

# IN THE IMAGINAL REALM BEFORE SHE COULD READ: A HEALING A/R/TOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

*Barbara Bickel*

## Abstract

This healing a/r/tographic inquiry ritually cycles through ancestral time to the present inspired by a book recently found above my dad's desk—10 years after his death. This article shines light and memory onto spirit infused borderspace(s) through returning to a site where text first met image in the early years of my life. Through an autoethnographic exploration memories are recovered, along with a deepened understandings and encounters of reconciliation with my father and our religious ancestry. I am the young dreaming artist-child and the responsible artist/researcher/teacher seeking embodied relational imaginal knowledge through the light of image and word.

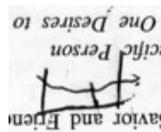
## Bio

Barbara Bickel is a writing artist, researcher, teacher and Emerita Faculty of Art Education, Southern Illinois University. A multi-media and performance ritual artist, she practices socially-engaged art with the human and more-than-human world. She lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia on Vancouver Island where she serves as co-artistic director of Studio M\*: A Collaborative Research Creation Lab Intersecting Arts, Culture & Healing. She is author of the Palgrave Macmillan book *Art, Ritual and Trance Inquiry: Arational Learning in an Irrational World*, and co-author of the Routledge book *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-Inquiry and Healing*. To see more of her art and writing go to: <http://www.studiom.space> and <http://www.barbarabickel.ca>



*Word and Wisdom*

*Lines pretend across the top of the page mimicking left to right her father's script.*



. . . grant that Thy Word may continue to be his [her] daily guide and delight. I pray Thee also, grant him [her] a realization of the responsibility that goes with higher education. Help him [her] to view all knowledge in the light of Thy Word.

Excerpt from My Prayer Book, 1957, p. 141, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis MS.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14. King James version.

In the beginning was the Wisdom, and the wisdom was with God, and the Wisdom was God...and the Wisdom became flesh and dwelled among us.

Rami Shapiro cited in Cynthia Bourgeault, 2010, p. 176.

The Word of God was sacred in the Lutheran minister's home I grew up in. I was the middle daughter of five children and sister to three foster siblings—a preacher's kid or PK. Sacred, as I perceived it as a child for the most part, meant taboo, and I grew up afraid to make a mistake speaking or even thinking words or wisdom that did not align with the great patriarchal God version of the Word taught in my home. I learned it was safer to listen and watch rather than question or speak. I came to love listening and watching and did not miss speaking at all. Yet I found ways to bring my unthought questions and voice silently forward from one world into another through drawing—through the image. As I circle between the present and my early self (image a), I am grateful for the scholars who have brought the writings of Germanic female Medieval mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen and the occluded sacred Christian texts of Mary Magdalene into conversation with the bible and gospels I was raised with.

I am steeped in the rituals and practices of my Lutheran ancestors. I worked hard as a child and teen for my Germanic religious tradition; never missing church, studying hard for my Confirmation, teaching Sunday School and playing the organ for church services at my dad's request. Spending time in nature I also generated my own rituals. In particular, swimming; floating and being immersed in nature's water became a sacred ritual for me. I recognize the sea as Great Mother, called in German *meer*, in Italian *mare*, in French *mer*, and in Spanish *mar*. All mmmm mama words. In my early twenties I traveled through Europe (where the English language was still foreign to most locals and my communication was mostly non-verbal). I spent many months traveling and living on the Mediterranean coast guided by my intuition, free from my family and North American cultural norms. During this time of travel my spirit opened wide to the imaginal, natural, cultural and eros realms of older cultures and other worlds.

The imagination of my child-self helped prepare me for co-encounters in borderspace(s) of the imaginal realm. When I realized I had a spiritual choice beyond the father's way as a young adult, I left the Lutheran tradition.

It was within the imaginal, mystical and cosmos-centered feminine world of spirituality, unconfined by any religion, that I eventually found resonance with my heart and an authentic home. The imaginal, as I use the term, is distinct from the imagination. I draw from mystical scholars, who describe the imaginal as our real home:

[A] realm that objectively exists (one might think of it as an enveloping matrix of meaning around our own space-time dimension), and it is from this realm that our human sense of identity and direction ultimately derive....it is that elusive “origin” or source”...as “the Aion,” the fullness beyond time. (Bourgeault, pp. 166)

A passage from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, cited in Cynthia Bourgeault, offers a different frame for the imaginal sanctuary doorway I walked unconsciously through at a very young age and more consciously through as an adult.

I left one world behind with the aid of another, and now as Image I have been freed from the analog. I am liberated from the chains of forgetfulness which have existed in time. From this moment onward, I go forward into the season of the Great Age, the Aeon, and there, where time rests in stillness in the Eternity of time, I will remain in silence (2010, p. 67).



a<sup>1</sup>

This healing a/r/tographic inquiry<sup>2</sup> ritually cycles through time from the past to the present spiraling into the future. A/r/tography is an ontological form of arts-based research drawing from the interconnected perspectives of the artist, researcher and teacher while incorporating artistic sources and theories. A/r/tog-

raphy dialectically inquires through art-making and writing—thus images and words in this article are in conversation, informing each other. I further engage a/r/tography as ritual (Bickel, 2007)<sup>3</sup>—slowing down and centering within a space of the sacred that includes co-encounters with humans, more-than-humans and ancestral teachers. Contemporary artist mystic Meinrad Craighead unwinds the curvatures of time and the stillness at the center, in the passage of time this inquiry dwells amidst.

Revolving at her own center. Changing Woman unwinds the incalculable curvatures of time....Her unity is perceptible in the two moving points of our own spiral dance in time: the journey evolving outward, and the search involving inward. pp. 33

This autoethnographic inquiry aesthetically evolves outward and searches inward, inspired by recently finding a small grey book in a cupboard above my dad's desk; 10 years after his death after most of his books had been given away. I regretted as an adult not asking for some of the books in his collection to be saved, many of which I knew I had drawn in. This little book—My Prayer Book, remained undetected, storing my earliest drawings inside it for decades. It had not been given away! My joy in finding this book was great. I received it as a belated gift from my father to me.

### *Drawing Upon Wisdom*

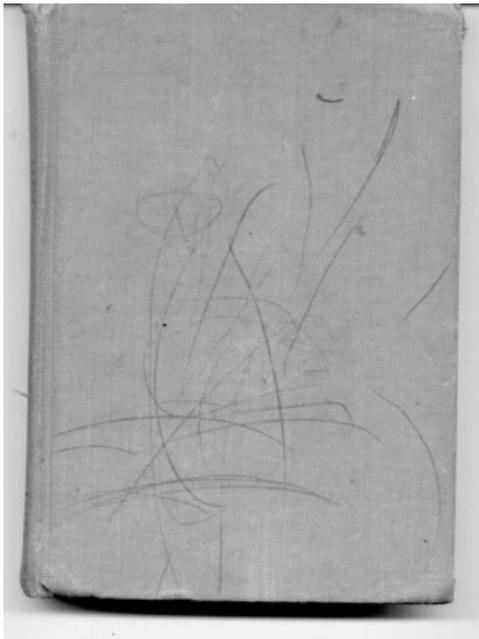
My dad was an avid reader, a life-long student of theology and writer fluent in English and German. Growing up in a strict German-American Lutheran pastor's home in a rural community, he decided to become a minister at the age of 12 because he had doubts about God's existence. His decision was made, in part, to help relieve his doubts and fears not welcome in his Christian home and Missouri Lutheran community.

From an early age, before I began school full time, I have vivid memories of being with my dad while he worked in his church office—an office that had a doorway opening onto the church sanctuary. In that windowless office we worked in mutual silence for the most part, him reading or writing and me drawing people in the blank pages of books I pulled off his library shelves. A library that did not include the kinds of picture books we had at home. My dad loved books but did not treat them as precious objects. He never stopped me or scolded me for drawing in his books. This special time with my dad is symbolically carried and remembered in my silent child drawing's relationship with him and the printed Word. This inquiry has led to new understandings about my dad, our shared ancestry and our unspoken relationship. It has brought me into a process of reconciliation for what could not be fully reconciled before his death.

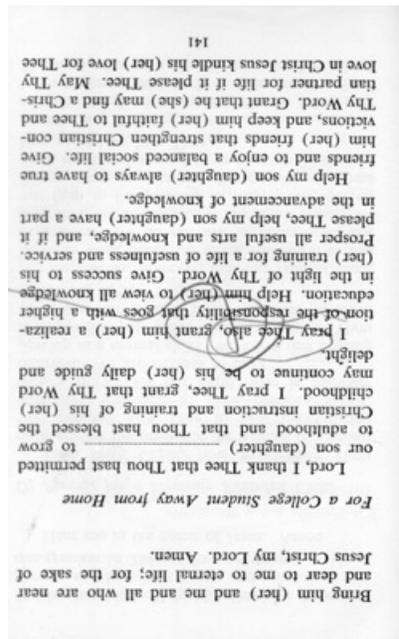
I knew when I found the book that I wanted to create something from it. Simultaneously, I have been dwelling with a photograph of me looking pretty pleased at the age of 4 holding an adult book on my lap (image a). Was it a book that contained some of my drawings? To begin to write this piece, I study my drawings in the small prayer book. Holding the re-found book, in my now adult hands, I see how I created my own front cover by drawing on the back cover of the book (image b). Opening the book from the back and reading the drawings from back to front, I notice how as a child I was unaware of front or back, or whether text was up or down (image c & d). I remember how I longed to be able to write and read as my dad, older sister and brother did. I also recall how, with a sharp pointed lead pencil held firmly in my hand,

I would carefully trace, letter by letter, line by line on top of the script—written-with-fountain-pen, in my dad’s notebooks. Through his handwriting I defied time and the limits of my young age and found a way to write in cursive before I could print.

Sitting on the floor of his office, hidden on the other side of his desk, I easily entered an awake dream-like meditative drawing and re-scripting practice—in parallel with him as he became lost in his own study and church work. I was in a place of calm and rapt attention in my self-created learning task. I have no memory of him noticing or commenting on my drawings in the book or me. I am sure he was just happy I was not distracting him from his work.



b

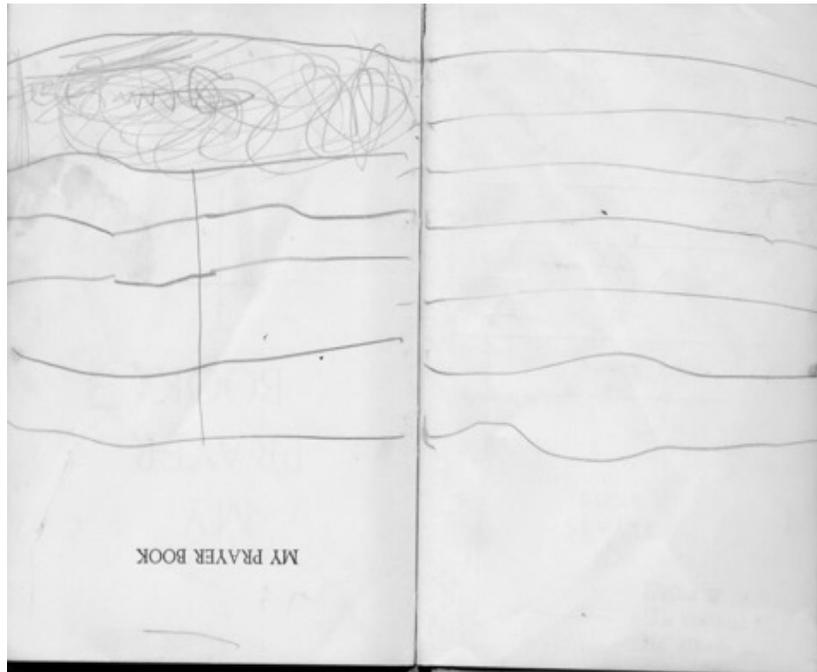


c

The quote that opens the article is from a page I drew on in My Prayer Book when I was around the age of 5. The quote is part of a prayer for a child entering higher education. It is reminiscent of readings I heard as a child growing up. The second biblical quote is one I chose to read at my Confirmation, after attending weekly classes taught by my dad from age twelve to thirteen. The third quote is a mystical interpretation of the prior quote, where the Word is traced to its Greek origins of logos that is associated with the feminine/Sophia/wisdom. In this translation Sophia’s divinity is made manifest where “Wisdom is about transformation and transformation is about creativity” (Bourgeault, 2010, p.175). Reading the reinterpreted quote helps me make more sense of why I chose it.

## *My Prayer Book*

Returning to *My Prayer Book* has helped me to re-integrate not only the image and Word but also my story with my father’s story through our genetically entwined ancestral lineage.



d

I open My Prayer Book from the back as my child-self did and begin to turn its pages (images e, f & g). These poetic words flow as I try to recapture what my experience at the time of these drawing might have been.

Before she could write or read words  
before she could read music  
before she could play songs on the piano  
before she could swim  
before she could ride a two-wheel bike

She could play she could dream  
she could love books  
    especially their pictures  
she could sing  
she could walk, run, spin  
she could listen and observe  
and she could draw

She could draw  
share her world  
quietly asks her dad for a pencil from his desk  
carefully pulls a small hard cover book off his book shelf  
slips her small fingers between its sheets  
finds unmarked pages

white space awaiting  
her palm gently smooths the first page  
deliberately flattens the spine

The pencil finds its starting place on the inside cover  
lines pretend across the top of the page  
mimicking left to right her dad's script  
spiraling with determination  
across the next page  
in consecutive  
horizontal rows  
a smiling sun leaps into the upper right corner  
nebulous shapes and forms gather

jump

a wide toothed grinning face punctuates the story

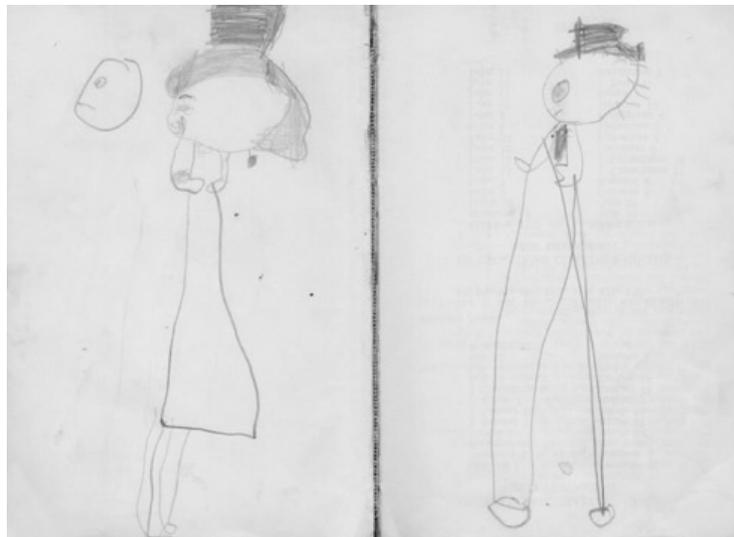


e

She turns the page  
remembers her mom  
misses her mom  
draws her just off center  
bejewelled and wearing an impressive Sunday hat  
crowns her with a sacred title  
“dad, how do you spell mom?”  
draws dad and big sister Janice into the family gathering  
in the borderspace a small head  
floats  
stares intently at dad  
grows larger on the next page



f



g

“Time to go home”  
reluctantly she returns the pencil to her dad’s desk  
slides the book inbetween its siblings on the shelf  
til the next time

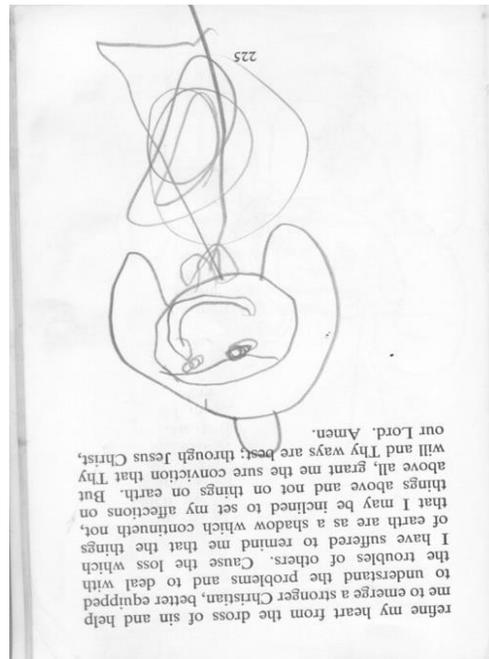
The drawn story continues, jumps many pages and lands on “Table Prayers,” in the borderspace between “Grace at Meals” and prayers “For the Sorrowing.” I am greeted by a celebratory gathering of women wearing floor length gowns, adorned with beaded earrings, necklaces and elaborate headdresses (image h).



h

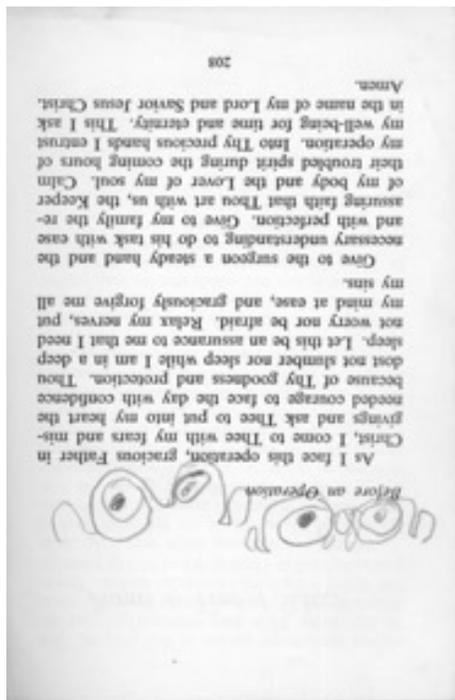
This drawing depicts a joyous event with a perplexed sad looking head floating, its body absent. Re-appearing on the next page alone, inverted, with a scribbled-in body and smiling (image i). The printed words on the page offer clues.

Cause that loss which I have suffered to remind me that the things of earth are as a shadow which continueth not, that I may be inclined to set my affections on things above and not on the earth.

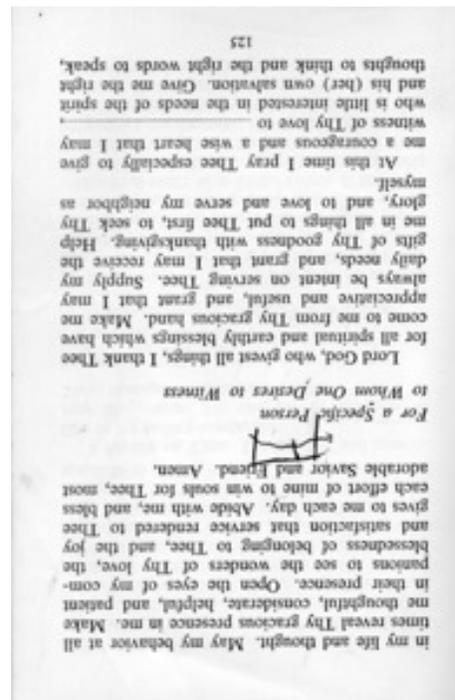


i

I have great affection for the Earth beings that continue onward in this book. As I flip through more pages I find line drawings mysteriously, sometimes aesthetically, communicating with the printed Word (image j & k).



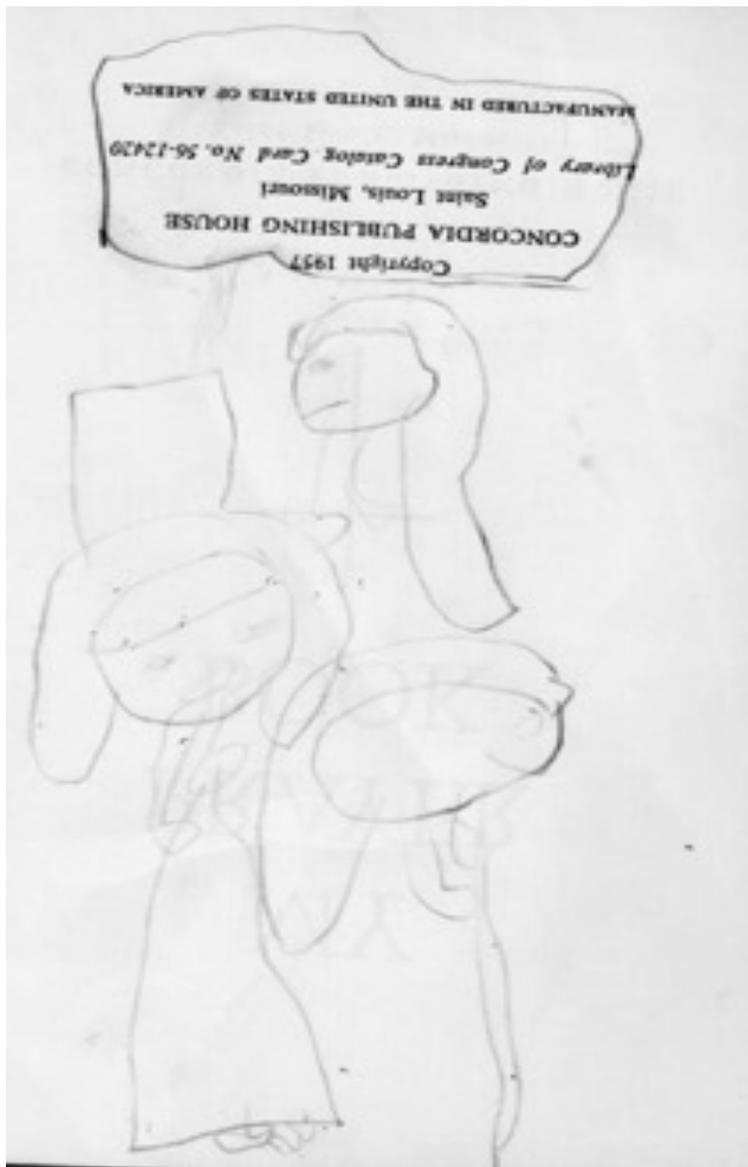
j



k

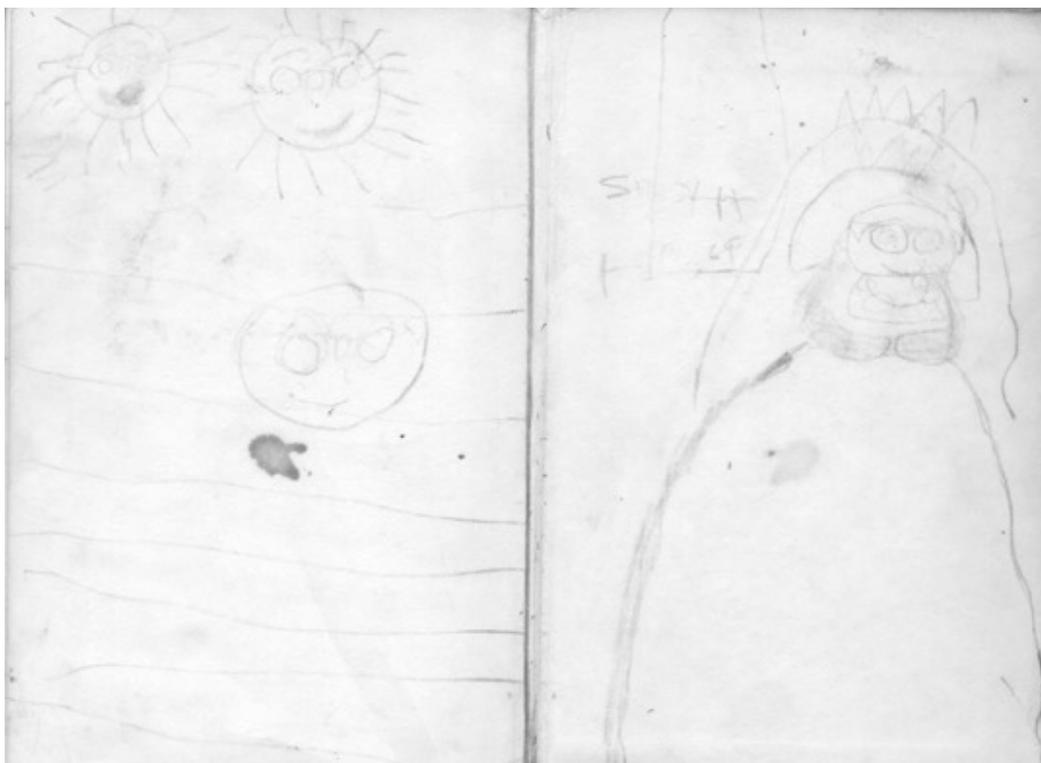
I take note of the faint figure drawings at the end and start of the book as they retain evidence of attempted erasure (image e, l, m & n). Do they mark a change of heart for the child-artist regarding their presence and relationship with the book? Or has the imaginal world been invaded by outside forces? Words maybe spoken in dismay upon finding them? Had the transgression of the Word realm; of God the father's territory, been discovered?

The publisher and title of the book are left untouched, framed by lines that have been spared erasure (image l). The erased drawings are faded but still there. The relationship between the realms of the imaginal and the Word is unmistakable and not erasable. They co-exist together in ghostly presence on these pages.





m



n

## *The Alphabet Versus the Image*

My elementary school years supported my creativity to flourish at the expense of traditional grammar. I was part of a pilot program in my school that fore-fronted creativity. I received As in my creative writing assignments. I remember one very exciting illustrated story I wrote in one long sentence. I struggled and still struggle with spelling and grammar and have no memory of learning the mechanics of writing. Yet, since I could read, I have read voraciously with high comprehension. As an adult I have come to recognize that I have mild dyslexia in my writing. Words, letters and numbers do not always line up as they should. I see words, numbers and sentences as a whole and not as parts. It allows me to be a fast reader but a slow writer. I am also a slow thinker who takes time to weave and see the big picture.

The struggle to connect with the rational linear Word and being more comfortable within the arational<sup>4</sup> nonlinear imaginal realms has remained with me throughout my life. This conflict, in part, has led me to identify as an earth-centred spiritual feminist. Since the age of 42, I have found myself writing, often collaboratively, with words that continue to surprise me as they teach me about art and healing, and art making's transformative process (e.g., Bickel, 2020, 2012, 2008, 2004; Bickel & R.M. Fisher, 2022, Bickel & V. Fisher 2005; Jordan & Bickel, 2022; Snowber & Bickel, 2015; St. Georges & Bickel, 2022). I loved discovering the mystic, doctor, scientist and artist Hildegard von Bingen (born in Bickelheim) who, like me, began writing at the age of 42. After two powerful illuminations she began teaching and sharing her visions widely as a spiritual leader in her community. It was validating to learn that slowness in coming to writing and teaching was experienced by a woman mystic I have felt ancestral, creative and spiritual affinity with. Matthew Fox (1985), a Dominican scholar of her works writes:

She teaches that it is art... that “awakens us from our sluggishness” and overcomes apathy, that makes cold hearts warm and dry consciences moist again. The proper context for spirituality and faith is the cosmos—not the privatized, individual soul. And the only way to express the cosmic experience is through art and creativity. Humans become the musical instruments of God. The divine Spirit makes music through us. (pp. 15)

In my late twenties I consciously began following the spirit of art through my visual art practice. I did not know where it would lead me. My masters thesis, that began when I was in my early forties, became my writing initiation and was entitled *From Artist to A/r/tographer: An Autoethnographic Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body*. My dad travelled to attend my thesis defense. I gave a copy of the thesis to him. After he read it, he told me it was his journey too. I remember at the time wishing he could have read it just as my journey. He also came to my dissertation defense; a dissertation entitled *Living the Divine Spiritually and Politically: Art, Ritual, and Performative Pedagogy in Women's Multifaith Leadership*. The opening ritual and presentation, was followed by an intense two-hour questioning period. My dad told me afterwards that he prayed for me the entire time. His prayers may indeed have helped, as following my defense I was told by my supervisor that the external reviewer had raised concerns regarding my not adhering to the canons of the field of art education. My passing was dependent on my sufficiently answering the questions of the external examiner (who was not present) at the oral defense. The final decision for passing my examination was left to the Chair from another department in the university and not the committee. I was in my supervisor's office the next day, not knowing if I had passed, when the Chair report arrived in my supervisor's email box, passing my oral defense. Although my dad never shared this, I think he understood the responsibility, fragility and danger of my words and images being accepted, understood and approved in the academy and the world.

My dad loved the study of words and in particular the words that told stories in the bible. While writing this article I found a piece of his writing stored in a file box in my mom's garage entitled "My Journey With the Bible." Half a century earlier, as a student himself my dad had struggled with traditional Missouri Lutheran educational and institutional practices of teaching religion through doctrine in the catechism and not through the bible itself. He recognized how focus on doctrine limited his desire to study and learn from the bible and its stories directly. It was in fact discouraged. Later in life as a pastor, he was accused twice of being a heretic by church members, based on his sermons that reflected his personal study of the bible.

I vividly remember the large family bible that lived in the living room. I did not read the bible, instead I loved kneeling in solitude at the coffee table and staring, for what felt like hours, at the inner pages of vibrant colourplate paintings of biblical stories found in the centre of it. I was nourished by looking at and creating images. As I identified as a visual artist foremost, as an adult I felt I was betraying art to write with words. My identity shift to a writer was fraught with resistance accompanied by a deeply felt terror. Intuitively I seemed to know there was an ancient and ensuing battle taking place between the Alphabet and the image. An historical battle well-articulated by the writer Leonard Shlain—where the evolution of the alphabet and written word took over the image and came to dominance through the suppression of the symbol-based matriarchal or Goddess-centered cultures. He points out how the first commandment of the Israelite faith in the Old Testament: "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me (Exod. 20: 2-3), [effectively] announces the disappearance of the Goddess." (Shlain, 1999, p. 82). The second commandment, Shlain further points out, directly denounces images: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exod. 20:4)." He asks: Does this commandment, by its placement of order signify more importance than the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not murder"? This disturbingly suggests that suppressing images, and more importantly controlling the human imaginary is more important than the commandment to not kill each other! Sadly, and tragically, this points to imaginal and arational<sup>5</sup> ways of engaging life being the greatest threat in a patriarchal God-fearing culture. My spiritually strong and religiously devout paternal great grandmother, who became an agoraphobic, comes to mind. The grandmother that gave her grandson, my father, his first bible at the time of his confirmation. I often wonder why she did not leave her house and how she became the inspiration for my grandfather, my father's father to become a minister? Did my grandfather, like my father, choose to study the bible and become an authoritarian church leader to dispel doubt—and whose doubt was it? This begins to uncover roots of the ancestral hurt I have had to work through to share my feminine writing voice with the world.

Living life as a woman artist gave me an image-centered voice I was more comfortable with. As a professional figurative artist<sup>6</sup> I was and am passionate about a relational feminine aesthetic, along with embodied and arational ways of knowing through artmaking. I have a deep respect for and love of the human body. Drawing people was an endless source of inspiration, or so I thought, in the first decades of my career. As I matured in my artistic path, I often encountered feelings of grief when my figurative artworks were not read or understood as I wanted when exhibited in public. My intentions of expanding imaginaries and caring deeply for the human body, and in particular the female body as a sacred vessel of wisdom, was too often interpreted with a destructive twist in the dominant patriarchal art-world I was sharing my art within. I stopped drawing the body in 2011 and to this day have not returned to it directly. Yet my art still draws on the human body and its subjectivity, but now it manifests more with and from an embodied inner and cosmic experiencing.

In 2009, while in existential doubt about drawing the body and making art to hang on the wall, I found Matrixial theory,<sup>7</sup> as articulated by philosopher, psychoanalyst and artist Bracha L. Ettinger (2020). Interestingly, Ettinger often

interprets the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament and returns to it the feminine sources that have been altered in subsequent translations. Significantly, Ettingerian Matrixial theory introduced me to the presence of matrixial borderspace(s) and art's role in seducing us into the imaginal liminal space of the m/Other colliding in complementary relationship with the phallic realm, even when suppressed and hidden. Significantly, the matrixial sphere serves as an "aesthetic-artistic filter" where one can enter a paradoxical time of future meeting the past to engage fragile and fragmented borderlinkings in the present (p. 265). Ettinger writes poetically and deeply with words and fluidly alters them to more accurately reflect the realm of the matrixial. As for example, she adds an r to the word metamorphosis. The matrix in this context is a "psychic borderspace of encounter" and within the matrix the process of metramorphosis serves as the "psychic creative borderlink" (Ettinger, 2020, p. 162). Metramorphosis is the creative process that transgresses a borderline—at the threshold of conductability and attunement with an unknown other. She calls us to slow down, re-see and re-know that which we think is the only and correct way to be with and language the world.

I shine light and memory onto matrixial borderspace(s) through the metramorphic co-mingling of text and image while a/r/tographically writing about my return to a time where text first met image in the early years of my life. As an adult I now see how I had an innocent and intuitive desire to integrate these historically embattled realms. The blank page is the matrix for the printed text. I entered the matrix of published books through borderspace(s) of the page to join the image with the word. My father's story and my story co-mingle in the pages of books. I love that I was creatively fearless in altering and transforming published books from my father's library into stories of embodied relationships. It is in matrixial borderspace(s) that an alliance is built between the image and the word, thus tapping into sacred "covenants hidden in art" (Ettinger, 2002, p. 230). In the patriarchal Christian context I was embedded within, the blank spaces in my father's books opened a channel to pre-Christian and Christian ancestors—for myself, my father and others to have a sacred encounter with images in relationship with the Word.

I became curious about and began inquiring into ancestral connections in my art practice in 2000 through trance.<sup>8</sup> I describe what I now call trance-based inquiry (Bickel, 2020) as an awake dreaming or journey process with intention to enter imaginal realms to access arational forms of knowing and unknowing. Trances take place in the liminal zone of the imaginal. As I search for an artwork example of my trance-based art I remember and re-watch an art video based on a trance I entered on a full moon. When I look at the date, I see it took place the week prior to my dad's death in 2012. Drawing upon the imaginal through art and trance I was processing my dad's pending death while he was in a hospital 4000 kilometers away.

### *An Ancestral Journey*

In the early hours of the morning at a nearby Lutheran church I slowly walked down the sidewalk to the church with a Lutheran Hymnal engraved with my name under my arm. I placed an altar cloth for my body on the cement ground at the church entrance and sat on it. I randomly opened the hymnal to hymn 223 and read it aloud. I lay down on my back and rested the hymnal on my diaphragm and entered the trance.<sup>9</sup>

*I travel down into the earth through tree roots until I reach an empty chamber. I wait here. An old woman meets me and gestures without speaking for me to place my hands on my heart. Our heartbeats join. The heartbeat takes me a looong way back in time. An old man appears and leads me on a walk over hills and we come to a small humble village church in*

*Germany. He opens the door for me. I ask if this is the church of my ancestors. He nods his head yes, and I enter the church. I watch as a circle of people holding hands form around the outside perimeter of the stone church. They begin to run, then to dance in circle. The energy vortex created by their movement sends my body upward. They begin singing together. Their communal chorus lifts me further upward. I am reminded that the core principle of the Christian tradition I was birthed within is community. It's very simple. Now above the steeple, high above the ground, I open my arms and hands very slowly. While I do so I recognize that it is the spirit of the people who created me and Christ. It is the people who lift each other up rather than a dominating, unknowable paternal and singular God. Ascension is not a miracle. It's a collective endeavor where everyone has an opportunity to be freed and released from the earthly world to enter the imaginal realm of spirit with the support of others. I float back down into the church.*

*The old man awaits me outside the church and walks me back. My heartbeat returns me, returns me to the chamber where the old woman separates our hearts and releases me to travel back to present time. Back to the tree above ground.*



Revisiting this trance-based art video many years later I am in awe of the transformative vision I was given by my ancestors just prior to my father's death. A vision that very much echoes the teachings of early mystical Christianity and my own feminine spiritual path. Was this something my dad knew about or was searching for himself? I am grateful that my dad was not a hell, fire and brimstone preacher. That he put to rest the fear-filled Satan fixation of his evangelical forebearers. My vision took place deep in the earth where the sulphur stone that is deemed as hell and brimstone is found. But my vision is not about hell, nor does it hold any resemblance to the first or second commandment. It is guided by the Earth as the memory place-holder of the relational path of spiritual experience and understandings. The feminine mystical cosmology of Mary Magdalene and visionary art of Hildegard of Bingen and Meinrad Craighead also stand in high contrast to the first and the second commandment of the Old Testament. Theirs is a feminine spiritual path steeped in the relational and the imaginal through direct visionary revelations from heavenly and earthly realms that emanate with images.

Lamentably, the conflict between the rational word and arational imaginary culminated in the church's rejection of direct revelations of visionaries in the third and fourth centuries (Bourgeautl, 2010). It was women who were the most frequently known for visionary ability. With the elimination of the mystical aspects of Christianity and women's presence in the leadership of the church, the church has been mostly left bereft of space for nourishing the imaginal and visionary capacities of humans. This loss has diminished our capability to act compassionately for the whole, causing a narrowing of perspectives and blocking individual and collective transformation. My struggle to fully connect spiritually and emotionally with my dad feels part of this loss.

Most recently, in a trance-based performative project,<sup>10</sup> I have been exploring my historical ancestral burdens along with the gifts while studying historical trauma. Historical trauma has recently come to consciousness in Western culture with the discovery of epigenetics and its role in the mental health crisis. Epigenetics is a scientific understanding of how we pass trauma on to future generations through our genes.<sup>11</sup> Something that Indigenous healers have never lost sight of, with some claiming that historical trauma reaches back 14 generations (Affo, 2022). In my exploration and study, I have learned and keep learning about the violent and hurting shadow of Christianity as it has been projected upon women. A shadow that reached its first apex during the Catholic led Inquisition that was amplified by the Reformation. Luther himself tragically had a loathing for nature and digressed into teaching the adversariness of feminine nature (Owens, 2020). Traumatic shadows, such as the Inquisition, first demonized then created a holocaust of (mostly) women and wise nature healers in communities.

The shadow side of Christianity, generated during periods of collective trauma, has infiltrated North American culture in unique and deeply divisive ways. Our current western culture, severed from healthy ancestral lines has tragically mastered a fear-based manipulation and cooptation of images for its own power and greed. This perpetuates the desacralizing of women and nature through its exploitive portrayal of and coopting of female and nature images. Fear of the other; peoples of colour, peoples with diverse sexual identities, women and nature runs deep in Western culture. It is tragically manifesting in an inability to compassionately and collectively respond to holocausts, pandemics, ongoing wars, climate crises and more.

The overlapping of Matrixial theory and its relational healing and aesthetic foundations, with ancestral

trauma theory is invaluable. Spiritual teacher Tomas Hubl (2020), who grew up in post-Holocaust Germany as a Gentile in his book *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wound* teaches that in the ancestral field we have access to the individual, the collective and the ancestors. And that,

It's helpful to hold in mind that whomever we are, wherever we are, we are never alone. We are, each of us, a living multidimensional matrix of connection: we are fitted to one another, to our ancestors, and to all other life-forms. While we remain indissolubly linked to the whole and higher aspects of each and all, we are equally bound to their denser and-dissociated forms. we contain not just our own fragmented shadows but together carry the dark of our ancestors, our cultures, our planet, and our cosmos. Awakening transcends the individual, because integration is about all of us. (pp. 122)

### *Copoiesis: Like Father Like Daughter*

I look through my art portfolio for a piece that is about connection; a more recent art image that brings the body into play without drawing it directly. I find a socially-engaged<sup>12</sup> artwork I titled *Copoiesis*<sup>13</sup> (image p). It captures a performative moment of co-encounter photographed at an artist residency I facilitated for art students in 2014. Still a figurative artist despite no longer drawing the body in my art, this piece of art is about “being fitted to one another” (Hubl, 2020, p. 122). In the photograph young women artists and myself are engaging with an interactive art piece I made from thrift store clothing, which I joined at the ends of each sleeve. People are invited to playfully wear and insert themselves into the piece and see where the garment collectively takes them. In the times I have shared this piece, a unique collective spirit arises as individuals slip their arms into the sleeves, slide out of their individual selves and become a playful and joyful interconnected whole. In looking at this piece I recognize the threads of my early artist-child drawings—wisdom becoming flesh. Prayers visually rendered by my 5 year old artists self, are transported through time to the artist residency in this playful “matrix of connection”— a celebratory gathering of female artists.

Moving into artistic engagement inspired by the photo of the *Copoiesis* piece I begin to cut figure drawings out of the prayer book. The figures freed from the page become animated paper dolls for me to play with (image q). As I am cutting, a memory surfaces of how my dad was one of the first in the 1960s to bring the teaching of biblical stories through animation with felt storyboards and cut-outs to his ministry. He included this in the Sunday school teacher curriculum. As I became one of these Sunday School teachers as a teenager, I utilized this visual story telling practice. My early story-telling teaching practice has made its way into my visual collage practice. More memories emerge as I carefully cut around the drawn lines of the drawings. My dad once told me he loved to draw as a child and then he remembered just stopping and never drawing again. He did not know why. He also shared that as a young boy he liked playing with his sister and her friends but was teased by his brothers so he stopped. Bereft at an early age of drawing and more girl-style play and friendships he transferred his energy to sports and more boy-acceptable play. He often shared how he regretted the lost opportunity of learning how to play with and relate to girls. I wonder what kind of a dad and person he would have been if he had been encouraged to draw and explore the world through images and not been ridiculed for playing with girls?



p



q

I continue to play with the cut-out figures and place them on top of a spontaneous<sup>14</sup> green pastel drawing I made, inspired by swimming in a lake reflecting the green trees of the forest that surround it (image q). More memories of conversations with my dad materialize. When I made the decision to become an artist and obtain my BFA I recall my dad telling me that as a seminary student he originally wanted to focus his theology thesis on the artist Lucas Cranach the Elder, the Northern Renaissance painter and printmaker. Coincidentally, my favorite time period of study during my BA minor in Art History was the Renaissance. I had loved going into the cathedrals and museums and being with the figurative story telling paintings when I travelled in Europe. I remember seeing and then studying Cranach the Elder's paintings.<sup>15</sup> Cranach was commissioned by the Electors of Saxony, who supported the Reformation, and was an enthusiast of humanism and the Reformation. A personal friend of Martin Luther, he painted Luther's portrait and served as a best man at his wedding. They named each other as godparents; he for Luther's son and Luther for Cranach's daughter. Cranach also provided illustrative wood cuts for Luther's (translated to German) bible. This was the first printed bible on the newly invented printing press and able to be read by lay persons—giving direct access to the bible and fueling Luther's Reformation. Although best known for his portraits, Cranach the Elder's paintings were often biblically pedagogical in content (Snyder, 1985). He painted biblical stories that promoted the reformed Christian interpretations of the bible. Interestingly, his reformed faith did not cause him to shy away from depicting the naked human body in his paintings. Likewise, my father never shared concern regarding the naked body that was a large part of my artistic practice.

I do not remember why my dad did not follow through on his desire to study this artist and his art. Was it because the proposed image-inspired thesis was not seen as scholarly or Word sourced enough for the very traditional Lutheran Missouri synod? The Lutheran church after Luther, became more austere in its use of images. In writing this piece I reflect more on my dad sharing that my MA thesis story was also his story. I regret not asking him how or why? Although I could not imagine it at the time, I now wonder how our spiritual journeys fitted into one another. Was he recognizing in my journey an extension of his own journey? As I learn more about his struggle in having his own voice recognized within the patriarchal Christian Lutheran culture he was embedded in, I wonder if and how his own struggle might be reconciled through my journey of art making, scholarship and writing?<sup>16</sup> His writing time was taken up mostly by writing a sermon each week (with additional sermons for the religious days, e.g., Advent, Christmas, Good Friday), writing down quotes as part of his study of books of the bible and theologians he was reading, and writing letters to family and friends. In his retirement he took up memoir writing where he had a keen desire to document his childhood years and his early years as a minister. The impulse to integrate one's life journey is similarly present in our studies and writing. In contrast to my dad, my autoethnographic and a/r/tographic writing as ritual and healing was and is supported by artist-scholars in the institution.<sup>17</sup>

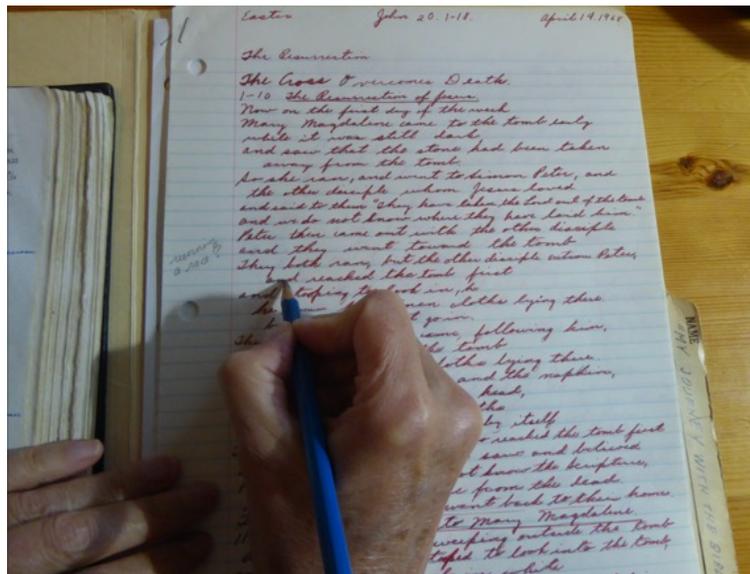
### *Persistent Women Who Waited*

The writing of this article has led me to open file boxes clearly marked and organized by my dad and stored by my mother in her garage. I am a bit overwhelmed by the many boxes. Yet, I am aware that another layer of the healing a/r/tographic inquiry awaits. I step into the borderspace. I open the box marked "Sermons." Not surprisingly they are filed according to the different books in the bible. As my early confirmation quote came from the Book of John, I pull out the folder containing Book of John sermons. I was born on Good Friday, so I look for a sermon around that holy week and find one titled Easter, John 20.1-18, April 14, 1968. I had just turned 7 when my dad preached this sermon on The Resurrection. John's is the one book in the

bible that elaborates Mary Magdalene and other Mary's in the resurrection story. The rest of the books in the New Testament minimize Mary Madgelene's role (Bourgeault, 2010). After pulling out this hand-written sermon I open, what appears to be my dad's well-used and possibly favorite bible to the same passages in John and place a few of my cut-out child-images on its pages. I sit at my desk with a freshly sharpened led pencil and as I did as a child, I carefully write on top of the handwritten script of his Easter sermon. In contrast to my own erratic handwriting my dad's script is very steady and readable. Tracing his script contemplatively as an adult, I am able to read and feel the words he has written with heightened awareness.



r



s

I share a few excerpts from my dad's sermon:

### 1-10 The Resurrection of Jesus

The women had watched when Jesus was buried, so they knew the place. They anxiously waited for the Sabbath to pass over so that they could go and anoint the body of Jesus. Mary maybe was a little bit ahead of the others, or maybe her mind rushed to the wrong conclusions. When she saw the stone rolled away, she naturally thought that the body of Jesus has been stolen. Then it was natural for her to run and tell Peter and John. Peter and John checked it out and found the grave empty. However, they didn't get to see Jesus because they didn't understand Scriptures and didn't stick around.

### 1-18 Jesus Appears to Mary

But Mary stuck around. She anxiously tries to find the body of Jesus. And in her anxious seeking, she finds Jesus himself. Jesus reminds her that this was the final evidence that he was from God, namely his ascending to his Father. John 3.13. John 6.62.

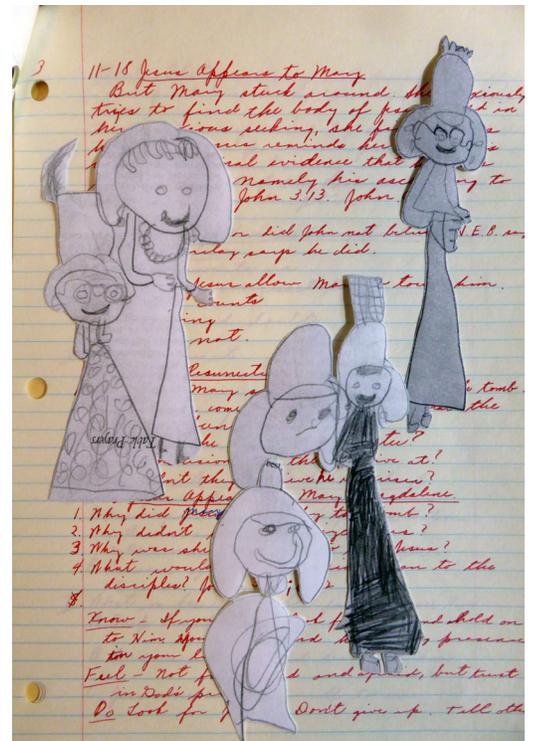
He then enters his inquiry:

- Know – If you really look for Jesus and hold on to him you will find his living presence in your life.
- Feel – Not frightened and afraid, but trust in God's promises.
- Do – Look for Jesus, Don't give up, Tell others.

He then enters his teaching:

II What makes it possible for us to see Him [?]

- A. Deep love for Jesus.
- B. Anxious and persistent search for Him.
- C. Jesus revealing himself to us.



t

I insert my child self and my many women into my father's text. I love the synchrony that has brought me to this particular sermon that circles my inquiry back around to Mary Magdalene and to the theme of ascension that appeared in my ancestral trance when my dad was dying. A sermon written by my father that presents a story of persistent women. A community of 'women' who waited. And Mary Magdalene, the beloved apostle, who was ahead of the others, who had a deep love for Jesus—who searched for him, found him and understood the phenomenon behind Scripture before it was written. She was the one to share the good news of the ascension with the other disciples. Contemplating my dad's sermon, it is clear to see how it was the loving feminine that began the Christian Scriptures. It was a woman, in the flesh of Mary Magdalene (not the male disciples who left) who gestated and then birthed the mystical story of Jesus into the world.

In the beginning was the Wisdom, and the wisdom was with God,  
and the Wisdom was God...and the Wisdom became flesh and  
dwelled among us.

The bible passage I chose at the time of my confirmation is re-confirmed through my father's telling of the Easter morning bible story in this early sermon. This healing a/r/tographic inquiry is birthing words of the flesh. The word and the image, masculine and feminine, Mary Magdalene and Jesus, father and daughter are intertwined, co-mingling, co-belonging, co-becoming and even co-healing the flesh through words and images across time and space.<sup>18</sup>

The gifts of my lineage hold much that have led to my love of the image and the expansive imaginary of spirit; through my father, Hildegard, Luther, Cranach, Mary Magdalene and more. Dwelling with fitted-together stories we can draw closer to beholding the glory of our interconnected presence on this Earth and move forward into the Aeon. I am that young dreaming artist-child and the responsible artist/researcher/teacher seeking healing, embodied relational knowledge and wisdom through the light of image and word.

She could play  
she could draw  
share her world

## **Acknowledgements**

I hold gratitude for the gifts given to me by my ancestors and the ancestral lands in Europe they were born upon, cared for and nourished by. I offer respect to the ancestors of the lands I live and have lived upon, and upon which my settler ancestors have lived since their migration to North America.

## **Dedication**

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father Reverend Herman George Bickel (1923-2012).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Images as they appear in the article:

a: Barbara Ann with an adult book on her lap. Sitting beside her dolls who were often her students. Age 4. Family Photograph.

b-n: Drawing from the pages of My Prayer Book. 1966. Courtesy of the artist.

o: Ancestral Journey VII. Video still. 2012. Courtesy of the artist. See: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/46934750>

p: Collage of cut-out drawings from pages of My Prayer Book inspired by the interactive artwork Copoiesis, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

q: Copoiesis, interactive performative fabric clothing engagement. Left to Right: Sarah Dorau Alexis Kimbrell, Barbara Bickel, Honna Verkamp, Lindsay Krzyzek. Artscape Gibraltar Point Artist Residency, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

r: Photo of the artist-author at study with her father's writing. Photograph credit. R. Michael Fisher.

s: Photo of the artist-author engaging her father's writing. Photograph credit. R. Michael Fisher.

t: Collage of cut-out drawings with the artist-author's father's sermon. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

<sup>2</sup> A/r/tography evolved out of the Arts-Based Educational Research movement named in the mid 1990s by Eisner Eisner. It was formed and developed within a community of practice at the University of British Columbia in the early years of the twentyfirst century. I was fortunate to take the first a/r/tography graduate class during my Masters taught by artist-scholars Rita L. Irwin and Stephanie Springgay. To read more about a/r/tography see (de Cossen & Irwin, 2004; Irwin et al, 2006; Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005; Springgay et al, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> 'A/r/tography as ritual' emerged within and was articulated in my Masters thesis.

<sup>4</sup> I draw from the philosopher-poet Jean Gebser's understanding of the arational which includes and transcends the pre-rational and the rational. The arational is most present when dreaming, meditating, and creating and is not confined by time or space (Gebser, 1984)

<sup>5</sup> The arational in the patriarchal sphere is most often conflated with the irrational (Gebser, 1984). It is distinct and ideally operates in an integrated way with the rational and irrational realms. Serving as a link between the two. The arational is accessed through modes of knowing and sourced through, for example the body, senses, emotions, intuition, spiritual and creative experiencing.

<sup>6</sup> A figurative artist is one who gives the focus of their art to the subject of the body.

<sup>8</sup> See *Illuminatus*, an exhibition and performance ritual based on a spiritual pilgrimage to the land of my German ancestors. A journey I traveled through trance in the imaginal realm and not geographically. <http://barbarabickel.net/firms.com/barbarabickel.com/artist/portfolio/Illuminatus.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Ancestral Journey VII* took place in Carbondale, Illinois at a Lutheran church near to my home. It was one of a series of eight trances I undertook as part of a Gestare Art Collective annual ritual practice. [https://vimeo.com/user3984418?embedded=true&source=owner\\_portrait&owner=3984418](https://vimeo.com/user3984418?embedded=true&source=owner_portrait&owner=3984418)

<sup>10</sup> In 2018, sacred theatre artist and healer Tannis Hugill and I began a collaboration exploring our settler and ancestral traumas that will culminate in a performance ritual. In our artworking process we witness each other entering trance through our bodies in the studio and through trance journeys. We have drawn from our performance experience, and spiritual practices as well as from the historical trauma work of Resmaa Menakem and Daniel Foor. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl8NKF5to-0>

<sup>11</sup> See M.S. Tarsha and D. Narvez at <https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/ijps/article/view/2244>

<sup>12</sup> “Socially engaged art practices involve a hybridity of art, research and pedagogy, including performance, activism, image making and social research. The shared method that crosses all socially engaged art is “dialogue between the artist and the participant” (Heim, 2003, p. 186).” Bickel, 2015, p. 80).

<sup>13</sup> *Copoiesis* is an Ettingerian matrixial term for the transformation that emerges relationally within aesthetical and ethical ways of being and knowing that are nonconscious and preverbal.

<sup>14</sup> This artworking was created during a Spontaneous Creation-Making session. A communal practice of art-care. See Bickel & Fisher, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucas\\_Cranach\\_the\\_Elder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucas_Cranach_the_Elder)

<sup>16</sup> This insight came from Lynn Fels. I am enormously grateful for her review of a draft of this article and the suggestions, questions and challenges offered to me by her to take the article further with another layer of a/r/tographic inquiry that could include my father’s writing. The last section of this article is due to her encouragement.

<sup>17</sup> Early institutional academic champions of relational, life-centred, arts-based and even spiritually infused research and education paved the way for me and others. These include Drs. Shauna Butterwick, Rishma Dunlop, Lynn Fels, Rita, Irwin, Carl Leggo, Karen Meyer, William Pinar, Celeste Snowber, and Daniel Vokey. Each of whom I studied with as a graduate student.

<sup>18</sup> I insert Lynn Fel’s poignant wondering below. I love how reading an early draft of this article led her to these questions. Her questions, in turn have deepened my own sense of healing as a daughter with my father that moves beyond reconciliation many years after his death.

“One wonders if the healing a/r/tographical journey was as much that of the father through his daughter’s writing of this piece as she rewrites how she is listening to his story into her inquiry....beyond reconciliation, is reciprocal healing after death possible through healing a/r/tographical inquiry?”