligence and the process of learning. Slowly, I realized that what I was singing, playing, and composing was good *because it was coming from my heart*. After I realised that, I didn't care if anyone enjoyed and approved it or not.

**AD:** In youth, we can become heavily invested in the hierarchy and the path laid before us. I think, however, that as we become more self-actualized, the path matters less than our happiness. I think that is what you're talking about: just follow your heart.

**AK:** While in the beginning, I couldn't pursue my interest in music, I did become interested in meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2013; Kumar & Downey, 2018a). Meditative inquiry is a process of clearing blockages within you; it breaks down conditioning, fear of authority, fear of life, fear of anything. It is not a conscious process, but the deeper you go, the deeper the roots of the blockages will be broken. When there are no blockages, life will rush out. That is what happened in my case, I believe. By studying Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff<sup>25</sup> (1950, 1963, 1975; see also Ouspensky,<sup>26</sup> 1949, 1957), and Osho<sup>27</sup> (1983, 1987, 1989, 1996, 1998) and having an interest in understanding myself, I slowly removed the barriers (e.g., external discouragement and internal doubt) that were suppressing my interest in music. My blockages started to go away, and the music started to surge out. *When there is clarity and sense of integration within, you can do nothing but follow your heart.*

**AD:** *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009) that came out in 2009 showcased the spiritual orientation of Indian classical music, and you've talked about the spiritual aspects of your own philosophy ...

**AK:** It is two-in-one; *music and meditation are two-in-one*. I do music for meditation. Music takes me to meditation. From meditation, music comes.

**AD:** Perhaps, you could tease out some of the spiritual philosophies behind music? What is it about music that makes it spiritual?

**AK:** I can give you an example from my own experience, and then we can try to tease it out. Have you heard

of *alaap*? An *alaap* is free-flowing singing or playing a raga without any rhythmic cycle. To me, it is the most meditative part of music. It is a dialogue with the raga, the music, and life. From a technical perspective, when I started learning music, I did not know I was doing an *alaap*, but in some sense I was. I'll just show you a little bit in raga Bhairavi. In this raga, all twelve notes of an octave can be used with skill without changing the nature of the raga.

### Audio 3: A Short Alaap of Raga Bhairavi

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-3-a-short-alaap-of-raga-bhairavi?in=user-235458448/sets/ashwani-kumar>

There are a few websites that list ragas with their ascent, descent, *pakad* (key characteristic phrases), and *chalan* (movement).<sup>28</sup> I would go on these websites, look at one raga, and then play the notes and phrases specific to that raga for an hour or so without even knowing if I was playing the actual raga. I told myself, "I don't care about the pre-established concept of a raga any more. I will play because I love playing it." From that intuitive, spontaneous, and meditative playing, a song would emerge. It happened almost every time, and at times it has happened when there were other people sitting in the room, and they have witnessed that the composition came from nowhere. It has happened many times in front of my wife, once it also occurred in front of my brother-in-law and his wife, and another time it chanced in the presence of my niece in India. I am, of course, not saying that these compositions are perfect and that there are no mistakes in them. In the very beginning, at times it would not even sound good, but the joy that I got in the whole process is beyond description. As I learned more, worked more, understood more, things began to improve fast. I was able to create more refined compositions more quickly.

What surprised me is that the songs which came were sad and heavy. Every song showcased a deeper urge to be free, to find the unknown, to merge into the unknown. For me, this is where spirituality and music meet; my meditative inquiry cleared the blockages, and then the music started to surface, which further deepened the meditative movement. *In my music, there was a calling for an even deeper meditation where even the meditator does not exist.*

Poetry also came during this time. I never thought that I would ever write a poem. Even when I did it, I doubted myself in the beginning, but later I allowed myself to trust my intrinsic intelligence, telling myself, "This is happening. This is happening without any reason. You are not forcing yourself to do it, so why don't you just stay with it?" Most of my poetry is spiritual in nature. It is a calling. It has been about my quest, my difficulties, and my existential conundrums. Some of it is also about real teachers, a guru who takes you from darkness to light. I was writing for a teacher like Krishnamurti, Kabir,<sup>29</sup> or Buddha. They were in my mind because they have inspired me so much. I would sing an *alaap*, and the compositions would come in a flash. That has happened with all my compositions; they are never a struggle, they just come. Refinement and setting them to rhythm may take some time, but the creative side itself just comes out.

I would like to recite one of my poems about true teachers, first in Hindi (my first language) and then its translated version in English. This was my first poem. I still remember how it happened. I was at Krishnamurti Education Centre in Varanasi in 2014. In the evening, I was sitting in my room, and suddenly I had the urge to write something down. The whole poem happened in a flash. I created a tune for it a few months later at another Krishnamurti Centre in Bangalore! That tune, too, just happened like a flash. Since then whatever I wrote or composed, I always kept a record of it because I wanted to be able to go back and see what I had been doing. I never knew that we would be having this dialogue, and all of it will be coming in handy!

### Audio 4: In Praise of the Great Teachers/ Astitva Ke Samaan Ho Tum

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-4-in-praise-of-the-great-teachers-astitva-ke-samaan-ho-tum>



### **अस्तित्व के समान हो तुम**

अस्तित्व के समान हो तुम।  
अस्तित्व की पहचान हो तुम।  
तुम्ही में तो पूरा जग है समाया।  
तुम ही हो प्रकाश जगत का।  
तुमसे ही उज्ज्वल हैं ये धरती और आकाश।  
तुम असीम, तुम उदार, तुम महापुरुष हो।  
तुमसे है सच्चाई जगत में, तुमसे ही अच्छाई।  
तुम्हारी महिमा कोई न जाने, तुम्हारी सरल है वाणी।  
मेरा प्रणाम स्वीकार करो तुम।  
मुझे मुक्ति प्रदान करो तुम।  
है प्रिय अनुदानी।

### ***In Praise of the Great Teachers***

O Great Teachers!  
You are the existence itself.  
The whole world is contained within you.

O Great Teachers!  
You are the light of the universe.  
Your beings illuminate the Earth and the sky.

O Great Teachers!  
You are eternal and compassionate.  
You are the awakened and the enlightened beings.

O Great Teachers!  
You embody goodness and truth.  
Your greatness lies in your simplicity, your nothingness.

O Great Teachers!  
O Dear Merciful Ones!  
Kindly accept my obeisance.  
Bestow upon me the freedom.

In many of my poems and songs, it is as if I am talking with God, by which I mean the whole existence and life. There is an irony here. You know how critical I am of any orthodoxy or belief system in my academic work and in my conscious self-inquiry, but in my music, I am the biggest believer, and *I don't want to interfere with it*. I would tell myself, "If this is what it is, it has to be this." Though it seems like a contradiction, I don't think it is; it is paradoxical. If you start talking to me about God and beliefs, I will start becoming critical

because blind faith, superstitions, and organized religions have caused a lot of conflicts and divisions between people. However, I accept a meditative and spiritual engagement with music, and it is fine if the inner expression takes the form of a devotional language.

**AD:** Perhaps there is a difference between spirituality and religion?

**AK:** That's what I think. All this poetry belongs to spirituality and is not tied to a belief system. I may have used words that are also common to the orthodox Hindu tradition because I grew up with that language, but once I translate them into English, those things go away because I don't need to use those terms. I made a song using the name Rama—Lord Rama is a famous Hindu deity—but when I use Rama, I am using it in the sense that Kabir uses it. It is a metaphor for the unnameable, the unknown, and the invisible! The song was in raga Jog. It is one of my very first compositions. I have not tried to refine it too much.

**Audio 5: Mori Nagariya Aao Raam/O Life! O Happiness! Won't You Visit Me Sometime Too?**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-5-mori-nagariya-aao-raamo-life-o-happiness-wont-you-visit-me-sometime-too>

The whole point of the song was:

*O life! O true happiness!*

*Where are you?*

*Where are you?*

*Won't you visit me sometime too?*

**मोरी नगरिया आओ राम**

मोरी नगरिया आओ राम।

देखत तुम्हरी बाँट प्रभु,  
बीत गयी मोरी ज़िन्दगी राम।

अब तो दर्शन देदो राम।  
देदो राम, देदो राम।

काहे मुझसे रूठ गए हो,  
मुझको बताओ मेरा अपराध।

कब होगी मेरी प्रतीक्षा पूरी,  
कब होगा जीवन में प्रकाश।

तुम्हरे दरस बिना, मोरा जीवन सुना।  
दरस दिखा दो, प्यास बुझा दो।

मेरे प्रभु राम, मेरे प्रभु राम।

**AD:** This is your spiritual journey.

**AK:** It is, and I think many classical musicians are also devoted to music in this way. For them, music is their God. I have heard many of them, including the great Pandit Jasraj and Omkarnath Thakur, consider music to be divine. There are even many Muslim musicians (e.g., the late Mehdi Hassan, a legendary ghazal singer from Pakistan) whom I have heard say during his performances that music is God despite the fact that in Islam music is not always encouraged. *Notes are pure like God.* That is how musicians think about it.

**AD:** I can attest to that as well. I went to university in Québec where people can sometimes be anti-religious. In the music department, however, everyone at least partially submitted to the greatness of music. When you

are in the presence of great music, it is awe inspiring. The only thing you can think of is that you have to go play.

**AK:** Yes! Whenever I hear a good song, a good classical performance, there is this urge to play and compose. Schopenhauer said that although life is miserable, the way in which you can escape it a little is through the arts, and in the arts, it is music that is the best medium for this escape (see Chu, Morgan, & Wardle, 1999; Cox, 2016). Friedrich Nietzsche found the same experience in Richard Wagner's work (see Chu, Morgan, & Wardle, 1999; Cox, 2016). For me, however, *music has never been an escape from my conflicts or misery*. It is a way to bring out my questions and conflicts so that I can see them as clearly as possible through musical and meditative awareness. It was never a mere entertainment; what came from music is release from my blockages and conflicts as I said above.

**AD:** You just mentioned the difference between entertainment and the spiritual pursuit of music, which was also mentioned in *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009). Could you speak a bit more about that difference?

**AK:** First, if someone is devoted to music with their whole being, it is spiritual regardless of whether it is Indian, Western, Chinese, or Iranian. Entertainment is when someone is playing and listening superficially, as a distraction. If you play, and I listen to you with complete attentiveness and intent, then it is a spiritual experience for the one who is listening and the one who is playing.

In Hindi, there is a phrase, *rasik shrota*, which in English means, "The person who listens intently and derives enjoyment." *There is some kind of alchemy that happens when somebody is listening intently*. It makes you want to go deeper and deeper in your singing and playing. Listening and playing collaborate with each other. If you listen completely, my playing will become better, and if I am playing better, you will become more attentive in your listening. Entertainment, on the other hand, is, for me, a superficial engagement with the arts. A spiritual pursuit is when you are totally engaged, whether you are playing music, or you are experiencing it. To me, both are spiritual. It becomes entertainment only when you have a partial connection to the wholeness of music.

**AD:** That comes to meditative inquiry, awareness, and being in the moment. The difference between spirituality and entertainment is whether you bring your whole being to whatever you are doing.

**AK:** And I think that is a way of being, right? If I live a meditative life, then my teaching will be like that, my learning will be like that, and my relationships will be like that—my whole being will be involved in whatever I do. That is the whole purpose of meditation. It is not sitting in a corner and breathing in a certain way for ten minutes; *it is learning to live with your whole being no matter where you are*. Then the false division between a person and life drops. I will not focus more when I am working and less when I am playing with a child or playing music or eating food; I am always aware, and I am fully present in what I am doing.

Work obsession has become crazy in the West. People are completely going insane while pursuing their work and ambitions. They believe that God is dead, as Nietzsche says, but then their work has become their new God—and it really doesn't matter whether you like your work or not! Work in itself should not be the goal—if you love something, then that becomes a different kind of work, but even when people hate it they somehow won't question their obsessive commitment to their work. Have you noticed it? They will not try to disturb their work. They can be ungiveing to a child, parent, or partner, but they won't let their work be interfered with, and they think that makes them responsible human beings. That completely baffles and saddens me—they have given so much importance to something that they don't even necessarily like.

**AD:** Even when we do try to take time off work, we are ridiculed or looked at as less than efficient.

**AK:** That's why it has become a conditioned response to say that I am really busy, as though being busy is a really good thing to be. When I came to Canada eleven years ago, I was surprised and wondered if people were really happy if they were busy all the time. I have seen that only when my brain is free and empty does the music flow. When it is cluttered, it does not. I think that because we have obsessed ourselves with work and external pursuits, our creative expression doesn't come out fully. We have prioritised things, put some things above others. For me, cleaning the floor is as important as playing music. I may not clean the floor very often, but when I do it is as good as playing the harmonium. I can't divide tasks into lower and high-

er – our whole lives are significant and sacred. When I am walking through Point Pleasant Park in Halifax, it is as good as when I am doing intellectual work. Why does there have to be a division? This division has narrowed people’s creative potential because they have fragmented their minds. This is the cause of anxiety and stress – living a partial, fragmented life.

**AD:** That’s quite profound. Do you want to read more of your poetry?

**AK:** Sure. When I wrote this poem, it was a full moon night, and I was sitting on a rock in Point Pleasant Park. That particular day is called Guru Purnima<sup>30</sup> in the Hindu and Buddhist calendars. It is a full moon night dedicated to all true spiritual teachers like those I have mentioned above: Kabir, Buddha, and Krishnamurti. People also say that the full moon night is the night when people become enlightened. This poem is my call to the universe. I will translate the poem into English for you.

### *The Full Moon Night*

So many full moon nights have come and gone.  
So many moments of life have come and disappeared.  
But why am I still asleep?  
Why have I not become awakened yet?

### *कितनी पूनम की रातें आयीं*

कितनी पूनम की रातें आयीं,  
और चली गयीं।

कितने जीवन के पल आये,  
और मृत्यु में सिमट गये।

जाग न मुझको आयी प्रभु,  
जाग न मुझको आयी।

इस पूनम की रात प्रभु,  
कर दो मुझको प्रकाशित प्रभु।

पूर्णिमा की शीतल चांदनी से,  
मेरी प्यास बुझा दो प्रभु।

कण-कण मेरा कृतज्ञ रहेगा,  
अपनी झलक दिखा दो प्रभु।

These words are also very personal and emotional, but that is poetry. In Indian mythology and culture, the moon is associated with the cool light, while the sun is linked to hot light. The next line is:

On this full moon night,  
Quench my thirst with the coolness of the moonlight.  
Every fibre of my being will be grateful if given a glimpse of you.

I composed this poem in a very beautiful and serious raga called Chandrakouns. Chandra in Chadrakouns means moon, and that is the reason I chose this raga for this composition.

### **Audio 6. Kitni Poonam ki Raatein Aayeen/Full Moon Nights Have Come and Gone**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-6-kitni-poonam-ki-raatein-aayeen-full-moon-nights-have-come-and-gone>

**AD:** This sort of plea has certainly been present in my own life. I know there is something more out there, something higher than this – can’t this moment be it?



**AK:** Everything that I have written is a plea. Everything is a plea.

**AD:** Why do you think that is?

**AK:** My whole being is a calling for something that I do not know. My musical pursuit came out of my calling, an inner calling for something that I think I intuitively sense, but which is beyond my comprehension. Is it for life, beauty, or happiness? I don't know. It is not, however, a matter of worry or anxiety for me, it is the expression of the whole being – it is how my being wants to unfold.

**AD:** It's not a plea to alleviate your discomfort.

**AK:** No, it is not a prayer. I am not praying to God to take away my problems. I am sharing with existence the agony or difficulty I may have. It's like a poetic relationship with existence. I am sharing my innermost feelings with existence, but not in a way that asks for them to be taken away so that I can get on with my life.

**AD:** Buddha said existence is suffering, and it sounds like you are revelling in that.

**AK:** But Buddha also said there is a possibility to be free of suffering. That's what I think Schopenhauer might not have realized. Buddha called the absence of suffering nirvana. So, you can say all my musical and meditative explorations are a call for nirvana, but it is not a desire. It is a deeper calling of the unknown. But even in this total and intense calling, there is a sense of deeper release, creative flow, and joy. Every time I play with my whole being, it is like a meditative experience; it leaves me in a silent and rejuvenated state. The same happens when I am sitting quietly without having any purpose or direction in my mind.

**AD:** In *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009), the musicians were very serious about music, and they continually mentioned rigour and discipline. Could you share your reflections on these concepts?

**AK:** I am both for and against discipline and rigour. I am against it when it comes from external pressures. I won't be disciplined or rigorous because a figure of authority wants me to be. If you love something, however, would anybody need to tell you that you have to practice? If somebody has to force you or persuade you to practice, you know that you don't love it. Krishnamurti says that love is the most efficient thing in the world. He is making fun of people's concept of efficiency because people want to be efficient whether they love it or not. *If you love something, you will be efficient.* We will create more and more if we love what we are doing. If, however, you want to learn and create without loving something, even if you try very hard, it will be conflict-ridden. Thus, the discipline and rigour that come because you love something has value, but it won't have a pattern or rigid structure. Sometimes I play all day. Sometimes I don't play at all. Sometimes I am happy with what I am playing. Sometimes I am not happy with what I am playing. It is like life, changing all the time, but because I love it, I will continue to do it. I will also be rigorous with it, but not because of any external pressure.

**AD:** What are your thoughts on the concept of improvisation?

**AK:** Improvisation to me means going where my heart wants to go. If you have a sense of melody and deeply feel it, then it may take you where it will. Music to me is a living being, and it has its own movement. Recently, I was practising raga Bhairavi with my wife. We have been practising that raga for the past few months. Then, one day suddenly that raga changed into a different raga which I had not heard of or learned from anyone. It kept on going for a while. My wife and I both loved that experience and were pleasantly surprised. I have recorded parts of it and will develop it further and will also try to find out if there is an existing raga that corresponds to what we came upon.

If you are playing something and your heart wants to go somewhere else or the melody itself wants to flow in a way that the rules do not allow, I don't see any problem with it. There are hundreds of ragas in ICM. Musicians have creatively conceptualized these different ragas, and within those ragas, they have created phrases and movements that are particular to each raga. But the interesting thing is that there is no absolute agreement over what a particular raga in actuality is. There are general characteristics, but each musician has his or her own interpretation of what that raga actually means. Even the nature of the ragas has been changing. What a particular raga was 200 years ago is not necessarily the same now.

To get stuck in a particular box is not very musical in my view. You may come upon those combinations and permutations of notes that are so pleasing but do not necessarily fit with what others might be conditioned to hear. It is perfectly fine to play under the established rules if you really love it that way. But at the same time, you can also bring your creativity to it. I have heard many small phrases from some musicians, and I loved them so much that I created something around them. I took something from them, but then I created something of my own. But I don't think there is anything wrong with playing something that has already been established. What is limiting is if you get so stuck in it that you can't go beyond it or be creative. Even when I didn't know how to sing or play at all, I was never able to do the same thing twice: that has not been my life. So, when I play something I would always think, "Okay, what else can be done to it?"

*Improvisation is the essence of a creative mind, and creativity flowers in freedom, not in chains.*

**AD:** *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009) touches on the submission to a guru, who is almost like a parental or divine figure. How does that factor into your thoughts on rigour and discipline?

**AK:** There are music teachers, and there are spiritual teachers (all these terms are so ridden with problems, of course). In some cases, a music teacher may be a spiritual teacher. For example, Guru Nanak,<sup>31</sup> the founder of the Sikh religion,<sup>32</sup> also happened to be a musician (see Kapur, 2015). I think this is rare though. Most musicians are not spiritual teachers. That means they may be hierarchical in their orientation: they may be oppressive, they may be exploitative, and if you are really good, they may be threatened – it depends on the kind of person the teacher is. The general tendency in Indian culture is that you have to respect your teacher, which I am all for. If I have to give up my individuality for the ego of the teacher, however, this is not respect. To give up your individuality so the teacher can feel gratified is not true reverence in my mind. Teachers can sometimes get caught up in ego gratification – "If you don't gratify my ego, I am not going to share my knowledge with you." Can such ego-gratification lead to true respect, or is that a cunning game?

Such expectations can negatively influence your learning experience. For students aspiring to be professional musicians, the teacher really has to like them and teach them "secrets" so that they can become great musicians. I think my relationship with teachers and proponents of Indian classical music has been complicated at times, and I am not unique in that. As mentioned previously, I would try to do things which I was not supposed to do according to the traditional linear way of developing musicality, and that is challenging for anyone who has blind faith in a tradition. Learning to me is neither sequential nor linear. If you have love in your heart and if you follow your intuition, you can jump around; you can learn many things in a short time. You can learn difficult things before you learn easy things. The art of composing music is considered difficult, but that was the first thing I learned on my own as it was part of an intrinsic, intuitive movement. I learn from music teachers, from books, from material available online, but I have my own direction of learning and growth. I have learned the most from my own compositions. However, just because I compose does not mean that I am not paying attention to the script or the text. It is a thousand of years old tradition, and people have devoted their lives to it, so there are tonnes of treasures in it. However, I don't want the scriptures to become such a burden on my life that I stop living and creating. It is similar to the difference between technique and approach. If I have an approach to life, to living fully, I can use the techniques. If I have a love for music, I can pick up techniques, the tradition, and the text. It is only when those texts and authorities become a burden on my throat, when they begin to stifle me, that I should stay away from them.

One has to make sure that one maintains one's originality and independence. However well-intentioned, external pressures, standards, and expectations can force you to do what is not in tune with your own way of being. One must make sure one's inner flow is not suppressed by outside pressures and that one follows one's own path.

**AD:** In any music system there are rules that give it its defined features. How do you balance learning the rules of something versus seeking self-actualization through it?

**AK:** If a tradition has developed over thousands of years, of course, there are going to be rules, structures, systems, and instructions. The question is, can you associate with them through a free mind rather than a narrow and caged mind. Did music or rules exist first?

**AD:** Music, of course.

**AK:** There is a beautiful poem by an Indian poet, Amrita Pritam (2016), to which I composed music. It is called “ancient music.”<sup>33</sup> In it she says that the seven notes or 12 notes came much later. Music has always existed. It has existed in nature always, then in the folk music from which ICM is derived. ICM has become more formulaic and rule-based, but that doesn’t mean that it hasn’t created good music—it has. However, ICM and other established forms of music have come out of the larger reservoir of music and creativity, which is the very movement of life, so why not directly tap into that creative reservoir?

People say you need religion to tap into happiness and what they call God. I say, why not tap into God first? Take help from religion if it is true for you, but if it is an obstacle, don’t hesitate to remove it. Similarly, tap into music directly from the heart. Folk music around the world has emerged from this emotional and spiritual connection to nature. ICM is rooted in the folk music of India. We first tap into the source of music, which is life itself, then we make use of or change whatever rules exist. I would say the same thing about learning too. You can learn directly and intuitively, and you can also learn from the textbook. When we seek overreliance on rules, textbooks, and scriptures, we narrow our minds and become afraid to experiment, to learn, and to live freely. We just want to follow and conform, but if our spirit is free, we can learn so much more from traditional knowledge. If our spirit is burdened, then that tradition is a bondage. It won’t help your growth. That’s what I have done in music. I have learned a lot from the traditional knowledge, but I have not let it burden me. I always learn from my intuition first. I was and am ready to play “wrong” and go against tradition, but I wasn’t and am not ready to give up my intuition and my own inner trust.

Many times, I bypass the rule if that helps me make a richer melody. I may use a note or combination of notes which are “against the rules.” I follow the melody rather than the rules. Sometimes these rules stifle me. I try to tell myself, however, that I don’t have to be bound by any rules or seek approval from the authority figures. I am the last person who should be bound by these rules as freedom is the essence of my philosophy of teaching, learning, and living. To me, *melody is the core of music; if your heart knows melody, you know how to break the rules*. That’s how it goes with life. If you know how to live life intelligently, that is without succumbing to external pressures, rules, and structures and by trusting your creative and intuitive capacities, you will know how to use the rules that are imposed on you by the social structures including schools.

**AD:** How have you brought that to your career as a teacher and a researcher?

**AK:** I have always followed my intuition. In writing all of my three theses, I followed intuition. In my teaching, I have followed intuition—responded to students’ concerns, sometimes had a bad teaching evaluation, but always followed my intuitive spirit. By being responsive, you can introduce changes if there is a valid need. Being on my own doesn’t mean that I am rigid or that I won’t listen to my students. I have designed all my courses from scratch based on my interests. In teaching my very first graduate level course, I only focused on the work of Japanese Canadian curriculum scholar Ted Aoki,<sup>34</sup> and it did not go well. I learned that teachers do not necessarily like to learn theoretical ideas. Later that year, however, I focused on Krishnamurti and Aoki, and it was a huge success. I listened to students’ responses but kept my individuality—that is how teaching has to be. Teaching cannot be a cookie-cutter profession because then you don’t bring passion, creativity, and love into it. With the cookie cutter approach, your students don’t appreciate you; they are just there for the credentials. They just wait for the course to be over, and then they are happy. I have always loved teachers who are passionate, and I think that goes for all students. If you are passionate and creative, your students will learn so much from you in so many ways, not just the subject matter. Where will you find a student who loves a teacher who is bound by the book? Have you ever met a student like that?

**AD:** I can remember one student who actually may have enjoyed a teacher who was more by the book than I was.

**AK:** There are students like that, but I engage with them. Consider this common back and forth I have with students:

**Student:** Why are you not talking about curriculum outcomes?

**Me:** Because they are boring and because they won’t help you become a good teacher; they won’t give you any depth or any insight.

**Student:** But that’s what the system is demanding.

**Me:** If the system will ask you to be a racist, will you be? If the system will ask you to be unhappy,

will you be? If the system is asking you to do something anti-educational, why are you willing to do it? Of course, you have to maintain your job, but can't you question, can't you be critical, and bring some changes in your own context?

**AD:** Bringing your own passion to whatever you do in life is a piece of criticality. That passion and drive allows you to see through what's being spoon-fed to you.

**AK:** Also, it allows you to be original and responsive. Being original and creative doesn't mean you have to be rigid. You can be responsive to students' concerns—don't give them exactly what they want, but certainly pay attention to their needs. It is fine for them to learn about outcomes as they are responsible to teach through them, yet it is also important that they understand how outcomes-based education undermines deep and authentic learning (see Aoki, 2005; Eisner, 1967; Kumar, 2019a; Macdonald, 1995; Pinar, 2012). It does not hurt to change certain things so that students feel more comfortable and open to a new kind of learning.

**AD:** Where do you think the line between egocentrism or self-indulgence and intensity is?

**AK:** I think you are the best judge. If you are intensely interested in something, it won't matter what anyone says, you will continue to do it. That is my definition of it. Intensity is not externally driven; it does not work on reward and punishment. It is something internal. The big question is: are you seeking escape in it? Are you seeking refuge from your conflicts in it? Many people might play music because it relieves them of their misery for a while. That is self-indulgence. I don't think that is the case for me, but I would not say that I am completely free of egocentric activity. Part of it is egocentric because it is gratifying and pleasing, but I feel that music is somehow beyond me. *Music is the movement of life.*

People say that they want to learn music, but you can look at it another way too: *music wants to be learned. Life wants to learn music.* This perspective completely undermines egocentric activity and external and rewards-based motivation. *Do you want to play notes correctly, or do the notes want to be played correctly? Do you want to sing melodiously, or is it the melody that wants to express itself through you?* The whole perspective changes. It takes the ego away. If the notes want to be correct, I have to support them in that so that the melody and music may flow freely. You become part of the creative movement of life.

**AD:** It sounds like that notion in *The Music Lesson* (Wooten, 2008) of music or life as a living entity.

**AK:** Music, just like meditation, is a living being. You just tap into it, come into association with it, and then you begin to flow with it. It is nothing but the creative movement of life.

**AD:** Some of what we've touched on here reflects what I see as the problem with music education in the West, specifically things like the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) exams. In my experience, many people can be pressured into taking piano lessons and pursuing the RCM exams by parents and teachers. These people learn a lot about music, but it is all goal oriented.

**AK:** And primarily technical, perhaps?

**AD:** Yes. They even develop a technical analysis of musicality, but it alienates a lot of people from the experience of music because they have felt so much pressure. So, how do you encourage someone who has been alienated by a hierarchical system to re-engage with music?

**AK:** The whole problem is rooted in our fears and our lack of understanding of the process of life. As I have said before, music wants to be learned. If you look at it that way, it takes away the entire burden. When one sets a goal, such as an RCM grade, there is a possibility that one might turn a creative activity into an instrumental activity of meeting external expectations of parents and teachers, and even internalize these expectations. In my view, deep, intense, and meditative learning does not happen when one is externally motivated. Your whole being will never become enflamed with the desire to learn because what you are learning is externally driven—by people in authority and external motivations. Even if *you decide* to do 8<sup>th</sup> grade piano, you may be doing it for other people—perhaps to impress them, but not necessarily because your whole being wants to learn. However, when you want to learn something because you are intrinsically drawn to it,



then you respond to external requirements, standards, and expectations differently. So, one has to really look inward and explore if what one wants to do has deeper connection with oneself or not. It is also important that people do not force their desires on their children. All that does is block their creativity from flowering; it prevents their own internal discipline and rigour from developing. They are forced to be disciplined and rigorous, which they resent explicitly and implicitly, and which may bring about internal complexities and psychological and behavioural issues.

Also, if you have developed a relationship of hate with something because of bad experiences, you must ask yourself if it is necessary to have this hate relationship. If you don't like to play, don't play; it is as simple as that. It is, however, important to reflect on why you have developed a hate for something. Hate isolates you; it creates a wall, and by creating that wall of hate you are suffocating yourself. It has nothing to do with music, or any individual or any activity. Can you not play music and at the same time have no hate for it? Just drop the hate relationship, or at least interrogate the reasons for your hate. Is music something to be hated, or is it my parents and teachers who forced me to do something in which I wasn't naturally interested? Once the burden and hate go away, it is possible to live a creative life. The real question to ask is, "Am I living a creative life?" That creative life may translate into music, it may not, but the flow of my creative movement should be my concern.

**AD:** There is also a narrative in the West that music makes you smarter. Playing music will develop brain areas that are not hit by other activities like math and reading – which is accurate if you look at the brain science behind it but ...

**AK:** That is true for everything.

**AD:** Of course! And that narrative actually alienates the creativity you are talking about because people buy into the cognitive benefits of music without actually engaging with their creativity in a meaningful way.

**AK:** Education has become infested with this problem of hierarchy and measurement. We want to measure, control, predict, and create a sequence, and there is this assumption that if you follow the sequence, you will presumably become smarter. And similarly, we have divided subjects and activities into higher versus lower, marketable versus unmarketable, competency, efficiency, and skill-based versus theoretical and abstract, and academic versus artistic. In my view, *any activity done consciously and with interest makes you intelligent*. My toaster oven is broken, so I have to open it for the first time and see if I can fix it. In this task, I have no doubt I will learn. Any activity you do – walk in nature, look at a tree, play with kids, play music, study grammar, study scientific theory – *your brain will develop through anything in which you take an interest*. Music is in no way different; it is not higher than anything else. Even if it is elevated in some way, I don't want to accept that because that creates an unnecessary hierarchy: some activities are better, and some activities are useless. Math is worthwhile, the arts are worthless. The real question is, "Toward what do you feel drawn?" Your brain, your whole being, is craving that toward which you are drawn, so give in to it, and it will develop. Just listen to yourself and see where you want to go.

Our work as teachers is to give students opportunities to figure out toward what they are naturally drawn. When people become afraid due to parental, societal, educational, and economic pressures, they go out of synch with themselves and find it difficult to discover their own interests. When I started ICM, I was 35. Of course, I was afraid and uncertain, but the desire to learn was much more pronounced than the fear. I had to learn. If you can help students discover that kind of energy, capacity, and resilience, they won't need a test, and they won't need an exam. It is the mentality of measurement: the belief that only through measurement can you prove something is learned. This mentality creates hierarchies and sequences to make sure that somebody has learned. I think that is completely unnecessary. *For you to be passionate about something, to be serious about something, and to learn something, measurement is not necessary*. In fact, it can become detrimental because you will become so interested in those goals and those achievements that you forget to enjoy the process.

Based on my own experience, *I think that you learn from both technical and creative playing, but much more from free and creative playing*. In creative playing, you are not worried about making a mistake or failing on a test. What you learned from technical practice will show up in your creative playing anyway. In not worrying about mistakes, however, your brain opens to so many possibilities for which technical playing, memoriza-

tion, or sticking to an outcome cannot allow. When you play freely and creatively, all those technical things can be used, but then you are leaving space for anything new and unexpected that wants to come up. You can play creatively and freely as long as you like because that won't burden your brain. The same is true of all learning.

If you just do technical practice, if you are just obsessed with measurement, and predetermined objectives, activities, and outcomes, you are destroying your brain's creative capacity by limiting it. You are narrowing it; you are conditioning it so hard that it can only function in a narrow groove. *There is nothing wrong with technically training the brain, as long as you leave space for the creative movement.*

**AD:** In closing our dialogue, I'd like to ask you a few simple questions and perhaps you can answer as succinctly as possible.

**AK:** Sure!

**AD:** What is music?

**AK:** To me, music means a process of deepening my connection with the creative flow of existence. It is an unfoldment of meditative inquiry. *Music is a living being which is ever present, and you can become part of it and flow with it when you are in a meditative state of mind.* Then, you yourself become a part of this musical flow. It is vast and expansive like an ocean. It is an eternal source of rhythm, melody, and beauty.

**AD:** What is creativity?

**AK:** Creativity is existence itself. The whole universe is creative. Look anywhere, and you will find nothing but creativity. *The whole of life is creative and is an expression of universal creative energy.*

**AD:** What is the relationship among music, creativity, and meditation?

**AK:** They are one and the same in my view. Music is a creative and meditative flow. True creativity grows out of meditateness, and music is just one of its expressions. Meditation is awareness. Through paying attention to oneself and one's relationships, one experiences a state of integration from which creativeness, including music, flows effortlessly.

**AD:** What advice would you like to offer to people who are passionate about music?

**AK:** I would like to say that music is a vast phenomenon. It is not just a matter of technical expertise, mechanical practice, and blindly and uncreatively repeating the tradition. Technique, practice, and traditions have their due place in teaching and learning music, but an overemphasis on them without realizing the significance of creative play, freedom, originality, and intrinsic intelligence may prove very limiting. Music is a sacred, spiritual, and meditative experience. We must allow ourselves to experience its vastness, its beauty, and its eternal and creative flow.

### In Closing

This dialogue on music, meditation, and creativity unfolded much like a raga of Indian classical music. A raga is a "melody which delights the mind." It emerges as a dialogue between the music, the musician, and the intent listener, and it involves spontaneous improvisation and exploration of melodic themes. Similarly, the ideas and insights offered and explored in this paper emerged spontaneously through a dialogue, allowing a profound exploration of the ways in which music as meditative inquiry inspires holistic teaching, learning, and living.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Indian classical music (ICM) is one of the oldest and most complex forms of music on the planet. Broadly, Indian classical music is divided into two types: North Indian or Hindustani classical music and South Indian or Carnatic music. As I am learning North Indian classical music, my remarks and reflections in this dialogue will be related to North Indian or Hindustani classical music. See Khan & Ruckert (1998), Shankar (1968), and Srivastava (2008) for an introduction to North Indian classical music. The links below also provide a good introduction to ICM:

<http://raag-hindustani.com/Introduction.html>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=invvO3bN6iA>

<sup>2</sup>“A raga is a melody bejeweled with notes and emotions that colours or delights the mind” (Sage Matanga, Circa 700 AD, in Desai, 2009). See the following links for an introduction to the concept of raga:

<http://raag-hindustani.com/Scales1.html>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0fSUOiar0k>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bFzS6upIW4>

<sup>3</sup>A harmonium is a melodic instrument that came to India with European missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a reed instrument. In its present form, it is very different from its predecessors. Over the centuries, Indian musicians have modified it, and continue to do so, to suit the needs of Indian music. Because of its simplicity, it is the most widely used accompanying instrument in India from folk music to classical stage performances. Recently, it has also been accepted as a solo performance instrument on the Indian classical stage (see Brockschmidt, 2004). Here you may watch live performances from the World Harmonium Summit 2018:

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=world+harmonium+summit+2018](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=world+harmonium+summit+2018)

<sup>4</sup>Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) was a world-renowned philosopher and educator of Indian descent. In addition to his books, dialogues, and public lectures, he established many schools that continue to enact alternative approach to education based on his philosophy of personal freedom and self-understanding (see Jayakar, 1986). You can read more about Krishnamurti and his work here: [https://jkrishnamurti.org/about\\_landing](https://jkrishnamurti.org/about_landing)

<sup>5</sup>The discussion here on The Dialogue Project and *dialogical meditative inquiry* (DMI) draws upon “Teaching as Meditative Inquiry: A Dialogical Exploration” (Kumar & Downey, 2018a). Several other dialogues from The Dialogue Project have been used in conference presentations (see, for example, Kumar & Downey 2018b, c).

<sup>6</sup>Over the past eight years, I have conducted regular dialogues with academics and the wider public in Canada, the UK, and India regarding the meaning and significance of meditative inquiry. Some of these dialogues have included symposia on published works and discussions with counselors and educators (see, for example, Kumar, 2012, 2016, 2019b; Kumar et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Please note that I (Ashwani) have received written permission from the individuals named in this article.

<sup>8</sup>*Doordarshan* is India’s one of largest broadcasting organizations. It was founded by the Government of India in 1959.

<sup>9</sup>As my interest deepened in ICM, I began to realize its connection to my own research and the field of education. I decided to integrate this interest of mine as part of my research. I conducted a project titled “Exploring the Significance of Indian Classical Music for Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy” as part of my sabbatical research leave (2017-2018). The overarching research question for this project was, ‘In what ways can the philosophical, pedagogical, and spiritual foundations of Indian classical music (ICM) inform curriculum theory and practice?’ I approached this question through

two avenues: theoretical and experiential. The theoretical part comprised a thorough review of the philosophical, pedagogical, and spiritual foundations of ICM. The experiential part had two sub-components: (a) interviews with ICM teachers from Canada and India to understand their experiences of learning and teaching ICM, and (b) reflection on my own process of learning and composing ICM to understand how it has influenced my approach to teaching and learning. As part of this project, I traveled to three cities in India and interviewed 7 Indian classical musicians and observed their classes. I have also interviewed two Indian classical musicians from Canada. The present paper is also connected to the autobiographical component of my research project.

<sup>10</sup>The performance can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/moYuloryj00>

<sup>11</sup>A santoor is a stringed instrument similar in shape to a harp which is played by striking the strings with two small hammers. Here you may get a brief introduction to this instrument: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPOS3cxxjcA>

Here you can listen to an amazing flute and santoor performance by the legendary Indian musicians, Hariprasad Chaurasia and Shivkumar Sharma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXzAKBVGelA&t=1s>

<sup>12</sup>The period from the 1940s to the 1960s is considered to be the golden era of Indian cinema. This period was characterized, among other things, with the emergence of melodious and soulful music that had its inspiration in Indian classical music. Film songs from this era are still popular with Indian people around the world (see Anantharam, 2008; Beaster-Jones, 2014). Consider watching this short excerpt from an excellent documentary on the subject: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfaS1yJzJPK>

<sup>13</sup>It is a common knowledge among music lovers that the contemporary film music in India does not match the melody, depth, and meaning that was present in the Bollywood classics.

<sup>14</sup>All of the audio files included in this paper were recorded live in the media studio of Halifax Central Library. This was my first experience of recording music in a studio setting. It is also important to point out that while I have continued to play the harmonium since the beginning of my formal musical journey, my singing has been interrupted because of a throat condition I developed four years ago. My throat has become better, and I have recently started singing again, but only for short durations at a time.

<sup>15</sup>You can listen to the original song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UE-LcQ5NNg>

Its English translation is available here: <https://www.petervis.com/gallery/web/bollywood-translations/aansu-bhari-hain-yeh-jeevan-ki-rah-en-lyrics-english-translation.html>

<sup>16</sup>See the following link for a brief description of the raga Yaman Kalyan: <https://swarajyamag.com/culture/the-ethereal-beauty-of-yaman-kalyan>

<sup>17</sup>For an introduction to Jhap Taal see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j9mRTHjB4Q>

<sup>18</sup>A good introduction to raga Bhairavi can be found here: <https://theinkbrain.wordpress.com/2012/01/12/raga-bhairav-a-mode-and-a-mood-in-hindustani-music/>

<sup>19</sup>Mr. Vijay Vyas has been offering free Sunday music classes in Indian classical music in Halifax for more than 15 years.

<sup>20</sup>You may listen to several illustrations of raga Gorakh Kalyan here: <http://www.itcsra.org/Thaat-Details.aspx?id=9&Rid=152>

<sup>21</sup>Tabla, a set of two drums, is the key percussion and rhythm instrument used in North Indian classical music. You can find an introduction to this instrument here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KQj-abXrPk> Also see: <https://raag-hindustani.com/Rhythm.html>

<sup>22</sup>At that time (2013-2015), while I was able to compose, I was not able to perform as I was not proficient in playing the harmonium and singing along with it and the tabla accompaniment. On my request, Nayha would learn my songs and



play my songs for her family and friends.

<sup>23</sup>Read about this App here: <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/itablapro-tabla-tanpura-player/id337350026?mt=8>

Also see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Q15\\_7uOiXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Q15_7uOiXw)

<sup>24</sup>For an introduction to “guru shishya” tradition see: <http://www.itcsra.org/Indian-Oral-Tradition>

<sup>25</sup>George Gurdjieff (1866–1949) was a Russian mystic and spiritual philosopher of Armenian and Greek descent. Deeply concerned with human consciousness, he developed meditative practices, dances, and music to guide the process of self-transformation (see Patterson, 2017). You can read more about Gurdjieff and his work here: <https://www.gurdjieff.org/index.en.htm>

<sup>26</sup>P. D. Ouspensky was a Russian journalist and spiritual philosopher. He studied with Gurdjieff (see the footnote above) for many years. He is best known for his book, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949), which is considered a foundational text of Gurdjieff’s ideas.

<sup>27</sup>Osho was a twentieth-century Indian spiritual philosopher and mystic. In addition to his commentaries on Western philosophical and Eastern spiritual texts, Osho is well known for his open criticism of religious orthodoxy and his views on sexuality. He considered meditation, creativity, and laughter as key aspects of a spiritual life. Always a dissident figure, in the 1980s he was involved in controversy surrounding his commune in Oregon, USA, and was eventually deported on charges of immigration fraud (see Joshi, 2009; Way & Way, 2018). You can read more about Osho and his work here: <https://www.osho.com/read/osho/about-osho>

<sup>28</sup>Two of these websites that have offered tremendous help in my learning include: <http://www.tanarang.com/>  
<http://oceanofragas.com/>

<sup>29</sup>Kabir was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian philosopher and poet associated with the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement. He was critical of religious orthodoxy and emphasised alternative paths to self-realization, including personal engagement with the divine. His work is an important part of the Indian literary and spiritual tradition (see Hess & Singh, 2002). Four award-winning documentaries on Kabir by Shabana Virmani are available here: <http://www.kabirproject.org/about%20us>

<sup>30</sup>This link provides a brief introduction to the event of Guru Purnima:  
<https://indianexpress.com/article/religion/guru-purnima-2018-importance-significance-guru-purnima-5271315/>

<sup>31</sup>Guru Nanak (1469 -1539), the founder of Sikhism, was born to a Hindu family and influenced by the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement. In addition to carrying forward the founding tenants of Sikhism (see footnote below), Guru Nanak also composed 974 hymns that form the foundation of Sikh devotional literature (see Kapur, 2015).

<sup>32</sup>Sikhism, founded around the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Northern India by Guru Nanak (see footnote above), is the world’s youngest major organized religion. Sikhism can be seen as monotheistic and is built upon the foundational tenets of faith and meditation, unity, selfless service, social justice, and honesty (see Kapur, 2015).

<sup>33</sup>The link below provides access to Amrita Pritam’s poetry and its English translation. See the fifth poem on this page that is referred to as “Adi Saneet” or the “First Music.” <https://ghazala.wordpress.com/2008/07/09/amrita-pritam/>

<sup>34</sup>Ted Aoki was a renowned Canadian curriculum theorist whose ideas have tremendously influenced the nature of curriculum studies in North America. Aoki’s work (see Aoki, 2005) contributed immensely to the reconceptualization of the field of curriculum studies from “curriculum development” to “understanding curriculum” (Pinar et al., 1995). Aoki’s scholarship, on the one hand, critiques the dominant behaviouristic conception of curriculum centered on standardized testing and outcomes-based education and, on other hand, lays the groundwork for a subjective, critical, and phenomenological view of curriculum, which invites interpretation and creation of and transformative engagement with educational experience.

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# THE LION'S GAZE: FILMMAKING AS AN AWARENESS PRACTICE

ROBYN TRAILL

## ABSTRACT:

This is an extract from a Masters study describing my exploration of the art of film as an inner awareness practice from the view of the Buddhist yogic tradition and the teachings by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche called dharma art. I call this contemplative film practice. The article speaks to the initial pre-production and production phases of this research where formless Mahamudra meditations were most important. A camera lens was employed as a cue or reminder to practice the lens of awareness while capturing moving images. In the post-production phase, the creative meditations within Buddhist yogas became a major reference point: visualization, ritual practice, narrative text, and embodied energy practices. The research study included a series of meditation retreats with a schedule of visualization practices, formless meditation, mahamudra meditation-in-action, illusory body practice, and dream

yoga. In between retreats the practice of lens art and meditation continued as a walking-photography practice. Two films linked here, [Dreamsign](#) and [Holofractals](#), artifacts of this process, are included through various links in the text.

## BIO:

Robyn Traill spends his working life wandering aimlessly between various educational, artistic and yogic pursuits. Currently he writes music for film and TV, teaches music and performance from Grade 4 to Grade 12, and practices visual art and music as a path of inner awareness. Robyn identifies as a Buddhist yogin with a natural resonance for a wide range of contemplatives, ecstasies, monastics and scholars. His family provides a penetrating and vital atmosphere of feminine energy without which he would have no hope of experiencing the truth and tyranny of his own male privilege.

The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes onto oneself. (Trungpa & Shikpo, 2003, pp. 461-462)

Contemplative film practice is a method of cultivating the filmmaking process as an awareness practice. In the context of my work it is specifically the marriage of Buddhist awareness practice and the art and craft of filmmaking (Traill, 2018). These Buddhist awareness practices are meditations that explore the nature of our mind thereby synchronizing ourselves with the way “things” truly are. Buddhist awareness practices span a range of formless meditations, conceptual contemplations, and visualizations, and what follows is a sketch of the art of filmmaking from the viewpoint of this meditative tradition.

Contemplative film practice is, however, not dependent upon Buddhist practices at all. This art practice is fruitful territory for any contemplative meditation that works with sensory experience as simultaneous with the presence of what might be called “big mind.” Indeed, religious traditions are not necessary, and in some ways the most relevant evolution of contemplative film practice may simply be as a secular expression of art for the sake of waking up to our genuine human way of being and knowing.

From the Buddhist view, our minds and phenomena are in constant change. There is no solidity to existence. There is no solid “thing” present from one moment to the next. The true nature of existence, whatever else it might be, seems unstable to the senses and our consciousness. Our body changes, our mind is constantly shifting, accessing different senses, dreaming, and grappling conceptually to figure things out. We are a flow of heat, water, air, matter, and bacteria. We act like our thoughts, our lives, our personalities are solid and permanent, rather than temporary appearances. We live within a complex set of nested dualities, concepts that split our experience artificially into me and my environment, things being “for me” and “against me,” past and future. Within these dualities we struggle. Our life-force, however, seems to be more of a constant flow, or a constant process than a solid thing. This flow is a flow of light, sound, thought, emotion, consciousness, gaps, perceptions, abrupt shifts, a riot of inner body sensations. Even a sense of our “self” experiencing it all is part of that flow. Different perspectives, frames, lenses pop in and out of the foreground of consciousness, and “watch” ourselves being conscious. Awareness practice is interested in making friends with this constant river of change that is our life and world.

Life is not so much a bunch of things bumping into one another in a big machine-like universe, but potencies, strata, fields, patterns, mandalas, living fabrics. Unceasing energy is always present in our experience if we are able to let go of our personal territory (Trungpa, 2003, p. 29). Holding this view of completely open, non-conceptual space and unceasing energy is referred to in the tradition as “the lion’s gaze” (Sherab & Dongyal, 1998).

The art aspect of this marriage, what I call “contemplative film practice” is *to intentionally practice this openness and awareness in daily life with lens-based art forms.*

There are three stages to this art practice; I discuss the first two in this article. The first is called “pre-production,” where the practitioner trains in resting in the basic space in which they find themselves, and attune themselves to the conceptual frames and lenses through which the world is filtered, particularly the lens of the “watcher.” The second stage, “production,” is camera work and the practice of responding to the sense perceptions of ordinary life as they are highlighted by lens practice.

The third stage is “post-production” involving the dance of editing and layering the images together on a timeline, and then expressing the interior flow of artistic energy through sound and music. Improvisation and spontaneity are important at this stage as those artistic styles remain close to the constant flow of how life presents itself.

The artifacts of contemplative film practice are the result of exploring the relativity and malleability of our frames and lenses on life: the play of light, the dream-like nature, the inner experience, sound, and silence. This kind of frame or lens practice maintains relevance through the whole production cycle. Two films linked here, [Dreamsign](#) and [HoloFractals](#), artifacts of this process, are included through various links in the text.

All [blue underlined text](#) in this document is linked to these films, or fragments of these films.

## Frame Practice

I use the term frames interchangeably with lenses, filters, witnesses, watchers. *Frames* and *lenses* are, of course, concepts. The concept of frames separates the world in the frame from that outside the frame. The concept of the lens is that, like our eye, it gathers and bends light. Each of us has a unique “bend” on how we see the world. We can put different lenses up to our experience, and can attempt to catch our own unconscious lenses. The point of playing with lenses is to realize that there is always a different lens. A bigger frame. The most common frame is “me,” or “I.” The yogic response to the appearance of “I” is to ask, “Who is noticing the appearance of this ‘I’?” For a moment you stop looking out your own eyes and glimpse yourself from a bigger space, or sphere of knowing. You let go of the frame. You see through a different lens.

The meditation lens of my work involves questioning the nature of our consciousness and mind. Where is consciousness or mind actually located? Where do thoughts come from? Who is watching this life unfold? What is left if I stop maintaining this personal territory? The Mahamudra and Maha Ati tradition of Buddhist formless meditation says that our awareness has a “nature like the sky” (Urgyen, 2001, p. 152). This is an important instruction. The ultimate frame is the sky, a frame with no center or fringe.

Frame practice can be approached in two steps: first, you perceive a frame, and second, your perception automatically opens up. You “flip” your frame to include everything that was not in the frame. Perhaps the sky. In this way the practitioner is always expanding their self-awareness, expanding their sphere of being, unfolding into a bigger space, instantly touching into their essential, unconditional nature.

Tulku Urgyen (2001) uses many sky and space metaphors when teaching meditators how to realize their own true nature. He says “Rigpa (insight) is like space” (p. 159). It has no center or edge. And later he says that “rangjung yeshe,” self-existing wakefulness, is unconfined and wide open. The confining, limiting factor is the fabrication of the subject and object frame or lens (p. 160). The thought and the thinker are playful appearances, mere frames, in the big space of non-local awareness. In this way contemplative film practice plays with frames and lenses in order to see beyond them.

## Contemplative Film Practice: The Lion’s Gaze

The centerpiece of my work thus far is the exploration and development of the art practices of film merged with what I am characterizing as the meditative practice of *the lion’s gaze*. It began to take shape during a pilot film project<sup>35</sup> in the summer of 2016.

The Buddhist tradition is renowned for its methods of using the conceptual mind to point towards “the view,” which is inherently non-conceptual. It is best to remember that these concepts, as finely wrought as they can be, are only fingers pointing at the moon, not the actual moon. Padmasambhava, the Indian yogin instrumental in bringing Buddhism to Tibet, said that we should be like lions rather than dogs (Sherab & Dongyal, 1998). If you throw a stick for a dog, the dog will chase the stick. This is an allegory for how we habitually chase after thoughts mistaking them for the goal. But if you throw a stick for a lion it

immediately turns to look at the thrower. He advises yogins to be like a lion and look at the source of the thought. The lion looks at the “I” who thinks it owns the thought.

## **Retreat**

Retreat practice is a regular part of a meditation practitioner’s life. In its simplest terms retreat means living by yourself away from human contact for a period of time. A meditation retreat can follow a strict schedule with a specific sequence of meditations from morning to night, or it can be more relaxed with a couple of formal meditation sessions and the rest of the time bringing the meditative frame of mind to the ordinary activities of cooking, cleaning, studying, or simply watching the phenomenal world.

Choosing retreat as the context for filming is important. Life slows down, creating a backdrop of simplicity that illuminates the clarity and flow of the moments. A wide boundary arises between waking life and dreams, solidity and imagination. The retreat atmosphere can seem ripe with moments of liminality, with glimpses of epistemological and ontological groundlessness. Retreat disrupts a practitioner’s heavy conditioning and unexamined assumptions about reality. The possibility is always there to see what has not been seen.

## **Pre-Production**

Choosing to work with a camera on retreat is actually a pre-production decision. It lays the ground for production and orients how the visuals and audio will be recorded. The pre-production stage of a standard film project involves script writing and planning. Pre-production, in the case of contemplative film practice, does not involve much writing, but, rather, the preparation for a meditative practice. The essential elements of a “lion’s gaze” style of meditation, beyond the Buddhist tradition, would include two main qualities.

The first is practicing a sense of psychological spaciousness. All occurrences of outer phenomena and inner thoughts and emotions are allowed to come and go without fixation. When occurrences arise, one’s allegiance is to space around the occurrences. This space should be considered, at least as a thought experiment, as a non-local awareness. An entwining of space and awareness.

The second quality is embodying energy. Within the sense of space-awareness is flow. The full vitality of life is blossoming and dissolving constantly and this flow is a felt sense, a somatic awareness. An entwining of body and awareness.

In terms of pre-production, this somatic-space-awareness meditation, from whatever source one draws upon, brings the director’s lens to the front of consciousness in this practice.

Many of the traditional images and metaphors (lenses) of the world’s meditative traditions, when brought to mind in pre-production, are the actual cues that turn on the camera in the production phase. In the Buddhist tradition they would be cues such as “Be like an ocean” or “Be a child of illusion.”

Expressed in another way: the view and meditation of pre-production are the preparation



for relaxing, dancing, artistically, filmically, into a big, open, energetic space. As big or as precise a space as one can actualize.

## Writing

One might think that, because of the importance of non-conceptual awareness, writing and conceptual thought are second-class citizens in the process of contemplative film practice, but this is not the case. The arising of thought is part of the play of the creative space itself. The role of writing in my pre-production process, particularly journaling in the manner of Julia Cameron's "morning pages" free-writing technique (Cameron, 1992) or Natalie Goldberg's attention to "first thoughts" (Goldberg, 2010) have proven to open fresh insights and threads to the engagement of meditation and art. Cameron and Goldberg practice a discipline of writing whatever arises in the mind at that moment. The pen does not stop, but records the flow of thought without editing or judgement. The way I sometimes experience this is as if the words are arising out of space without clear cause.

The Mahamudra and Maha Ati language talks of space in different ways: charged space, womb of space, space pregnant with potency. Space can be a synonym for mind, awareness, emptiness endowed with ceaseless display. This kind of free writing is one of my practices to access this space. Many of the words and phrases from this writing became material for what I later call "cueing practice," particularly in the production and post-production phases. Many contradictions and metaphors embedded in Mahamudra and Ati language are there to put the practitioner in a liminal space (Chögyam & Dechen, 2002) and these come forward when contemplating and writing.

And in some very real sense all is liminal space.

## Tools and Technique

Technically, pre-production means testing out cameras, microphones, and recording procedures for simplicity and ease of use. Ideally the technology becomes an aid or support role to the moment of being present and then extending into the present moment. The intention to meditate-in-action is purposely connected to and invoked in the preparation and wearing of the recording device. The camera then provides the same role as lighting a candle or arranging a meditation cushion for a traditional meditation session.

## The Script

The way I think about the script for a contemplative film in this study is basically an "exposition of consciousness." In pre-production it is helpful to articulate and familiarize oneself with the details of life's appearances that arise to our consciousness. In production, which is essentially camera work, these details provoke a somatic response to record sense impressions of those moments. The list of these details can be considered a "shot list" for the production phase of filmmaking.

- the five sense impressions
- the mind moving between them

- the stability or fickleness of the flow
- the awareness of body movement
- the moment of choice, or judgement
- the inner sensation buzzing in the background
- the shifting of different lenses and frames
- the uncertainty arising from nowhere
- the awareness of the space of mind
- the watcher expanding and contracting

The pre-production stage is an opportunity to refresh an understanding of the basic nature of how consciousness unfolds. This will influence the movement of the camera in response to image and sound in the production phase. In the production phase, the filming itself, these words, seed ideas, or touchstones, orient the attention, and cue the attention to rest in awareness and dance with what arises.

For the sake of simplicity it is helpful to talk about pre-production and production as a sequence, but I find the relationship to be more of a continuous, reflexive loop.

## Production

### Advice to Self

*Stay with the heart*

*tune in*

*to the flow of the moment*

*without agenda*

*rest*

*settle in that space*

*be that space*

*you are the art that is*

*each moment.*

*You are space looking at itself*

*from nowhere*

*without center or fringe*

*spontaneous*

*brush stroke or thought*

*. . . arises.*

*dance with the play of phenomena*

*Glimpse the space too vast*

*for “self and other” to gain a solid purchase*

*How can you know before the occurrence of a knower?*

*Who’s observing the knower?*

*From where are they looking*

*and at what?*

*Who just asked that?*

*Settling into this undefinable space*

*is the lion’s gaze.*

*empty, luminous,*

*awareness.*

*without center.*

## **Camera as Meditational Aid**

The production phase, and its basic art-meditation, involves holding or wearing a recording device in response to the flow of sensory and mental occurrences. Small portable cameras are easy to use and keep close at hand.<sup>36</sup> The way they are used in this study is mostly to capture point-of-view footage of the sight and sound of everything from waking up in the morning, cooking food, going for walks in the woods, practicing meditation, driving in a car, visiting shopping malls, and making visual art and music. In a more courageous or fully artistic manifestation, the camera can be part of the spontaneous movement of the body in space.

On the outer level, the camera is an extension of the eyes, ears, and body as it captures sight, sound, and movement. The camera can also take on an inner value, though it takes the practitioner’s intention for this to operate. The work of Barbara Bickel (Bickel, 2016) and Medwyn McConachy, both whose video work is found on the Gestare Art Collective web site ([www.gestareartcollective.com](http://www.gestareartcollective.com)) both involve the camera lens as extension of the body into a felt sense of the world’s rhythms and layers of meaning. One of the ways they do this is through various ritual practices that reveal connections within society, our human psychological make-up and the physical environment itself. I place myself in similar territory to Bickel and McConachy in that the camera is a support for meditation and awareness training. It is an expressive tool for bringing awareness and joy to our lot in life.

My intention is that the camera encourages my awareness and inquisitiveness. A small camera requires little thought or attention before use, which is a key virtue. The mainstay style of practice of the Mahamudra and Maha Ati is the generation of, and close attention to, spontaneous moments of awareness. Putting hands on a small camera and pressing record are small gestures and movements that can synch up with this style of practice.

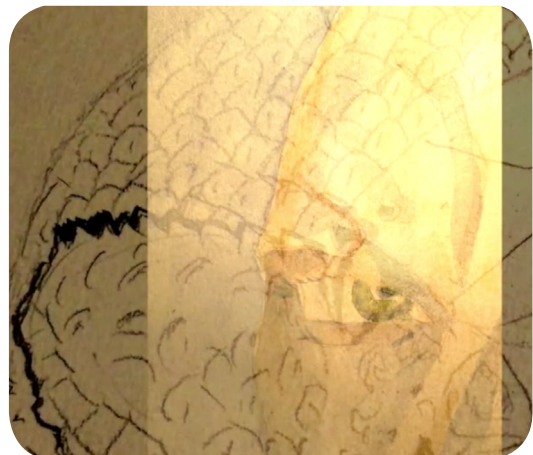
## Cueing During Production

Cueing is a form of contemplative practice. The elements of an exposition of consciousness can be used as cues to open and give space to whatever is occurring at that moment. Compelling cues, slogans, or frames are part of the meditative tradition, part of pre-production contemplations all the way through to the end of the contemplative film practice cycle.

For thirty-five years I've worked with various cues, phrases, and slogans, most of which are cut from the fabric of the Buddhist teachings I've received. Cues are a reflective technique used on the part of the contemplative filmmaker for coming to the present moment with some awareness. A cue is a short-hand for a longer teaching or meditation instruction. This short form of the teaching is purposefully put to memory so that it arises in the mind in response to somatic experience. The words and phrases flip the mind of the practitioner to pay attention with a little extra insight. The dawning of a cue such as "Regard your experience as a dream" can also *create* a strong somatic, or yogic response to a moment because it brings all of the rich experience represented by the cue.

What follows is a working list of thirteen cues with some examples of how they arose in certain imagery from the films [Dreamsign](#) and [Holofractals](#). I have provided time codes and screen captures from the films as examples.

**1. Portable Stage Set**—The Buddhist view is that humans create backgrounds within which we live our lives. These backgrounds are part of our subconscious narrative. This cue brings awareness to this background of the basic space around ourselves. It may have a particular size or mood at any given moment. We each create the tone of the lighting. The stage set is inhabited by characters, the principle being ourselves. It is a hidden stage set where each individual is the writer, producer, director, actor, and art designer. As a practitioner I can explore how I am the source for this stage set, and then how I operate within it as a pre-existing background. It is the play of a set of unconscious frames and lenses. The frame *Holofractals* (00:47) is a self portrait superimposed on top of the image of a snake I drew from a dream. It was like a visitation from a deity of some kind. The impact of the experience led to all manner of self-reflection and narrative about what was being revealed here. In the end the only certainty I have is that it is all my mind. I am the snake, the deity, and the confused person trying to find meaning.



Taking the cue of the stage set heightens the practitioner's awareness practice and questions the fabrication of what is occurring.



**2. Holofractal Perception**—The smallest perceptual moments of sight, sound, feeling, or smell can reveal the ceaseless energy of the moment. In that way the wholeness of life is present in the



smallest glimpse of sensory experience (Brakhage, 2010). In contemplative film practice the holofractal cue allows the camera to take a macro lens on things while simultaneously decentralizing and expanding into the view. This frame *Dreamsign* (1:03) is in a series of fractal moments: a wisp of smoke, an ink brush stroke, and cream curling in coffee. When I experienced these occurrences they pointed to the fragility of the world as it arises.

**3. Movement**—Movement is change. It is flow. Catching the constant flow in our life undermines the illusion that things are solid.

Water, wind, beings, machines, inner feeling. It is a constant. *Dreamsign* 4:45 is a screen shot of flag poles reflected in the water. This moment causally arose from the wind and the moon's tidal pull to move the water, the sun angling at a particular moment in the spin of the Earth, and the movement of both my attention and intention when caught in the flow of the light. An ephemeral, yet cosmic scale moment of flow with details as fine as sparkles dancing on the water.

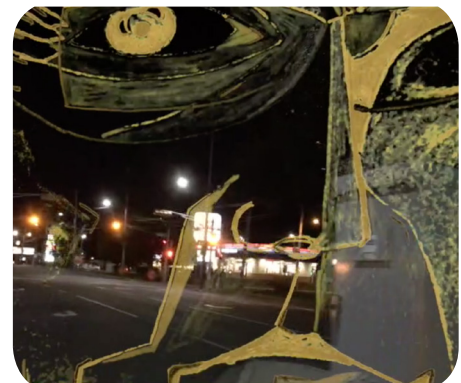


**4. With a Nature Like Sky**—Often our human experience does not seem particularly spacious. This cue reminds me to simply raise my lens to the horizon, then raise my own



gaze to the expanse of what is occurring in that moment. While in Toronto I was moved by this cue, by how much we try to cover up the sky, how easy it is to ignore, and how powerfully it transformed the claustrophobia of the urban environment. In the frame *Dreamsign* (7:25) a vertical view of the sky from Dundas Street floats on a straight-up shot of the sky from a boat dock. I hear the city, but it doesn't steal my mind away.

**5. Pain is Not a Punishment**— In the frame *Holofractals* (2:59) the self-portrait is intense. In fact, self-portraits have been flashing into view for a few seconds at this point. It is hard to look at yourself and see the struggle embedded in the lines and colours. Chaos, uncertainty, depression, sadness, and fear are all part of the play of the mandala of experience. Strong energy characteristically makes us shrink our lens and forget our background stage set. "Pain is Not a Punishment" cues us to see strong energy as neither for us nor against us. In fact, it often reveals where we are holding on to a small lens or frame that has outlasted its usefulness. Then, curiously, pain might be a reward.



**6. Things are Symbols of Themselves**— Things are completely what they are. They are not symbolic of a concept of something other than what they are. Our discomfort, in particular, is symbolic of our essential energy in a very direct way. To practice “things being symbols of themselves” (Trungpa, 1979, p. 57) is to regard the directness of whatever is happening as touching the hot wire of existence without intermediary. No buffer. Straight drink.

The frame from *Dreamsign* (7:30) is just a bee flying to a flower. And just a car driving down the road. On one hand they might symbolize beings travelling together through life. The moment of these images captured my attention because the flow and fragility of life was simply there and felt in a particularly direct way.



**7. Shadows and light**—Our visual field is constantly flowing with the movement of celestial bodies. The ever-changing angle of the sun keeps everything fresh. As the earth heats and cools from the sun, pressure zones are created causing wind and weather that cause the forms we see to dance with movement,

moisture, light, and dark. These are amplified by the fickle physical processes of sight and tune us to the dream-like nature of ordinary experience. The frame from *Holofractals* (5:11) is from a time-lapse video of the evening light changing while I practiced meditation. I remember thinking that I should be able to notice the change in the light as I sat there, but I was never able. I found that I could easily notice clear changes in light within 30 second intervals, and the closer the intervals became the closer I imagined feeling the earth and the sun careening through space.



**8. Oceans and Waves**— The oceans and waves cue is another trope to unify small occurrences (waves) with the background of emptiness and energy from which they arise (ocean). Our identity and stage set are waves. The frames and lenses are waves. Our awareness is non-local and without owner. It is the ocean. The frame from *Dreamsign* (4:10) exemplifies many cues, and not only are the vivid ripples of water dissolving as soon as they arise, but light from the sun is striking earth for the first time at that instant, both reflecting back out into the bigger space and also absorbing into the water. It is a moment of energy without anything to hold on to.

**9. Body-Mind as One Space**— Our own body, as it breathes and moves through space, is a reflection of our mind. Wearing a camera captures the movement of our body and mind. The body-mind cue brings awareness to how movement reveals our state of mind and shifts our state of mind. The frame from *Holofractals* (4:11) was taken when I recorded the sound of my footsteps which are an integral thread in the sound





design from 3:23 to 5:03. The practice of walking and resting the mind in the movement of the body was a central activity of this study.

Andrea Carvalho expresses this body-mind connection beautifully in reviewing a sculpture exhibit, *interstice: the space [often small] between two objects or events* on [www.kipjonesart.com](http://www.kipjonesart.com) (kipjones, 2011).

The relationship between our mental and physical spaces cannot be understated; in a number of ways they are one and the same. Space is not unlike a living organism. It can change or be changed, affect our moods, be mysterious and even ambiguous. For kipjones, space, and its experience has been a major focus in his practice.



**10. Speed**—The rapidity of our thoughts and the speed of phenomena around us are excellent relationships to explore. The speed of life can be met with a slow, spacious relationship to the camera. Exploring the flickering patchwork quilt quality to experience brings insight to perception and thought. The frame from *Holofractals* (1:58) is from such an exploration where I was walking down a forested road with the camera on my shoulder. As I walked I tracked how my attention continually flashed to the centre line on the road, and back to a more panoramic perspective, so I filmed some close perspectives of the centre line. In the editing process, post-production, I mimicked the fragility of my attention

by jumping from one to the other. The sequence takes a lot of energy to watch. How much of our personal energy is spent mitigating the effects of disjointed experiences? It is exhausting to be a “scatter brain.”

**11. Time**—I find that working with time-lapse footage allows me to see what is difficult to see. When the moon rises I mostly see it anchored in the sky, but know it is arching beautifully. The meditation is to slow down enough to become sensitive to small changes. The frame from *Holofractals* (00:57) is a time-lapse sequence filmed while I sat for an hour watching a sunrise. Everything in my experience arises and falls like those clouds. Suddenly a child is conceived out of nothing. It slowly grows and leaves the mother’s body, but it is difficult to pinpoint when the child first appeared. I suspect the way the clouds dissolve may inform how I myself will eventually dissolve from this existence.



**12. Generosity**—Generosity is a force of opening. It extends me into the world, and leaves me and the world changed. Being generous with a camera is like inviting reciprocity with the world. Offering to connect. Generosity is a willingness to chemically interact with phenomena and beings. To willingly be changed. Generosity as a cue loosens our territoriality as an artist. It is more concerned with “other.” This frame from *Dreamsign* (5:18) arose from exploring the intersection of the natural environment and the urban environment. This space under these bridges is basically ignored. Historically it used to be a community, and now it is dominated by highways

flying overhead. To my sensibility, this place is a power spot. It is at a narrows linking a harbour and a large protected basin. The views are still beautiful. Many people in the world live in close proximity to these kinds of structures, or have had their lives interrupted by them. Sometimes it is

just a little too much to fully feel the narrative I have about this place. Sometimes I feel fortunate to know this place, as it still has gifts to give.

**13. Life is Like a Dream**—This is a very important yogic cue for disrupting a meditation practitioner’s allegiance to subject-object duality and to the solidity of external phenomena. The daytime Buddhist yogic practice for this cue is called Illusory Body (Holecsek, 2016, p.158). Illusory Body is the practice of checking with yourself if you are really perceiving your current experience, or if there is something about the present state that is “dream-like.” When you walk outside the colors might be off. You might not feel the weight of your body with familiarity. Checking for gravity is common. Jumping a bit. Dropping objects. When you turn away from a sense object you can turn back to see if it is still more or less the same or if it has transformed in some unusual way. The practice feels like suspending automatic belief in the solidity of what you are experiencing.

This practice is also quite powerful when you review your moving images or photographs. Sometimes you see or hear something new or unnoticed. You ask yourself, “Are you watching your own dream?” The cumulative discipline is two-fold. The first questions our conceptual conditions to open up awareness-emptiness. The second effect is that during time, the yogin is more likely in fact a dream. This induces essential aspect of Dream the scope of this article, though are used in the films. In this we see an image of flowers actually a traditional example dreams. Putting the flowers in the sky occurred in the editing suite as part of the post-production process, but the original experience watching the flowers move in relation to each other gave the moment a power that cut through any impulse to invalidate the moment as merely ordinary.



The “life is like a dream” cue, which is anchored in traditional yogic meditation, continues to operate in the final process of filmmaking: post-production.

### Further Topics

Pre-production and production are very receptive stages in the artistic-meditative work of contemplative film practice. Of course there is the expressive, active quality of capturing images with a lens, but the majority of the work is seeing. There is an overarching quality of standing back and receiving the world. The Lion’s Gaze is, in a sense, the practice of looking at who is receiving the world.

Post-production—film editing, music, and sound design—move contemplative film practice towards a much more artistic dance with phenomena. Post-production moves from the Lion’s Gaze to the Lion’s Roar. This shift is significant enough that post-production deserves its own article, and would explore the virtues of spontaneity, chance operation and improvisation as emblematic of how life unfolds.



## Gazing With a Lion's Heart

From the point of view of Buddhism, meditation practice is almost useless if it remains the exclusive realm of cushions, gongs, and meditation halls. As in all sectors of our life, it is good to bring meditative awareness into the daily art of perceiving our world and the activity of expressing our human heart. Awareness and art can then mingle in a reciprocal loop: art shapes our culture which shapes our view of ourselves which shapes art.

The contemplative approach to filmmaking begs the questions:

Does it help in experiencing life without centralizing upon oneself?

Does it help to relax mental reservations and blockages?

Does it facilitate an authentic inner journey of waking up to our self-existing spaciousness and energy?

The artifacts of contemplative film practice are not about entertainment, but about waking up. The filmmaking process, to some degree, should challenge our foggy, habitual relationship to our perceptions. The films themselves might invite viewers to reflect on the nature of the "watcher" of the film, to see mind and phenomena arising in dependence upon one another.

The central allegiance of contemplative film practice is to the insight and discovery of being fully human, in all its simultaneous ephemerality and vividness. In the service of a culture of openness and possibility, contemplative film practice has no external goal other than the heart-felt somatic experience of wisdom, self-awareness and compassion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The pilot study was a video project with another artist-educator yogin as participant. We practiced meditation and did collaborative art as a context for discussions about how yogic practice informed our art and our work as educators.

<sup>2</sup>This research exclusively used an iPhone as a video recorder. On two occasions I used a portable digital audio recorder to record location ambiences and instrumental music in natural spaces. All the files were digital, and references to "film" are an aesthetic expression connected to the strips of celluloid I learned to edit in my high school years.

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## CLOSING PAUSE

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[Note from the editors]

*Peter London was invited to offer a response to the two part special issue as a last moment of pause. Peter, in turn, graciously offered his contemplative thoughts that we hope will inspire others to pause and engage their own contemplative reflections inspired by the artist scholar offerings in this special issue.*

Why bother writing, or reading for that matter, novels, when the daily paper brings you fresh from the gutters, news that is hair raising and whose outcome, moment by moment is a “thriller”; the characters are not only full blooded, but often bloody from their misadventures. So wrote Philip Roth as he contemplated retiring from writing novels, and, from which, he did stop. To this we add the well-known saw; Art is just like life, only more so. With life being as breathtaking as it is, how could art offer anything “more”? Why indeed take the time away from life as it constantly washes over us in order to gain some other (higher?) ground – to see or experience what?

Reading, listening, viewing the art forms created by the varied artists in this two part special issue of *Artizein*, will, I believe, provide the interested reader with serious responses to these nagging questions. The most conspicuous response as to why we might extract ourselves for a while from life’s hurly burly, is that life, as we humans experience it, is not lived on one plane only. Life *experienced*, is lived on many planes, each one offering different views at different magnifications and depths of field: especially the stuff of human relations with the world. The world of ideas and feelings and hopes and fears and dreams and imaginations and possible futures, and memories and misguided memories--thus the world of regrets, the unspoken and the un-speakables.

The arts open the doors of perception to all these dimensions of the world and thus bring to our attention the “more” that our raw senses cannot.

What we read, see, hear when we attend to the arts adds a complexification, a richness to the actual world that our primary senses bring to our attention, which, having alerted us to their presence, shake us awake, though not yet focused nor caring. We step on the wet grass of a morning, but the poet has told us and now, looking through both our own eyes and those of the poet, we become aware that it is a “soft” morning: the grass still moist with the goings on of nature, and now, unembarrassed, night beats a silent retreat. It’s still only wet grass, on one plane, but on several others where memories and fantasies reside, it is something “more.” But, of course, the arts not only add *more* to human experiences, on an occasion, the arts bring us to a place of “less.” A strange less, in which the world’s endless more and more and more, suddenly coalesce, assimilate, cohere, and now appear as a grand harmony, one which, of course, was always there, but hidden from our view by its many seeming dissimilarities. A new inclusivity appears and makes satisfactory *sense*, although we cannot say just how, but so it now seems. Seems to, now that we see it through a lens that the arts provide.

The array of artists that this special two part issue of *Artizein* bring to our attention arrive from many destinations with distinctive ways of perceiving and expressing, more than likely different from you, dear reader, and we hope those differences will provide the something more that the arts, carefully attended, can.

Peter London  
Davis, California  
May 9, 2019



