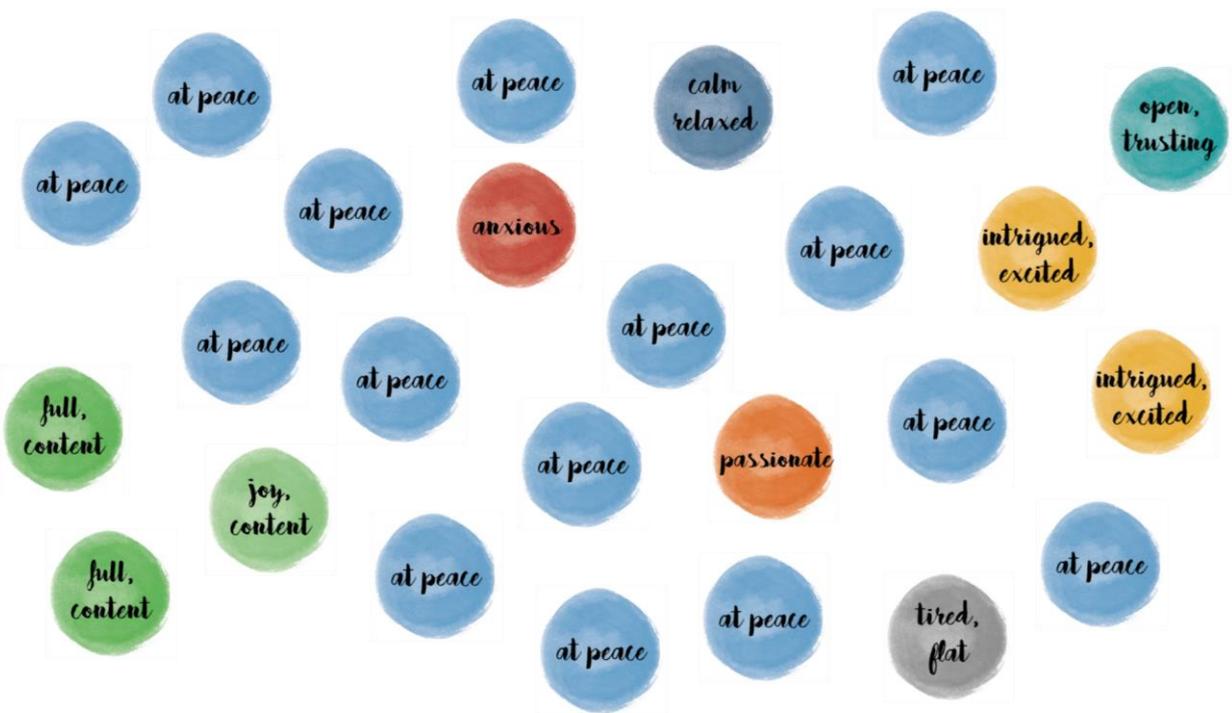


From Head to Hands

Creative Processes as the Locus of Divine Encounter

Pictured in colours of directees describing their feelings after they tried a contemplative creative process.



by
Alice Wood

**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

Introduction

This project is focused on the practice of using creative processes¹ in spiritual direction. It starts by explaining the reason for this study and discussing the theory around using creative processes in spiritual direction. It then emphasizes the aim of using creative processes in spiritual direction with a particular emphasis on making room for God. Next it outlines the key findings from using creative processes with a range of directees as part of this project and from a survey of directors who use creative processes in their spiritual direction sessions. Lastly it offers recommendations for spiritual directors who may wish to offer creative processes and provides a sample process of what this creative process might look like.

‘Creativity and contemplative spirituality nurture and support each other in their commitments to the slow way, to a close attention to the inner life, and to the sacred being revealed in each moment.’²

God is the most creative artist. In the same vein, there is a creator in all of us in that we all create – we cook, garden, doodle, invent, weave, and produce. When it comes to spiritual healing, however, we often default to using words – we discuss, talk, ask questions and answer verbally. It is my proposition that more space can be provided for using creative processes in our spiritual journeys. What if we gave ourselves the freedom and permission to create? What could the process of creating itself reveal about us, the God who dwells in us, and our relationship with God? This then naturally led me to consider how spiritual directors might offer a welcoming space for creativity that enables spiritual communication, revelation and union to happen naturally as spiritual directors.

I hope to bring to light what all artists already know: the restorative power that practicing arts reflectively can bring to our soul. I also hope that in making the creative process more accessible, more people can enjoy prayer and find something deeper and more meaningful than simply using words to pray.

The creative process is unique because:

The creative process is different from using words because it promotes right brain processing, which allows for deeper, sub-conscious knowing.³ It uses a different mode to express truth, especially when words are difficult or not permissible to describe what is within. Thus instead of simply watching for body language,

¹ When ‘creative process’ is discussed in this paper, it entails the directee using different mediums to create something. This paper focuses only in the process of the creating something new during a session, either by themselves or in a group setting. However, it will not be commenting on the act of observing or reflecting on an existing artwork.

² The Artist’s Rule: Nurturing Your Creative Soul, p.4

³ Paintner, Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts in to Spiritual Direction, p.8

emotional responses or the subtle cues that our bodies give off as a way to unmask the truth of how someone is feeling while we are talking, we can use a creative process to give more space for truth to naturally surface.

In addition, creative processes can provide a tangible and sometimes tactile link to ourselves and God through material, symbols, and colours. This abstract interaction can occur more easily than with words, and at times it can offer a different perspective. Indeed, as Paintner writes: 'our words cannot yet carry the weight of the new meanings being born in the darkness of anti-structure. In these times, image can be a vehicle for carrying the feelings and the meanings we cannot yet articulate.'⁴ For example, we can put some colours on the page symbolizing our feelings at the moment and then we can interact, have a conversation with the creation on the page.⁵

'The creative process, like a spiritual journey, is intuitive, non-linear, and experiential.'⁶

Not only can the creative process be a mirror to allow truth to surface, but it can also allow an opportunity to create in us new possibilities of health, hope and love, as we bring awareness of God's presence in us. The process itself can create space for a directee to converse and interact between themselves and God. It can also inspire new growth and possibilities to take hold in their souls. As Beckman writes: 'Art-making is somehow all at once a journey, a communication, a modality, a healing and a prayer.'⁷

Part of this is that the creative process, through the use of materials and the movement of our bodies, can bring us more in touch with our present and our bodies. For example, using yarn to make a weaving as a wordless prayer – the tangible touch of yarn as we create our prayers and the movement of weaving can provide an opportunity to interact with what we are expressing and bring us to the present. In the sessions undertaken within this piece of research, for example, there were many instances during creative processes where the directees in their feedback indicated that new insights surfaced, or that new suggestions, directions, and inspirations emerged. Some of the insights were the sort of knowing and experiencing that stayed with the directees long after the session.

⁴ Paintner, *Awaken the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts into Spiritual Direction*, p.144

⁵ The principal of Interactive Drawing Therapy applies even though in spiritual direction therapy is not the aim of our practice. We can use drawings to put the elements of our thoughts down to the page provide ways of interaction. Sometimes not just with physical elements (things and people) but also the abstract elements (like fears and identity).

⁶ Loori, John Daido in 'The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life.

⁷ Paintner , *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*, Ch.1, p.5

It is not about creating something great but making room for God...

As seen above, using creative processes in spiritual direction can certainly have benefits over using words alone. It is therefore timely to emphasise that the aim of using creative processes is not to have nice looking products or even about enjoying the creative process in itself. Instead we want to use the process to make room for God: '...it is to discover our souls, discover the face of the Holy One, the Utterly Other residing within the sacred depths of our own humanity.'⁸

Our role as a guide then, is to facilitate a welcoming space, eliminate possible distractions and trust in the process for the interaction with God. We do not want to glorify a method, or let the process take over from God's presence. We do want to give room for the mystery of God's movement, pleasant or hard, noticeable or otherwise, knowing that it is God who does the work.⁹

Therefore, to use creative process during spiritual direction we must keep our eyes focus on the centre of our aim:

- We aim to make room for honesty and the reality of our being.
Creative processes have a way of peeling off the analytical and the judging of what 'should' be, and letting real feelings or meanings surface. As such the goal is to bring people to a space where it's safe to bring just themselves, safe to make a mess, or a 'failed attempt of an artwork,' especially if it will bring about revelation or transformation.
- We aim to make room for God.
Part of making room for God to work is to design a process that has a structure for people to follow, but not so much structure that God is stifled. Thus, having a rhythm of pausing in silence, giving time, waiting for God's voice to surface, and being open to new possibilities – is important. Often, this is when internal change can take place. This is a place where God surprises us, where new life starts to spring forth in our directees.
- We aim to make room for transformation.
At times it is helpful to start a session with a question or a boundary within¹⁰ which our expectations are set. But, as is often the case with creative processes, we can be taken to a deeper and unexpected realm of possibilities very quickly. It is important to give room so people can respond with change, new inspirations and insights. We must be ready for unintended destinations!

⁸ Paintner, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*, p.213

⁹ I have used surveys to try to observe how it is for the participants when using creative process as prayer at the start of this project. Over time, I realized that surveys have more capacity to observe what is tangible: e.g. the amount of time, the sort of music, medium or lighting etc; but find it hard to capture information on the very thing we are really aiming for – making room for God's presence.

¹⁰ E.g., questions like 'what do you hope for in this time with God?' 'what questions you want to ask God?' 'what are you carrying with you at this time, that you want to talk to God about?'

- Lastly, we aim to make room for process and solidify the experience. At the end of the time, give opportunity for processing what was happening for them into words. The aim here is not to 'explain' about their creation, but to try to put into words their journey with God. This helps the directee to solidify their experience and bring their gleaning into their everyday life. This brings them back from a liminal into a tangible place.

Outline of my research into Creative processes.

Alongside reading the existing literature about creative process in spiritual direction, I conducted three creative prayer sessions. Each session was one and a half hours long and ended by asking the participants to fill out a survey questionnaire. In total there were 24 participants. Of these 24, around half did not know they would be undertaking creative prayer when they attended. Around half were aged 17-19, while the other half were all over 40. There were 6 males and 18 females. All but one would self-describe themselves as Christian, but there was no dominant denomination or tradition, rather a very wide range of different denominations and traditions were represented. Usually around two thirds of each session said that they were unfamiliar with the medium of the process they tried on the day of their session.

In addition, as part of the research project, I sent out a non-random survey to spiritual directors in New Zealand, Australia and America who I knew have used creative process in their sessions. Of the 10 questionnaires sent out, I received 4 responses. Only 3 directors indicated they used creative process on a regular basis and one replied that they would use creative processes if it was suggested by the directee. All of them would actively encourage doing things creatively and bring them to a session to reflect on. They have experiences in using creative process both in private spiritual direction or in a group retreat setting. I make a synopsis from the responses from the participants as well as the directors, in terms of themes, in the following paragraphs.

Learning from the qualitative surveys of directees and directors.

The environment for creative space

Being creative can feel a bit daunting and it appeared that people needed to feel safe to be creative. Both the directors and participants emphasized the importance of setting up the right space for the process. While a larger space may seem logical as it allows room to move around, many felt the large space to be cold and less personal. In a living room it can seem warmer and comfortable but also a little cramped. All the elements needed to be considered, including lighting, warmth, music and smell.

Feedback from the directors was that for those who were 'not creative'¹¹ by nature, having some creative elements in the room may help directees to be able to participate in creativity in a small way. There can be pictures to gaze on, colours and items in the centre of the room for them to reflect on. One director has a 'living altar' that invites the directee to put their choices of objects on it before the session. Another director would prepare a table top of cut out images all ready for making a collage if it comes up. Having said this another director mentioned that though objects and colours were important, it is best to keep it simple, so that there is a sense of 'visual silence'.

It was also seen as good to have some music in the background so that the sound from making was not distracting. (e.g. the sound of the paint brush on paper or the sound of scissors cutting). However, the choice of music presented an interesting challenge in a group setting, as everyone had different preferences. The style of music that one considered as helpful may be quite distracting for others. It seemed helpful if the music didn't have lyrics¹², has a rhythm of movement, is in the background but not too dramatic or loud to take over people's thoughts.

Tackling fear

Alongside the above, another block to entering into creative processes was a fear of judgement. This was mentioned by all directors and some directees. This fear may come from past experiences of shame, or self-judgement, making participants unable to let go and enter into the process freely. Some directors stressed the importance of not forcing anyone to go through the process but providing gentle encouragements. Many directee has mentioned it was helpful to understand that they were not trying to create beautiful things, or required to share or explain them at the end.

Familiarity to the medium

Most participants were not familiar with the creative medium that they were trying on the day. All responded that it did not matter, especially when it was explained that producing beautiful artwork was not the point. In fact, at times it seemed that being familiar with the medium may make it easier for participants to focus on making something that looks good and in doing so lose the point of the exercise. Sometimes it may feel like it is hard to 'control' the medium to how they wanted, which can be frustrating, yet such moments are good opportunities to pay attention to their feelings. From the directors, there were mixed responses in regard to the

¹¹ Many times the perception of being 'creative' or not seems to be a label that may hinder someone to enter in the liminal space. Those who thought they are, maybe keen to try creative things but can turn to their habit of 'making a product to impress others.' While those who may not see themselves that way can have a lot of fear in trying.

¹² Though some participants has suggested using worship music in the background instead of wordless music. I feel that is too intrusive and not giving enough space for true internal reflection.

familiarity of the medium. While one said that familiarity is not important another stressed that it was important for the directee to be comfortable and familiar. Overall based on the feedback from my participants I would lean toward the former¹³.

Deciding which medium to use, where, with whom and how is very important. All the directors emphasised the importance of discerning from God just what each directee is needing in each session. As previously mentioned, one director would only have creative sessions if it was suggested by the directee. Another idea that might be useful here is that there may be some scripture or a theme for a retreat, which would give direction to which creative process should be used. Another practical consideration is simply the amount of space and time that is available. In a retreat setting many different mediums can be offered. Sometimes the medium speaks directly to the directee. For example, one directee mentioned how she was reminded that God is in the centre of the weaving she was making, and that no matter how chaotic she may feel with all the elements in her life, that she is looked after.

Along with deciding which medium to use, comes a tension between freedom and structure of the process. Freedom to create as we mentioned above is important as we want to make space for God. Balancing this is that some people feel more anxious when they need to make many choices, without structure they simply feel lost. Just the right amount of freedom and structure, sensing what is needed in the directee, is key. Directors can consider how comfortable the directees might be with creativity, how experienced they might be with creative elements. For those who might be new to the experience, it might be good to give more instructions and structure, while for those who have done it many times, lean toward more freedom.

Even though there were a couple of directees that indicated that they were feeling intimidated before the process, almost everyone has described how enjoyable and positive it has been for them. Having said this, it was also the case that there was a range of emotions felt during the process. A few people described feeling disturbed or anxious as new revelations came up.¹⁴ Even so, most people described a sense of peace afterwards.

Many talked about having a sense of God's presence, and how God has spoken to them during the creative process time. Many others have described getting some new revelation, looking at things in a different angle or perspective. Most people

¹³ Sometimes – depending on the previous experiences of the directee of certain medium, their familiarity may take them to different places, back to 'work' or focusing on 'good looking product', which may not be helpful. The unfamiliarity may induce more freedom to 'play'.

¹⁴ When the creative process takes someone to a vulnerable space they may find it difficult to be open. When unpleasant or hard things surface, it is best to give plenty of space and time to journey with them.

described a new found inspiration to pray in a different way. Having said this a little over half of the people choose not to share with the wider group at the end. Some responded that they didn't feel that others would find their gleaning valuable. Others simply said they were feeling shy, while others maintained that they needed more time to process what was going on.

Many people outlined that they would only be comfortable doing a creative process in a group of people they knew well as opposed to strangers. There were a few people who mentioned that the shared silence in a group setting had its own richness even if they were doing individual reflections. Many felt that it was encouraging to be able to hear from others at the end of the session. A few people communicated that they might be less distracted if they were able to do it by themselves. Others said that without being part of a group, there would not be inspiration from other people's creativity to spur them on. Overall, 21 of the 24 participants said they would have an interest in trying something similar again.¹⁵

Recommendations for spiritual directors who may wish to offer creative processes in spiritual direction space and a sample process for reference.

In closing, the following are practical recommendations for spiritual directors who may want to involve more creative processes in their sessions:

- Have a discipline of practicing contemplative art, trying new mediums yourself.
- Incorporate some creative elements in the space where spiritual direction takes place. Invite some participation to see where the directee is at with creativity.
- It is essential to reorientate directees around what a creative process is inside spiritual direction before leading a creative process. Here it is important to emphasise the process over the end product and to be clear about the aim to provide space for God to move. Sometimes it can take a lot of gentle encouragement to enable someone to let go of their fears. It may be helpful if you give the freedom of not needing to share any of their creation or prayer at any point.
- A creative product by the directee can be highly subjective, deeply personal and meaningful, so be extra careful in commenting about any part of their creation, even positively. Always ask them to describe it first.¹⁶ Be mindful when leading a

¹⁵ When it came to paying for the session, most people indicated that they would want to know where the money is going. One downside was that most participants didn't realise that there can be a significant cost to running a creative process session in terms of materials and the right space.

¹⁶ One director describes how once her directee created a drawing with many bright colors, which to the person was about his or her suicidal thoughts. Since it was quite different from the director's 'colour library of meaning', she emphasized the importance of always asking the directee for their descriptions first before commenting anything about it.

group session to give everyone space during the creation phase. Ask people to resist commenting on each other's work during the creative process stage.

- The creative process is a rhythm that goes between non-judgemental freedom of outflowing and sitting back and reflecting on what has surfaced. When designing a process keep in mind to guide the internal movement back and forth as this will help the directee to get most out of the process. Asking them to reflect some thoughtful questions like 'what is happening for you?' 'how do you feel at the moment?'
- Depending on how comfortable the directees are with creative processes, adjust how rigid or flexible your direction might be.
- Always leave room for the unexpected. See the creation as reflection of possible internal transformation taking place. Encourage them to be open to the possibilities and have courage to let their creation to shift and grow.
- Understand that using a creative process often requires a longer time frame. This can be hard to fit within a one hour session¹⁷. Make sure you have plenty of space and time to allow transformation to take place.
- If you give opportunity for people to share, tread this space carefully and not to pressure sharing¹⁸. This can only be done with people who knew each other well already.
- As with all new insights there may need some focused spiritual direction time afterwards to process the experience they have gone through.

The following is a sample process of what a creative process might look like:

1. Make sure all materials are prepared and on hand. If there is layering of materials, put them out as and when they are needed so not to overwhelm the directee with too many choices at the start. Explain each layered step as you go.
2. Before you begin, also briefly outline what the creative process is about: We are focusing on the process, not the product. We are using this method to get in touch with ourselves and God.
3. Encourage people to let go of self-criticism: it is not important how it 'should' look or how they 'should' feel. When their self-critical feelings arise encourage people to let them pass and move on. Asking them not to try to 'correct mistakes' but to go with the flow and add to it instead.
4. Encourage the participants to notice their emotions as they create.

¹⁷ Although there are ways you can encourage movement to push the directee to move along within certain timeframe, as in Interactive Drawing Therapy process.

¹⁸ In fact, the very fact of any possibility of sharing at the end of this time may hinder a freeing creative spirit, which make people thinking about their sharing and explanation during creation.

5. Start the creative process with a period of silence. If an intention emerges in silence, write it down and sit with it, sensing the energy of the intention.
6. Start the actual creative process, be it a collage, weaving, poetry, painting, using clay, music or other creative medium.
7. Stop between each layer and ask if the creation feels right. Sense if there is change inside or change of direction of the artwork. Pause a few times and encourage the directee to dialogue with God – what does God say about it?
8. Stop when it feels finished to the directee. Step back and get the directee to reflect on the creation. What is it saying to the directee? What would the directee like to say in response to the last question?
9. Write down the feelings that surfaced. Is there anything the directee would like to say to God about the things that has came up during the process?
10. Have a short simple end to conclude the prayer time.
11. Give opportunity for sharing if the directee is willing.
12. Encourage the directee to keep their artwork somewhere visible for them to keep reflecting on afterwards.

Appendix

The creative prayer sessions that I lead as creative processes in spiritual direction:

- Circular weaving using paper plates (as backing) and coloured yarns.

- after silence, starts with yarns that holds the weaving out stretch to the edge of the plate
- choose a colour yarn to form a centre, representing God being inside me. touching the centre to feel his presence.
- weave as I pray, choose different texture or colours to represent what comes to mind, forming a weaving.
- finish with reflection



- Contemplative watercolours and collages

- starts with silence, forming an intention of what I want to pray about or an emotion I hold at present. I write that on the back of the watercolour paper.



- put a layer of water on the paper, then choose some water colours to put on the paper
- while the paper is drying, I choose 3 images that speak to me from the cuttings laid out on the floor.
- I arrange them on the paper, see their relationship with one other, I cut and paste them on the paper
- I add some words if they appear, and add more colours if they feel right.
- I stop and asking myself, what is the image saying to me? What is God saying?
- Finish with writing on another piece of paper what has surfaced and what I want to talk to God about.

Some other ideas of creative processes and suggestions of possible themes:

- Tin foil sculptures – take a piece of tin foil with some wire as structure, and make a sculpture that can be changed easily. Themes: changes, transformation, collaboration with others
- Box of outside and inside – Collage and decorate a box with images and words, both outside and inside. Reflect on what I present to others and what I hold in private place of my heart. Themes: outward and



inward realities, private and precious internal space with honesty, God's presence within

- Beading – Beading with coloured, patterned beads (or made with meaningful words on paper curl up into a bead) on a string. Themes: journey, progression, storytelling
- Poetry – Writing Haiku (5/7/5 syllables format in poetry) or cinquain (1/2/3/4/1 words on 5 lines) in reflection of the present moment. Themes: seasons, inner reality, invitations
- Percussion in group – starting with one person, each person with a different percussion as well as making sounds from their bodies, each add on their sound with the same rhythm. Theme: group collaboration, listening, energy
- Doodling a mandala – choosing symbols, pictures or words, starting at the centre of a circle repeat in 12 (or multiples of), put them in a circular pattern. Theme: centring, expanding, meaning
- Dance and movement – using gesture or movement to show what is going on, or how the directee want to move forward. Theme: embodiment, transformation

Bibliography

BLOCK, Karen, *Under the Radar: The Use of Contemplative Collage in Spiritual Direction*, SGM, 2012

[https://www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/under_the_radar -
_the use of contemplative collage in sdn - karen block.pdf](https://www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/under_the_radar_-_the_use_of_contemplative_collage_in_sdn_-_karen_block.pdf)

BOWLEY, Flora, *Creative Revolution: Personal Transformation through Brave Intuitive Painting*, Quarry Books, 2016, USA

FEHLNER, Jacqueline, *In the Green Space: Bridging Spairitual Direction and Relational Psychotherapy through Spontaneous Artwork*, 2001
<http://orientations.jesuits.ca/arttherapy1.html>

KINCANNON, Karla M, *Creativity and Divine Surprise: Finding the Place of Your Resurrection*, Upper Room Books, 2005, USA

MCCLLOUD, Faith, *Creative Prayer: A Collection of Contemplative Prayer Stations*,

PAINTNER, Christine Valters, *The Artist's Rule: Nurturing Your Creative Soul with Monastic Wisdom*, Sorin Books, Indiana, 2011, USA

O'DONNELL, Patricia, *The Creative Process as a Tool in Spiritual Direction*, SGM, 1999
[https://www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/the_creative_process_as_a_to
ol_in_spiritual_direction.pdf](https://www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/the_creative_process_as_a_tool_in_spiritual_direction.pdf)

PAINTNER, Christine Valters, *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice*, Sorin Books, 2013, USA

PAINTNER and BECKMAN, Christine Valters, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*, Morehouse Publishing, 2010, USA

PRITCHARD, Sheila. *The Contemplative Collage in Refresh Journal of Contemplative Spirituality*, Spiritual Growth Ministries, NZ. Summer 06/07.

SULLIVAN, Michael, *Windows into the Soul: Art as Spiritual Expression*, Morehouse Publishing, 2006, Pennsylvania USA

Stone, Christine & Everts Hans. *The Therapeutic Use of Metaphor in Interactive Drawing Therapy* NZJC 26-4 2006 pp31

Withers, Russell. *The Therapeutic Process of Interactive Drawing Therapy* NZJC 29-2 2009

Withers, Russell. (2008). *The use of imagery and metaphor when working cross-culturally*. 2008 International Asia Pacific Rim Counselling Conference Presentations Disc: 4-9.

Websites:

<https://artsworship.net>