

THE CREATIVE PROCESS AS A TOOL IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

by

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One of the roles of the spiritual director is to help the directee express their faith experience. De Guibert says, "The director must know the soul and help it express itself," (Leech, pg 75). Spiritual direction is most often a conversation, the primary form of expression being words. The rationale for using creativity as a tool in spiritual direction is that it can be more holistic. The left mode of the human brain hemisphere specialises in verbal, logical, analytic thinking. (Edwards, pg 11) The left mode most often dominates. To encourage right mode functioning is to promote thoughts of connectedness and relationships. It is more attuned to insights. Creativity encourages the right mode to bring a balance of functioning. (Appendix 1)

Like dreams, engaging in the creative process is very powerful and efficient. Not in the sense of taking less time but in releasing treasure that is quite deep within the soil of a person's being and at getting to the heart or essence of an issue or concern.

"Our inner images have great power, they push us from the past and pull us towards the future," (Macbeth, pg 36).

Powerful because it demands the involvement of the total body, its senses, emotions, attention and energy. Powerful because it demands a total yielding, a letting go of control, as in child birth. In childbirth the child is already formed in the depths of the womb and needs to be released, born through the birthing process. Similarly our true essence lies within and through the process of creating it can be expressed. It is brought, through the creative process, into the light, illuminated, where, like a child, it can breathe, be embraced, named, owned and cared for.

There are two understandings of creating which Maria Harris distinguishes. The first is an image of creating, which is like that of a builder, where something is constructed, a product. We can stand back from it, be separate and apart from it. Because we live in a consumer society this product focused image of creating is often what people associate creating with.

The other understanding is creating as a brooding, caring, activity. It has a life giving energy and intuition that go on from within. In this image we, "breath creating in, we dwell in it and are shaped by it." (Harris, pg 61) As in birthing it is very embodied, physical. It is this understanding of creating that is helpful as a tool in spiritual direction.

Creating brings us into the present moment of our journey in a very holistic way. The emphasis is as much on the "process, of creating as on, the creation".

Creativity is a way of connecting the physical and spiritual. As Marjory Bankson writes, "clay invited me into awareness of my soul where spirit and body join in the substantial world". (Bankson, pg 12)

Carlson in his definition of spiritual direction talks about discerning the character and movement of a person's faith experience. (Leech, pg 78) Character and movement are sometimes more obvious within the creative process and the creation. When reflecting on creating over a period of time some of the more subtle changes or movement in the character of a person's faith may become more obvious or tangible. There seems also to be an agreement that at the heart of the creative process is the potential for transformation and healing.

“We can change patterns we have grown up with and come home to our bodies as a source of wisdom. We can help our souls find a mode of expression and trust the guidance we get from the inside. We can even learn the deep healing power of love and sexuality if we are not afraid to get our hands dirty in the every-dayness of soul work.” (Bankson pg 15)

Mathew Fox recites the experience of Hildegarde of Bingen as an example where the process of creativity led to her healing, “It was in her commitment to putting her hand to writing that her health was restored.” (Fox, pg 190) Healing seems to be bought about by the experience of release and transformation that often happens as part of the creative process.

The invitation to enter into a creative process is an invitation to use other modes of expression. The actual mode can be anything from dance, composing, poetry, storytelling, to painting, clay, drawing, sculpture, gardening

There are many people for whom their creativity becomes meditation and prayer. Mary Horn in talking about her painting describes the process as a journey, “that is both an inner and outer exploration. Outer into the world of colour and things and inner into the depths of who I am in the search for meaning into who God is.”

From my reading and talking to people who use art and creating as a way of becoming attentive and alive to their inner self and their spirituality, there is a common process. Although different people have used different words the process they describe is essentially similar. Majory Bankson whose medium is clay describes the following process:

- Grounding** - gathering the basic ingredients.
- Kneading** - making ready.
- Centring** - the call to focus, give attention to the inner.
- Shaping** - letting our inner spirit expand.
- Finishing** - observing what we have created. letting it go, releasing, making room for the next.
- Glazing** - playing with it, enjoying it understanding it.
- Firing** - the commitment to transformation. (Bankson, pg 15-16)

Maria Harris describes it as a continuing process that begins with **Contemplation** moves to **engagement**, **form giving**, **emergence** then **release**. (Harris, pg 64)

Dan Wakefield describes four stages that lead to a new discovery of our creativity.

1. **breaking the myths**.
2. **emptying**.
3. **filling**.
4. **creating**. (Wakefield, pg 112)

Adriana Diaz states “creativity is a combination of making something happen and letting something happen. Creative meditation has two stages one quiet and still, the other spontaneous, active and dynamic.” (Diaz, pg92)

Matthew Fox in describing a creation centred model of spirituality also names four paths that have definite links to the processes described by other authors. The “**via positiva**” is a contemplative stage where the wonder and awe of our world and ourselves draws our attention. The “**via negativa**” corresponds to Wakefield's emptying stage. It is a time of “letting go” to experience the God of darkness. The kneading stage described by Bankson where the air is pounded out of the clay in quite a forceful way is also descriptive of this phase. The “**via creativa**”, echoes the dynamic and active phase described by Diaz, the form giving and emergence stages identified by Harris and the shaping phase described by Bankson. The “**via transtormativa**” is where reflection on the fruits of the creative process leads to a releasing and revealing of truth. The firing stage described by Bankson echoes this stage where commitment to healing and transformation are demanded.

Spiritual direction is about helping people to discover the living water and I was interested that Makuini Ruth Tai when teasing apart the meaning of the Maori word waihanga (waters of creativity) explains how it not only incorporates the idea of water wai, but wai also refers to memory, recollection. It incorporates “ha”, the idea of breath, breath of life, and hanga the idea of building or creating. Thus in spiritual direction the invitation to te puna waihanga, the creative spring, is about a process of **breathing, connecting, recollecting and remembering** and then **making, creating**. The currents of a person's spiritual life are brought to the surface through this process and at the same time they are drawn into the depths of the spring of living water.

The process of creating begins with contemplation and as in other forms of contemplation it can lead to a religious experience. This is where spiritual direction has a role to play. The role of the spiritual director is to encourage creativity as a tool in spiritual direction. It is essential that the director believes that all people have creative potential and to believe that the process of creating can be illuminating, transforming healing and lots of fun.

More specifically the role of the spiritual director includes helping to break down the normal fear and resistance to creating that most adults have learnt. “The single largest obstacle in teaching adults to meditate by means of art is getting them to let go of judgmental attitudes towards their self expression” (Fox, pg 193)

There may be a need to help directees calm the inner critic. Hal and Sidra Stone talk about the inner voice or critic that makes everything look ugly. It has the ability to cripple people and make them unhappy. According to the Stones it is best to think of it as background music. You cannot please your inner critic but you can turn it down, turn it off or change channels. In their book, Embracing your Inner Critic, they have a variety of exercises for turning this around. Dan Wakefield's first stage “breaking the myths” also suggests that there is often preparatory work that needs to be done before a directee will accept an invitation to be creative. Some of the reasons directees might resist such an invitation include:

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|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| fear of facing themselves | fear of failure. |
| not wanting to be different | fear of criticism |
| want to avoid risks | fear of expectations |
| fear of what it may evoke | not seeing themselves as creative |
| fear of the unknown | not trusting themselves |
| fear of letting go of control | |

The use of affirmations i.e. short positive statements, can be a way of counteracting the critical voice.

Another role of the director is to know **when** encouragement of the creative might be useful. Listed below are suggestions of when to consider using creativity as a tool for spiritual direction.

1. When a directee is experiencing a dry/desert time and their prayer is not working.
2. When a directee is having difficulty expressing verbally what is happening for him/her.
3. When a directee has had a dream that is significant but difficult to interpret. Working creatively with a dream can help a directee to capture it and understand it.
4. When a directee is going around in circles with his/her thinking. Doing something tangible can help to ground the directee and connect the thinking to emotions.
5. When a directee is having difficulty expressing or identifying emotions or wants a safe way to explore emotions.
6. As a way to further depth a religious experience. It can help to capture a religious experience more fully so that it may be remembered and returned to at a later date.
7. To explore present and new images of God. "What does my experience of creating teach me of God?"
8. As an additional option to journalling. Juliet Batten recommends the use of the visual diary. This is different from a journal that is illustrated in that the images are primary and words are added later. "The visual diary allows us to shape and express our experience in terms of colour, line, form, shape, rhythm and pattern. The visual diary goes for essence." (Batten, pg12)
9. As a way of observing patterns and movement which might be too subtle for words. e.g. One woman I spoke to shared how a drawing she did at the beginning of the retreat and a similar one she did at the end of the retreat helped her to see movement and a wider perspective.
10. When someone is having difficulty letting go, creativity can bring about the "consolation of release".
11. In Focusing, drawing or writing about the image that the body has revealed to a directee is encouraged as a way of honouring the gift. (Appendix 2)
12. As a way of helping the inner child have expression. For example one spiritual director I spoke with encouraged directees to draw with their non-dominant hand as a way of helping this aspect of self to find expression.

Julia Cameron suggests, as a way of recovering one's creative spirit, writing "morning pages" which quite simply are three pages of hand written writing of what ever comes

into your head - no censoring allowed. This she believes is a way of sidetracking the logical left brain and allowing the artistic, right brain to have a chance to play. The mode of the right brain tends to be focused on awareness, insights, the present and how things relate to each other. It is more holistic. To foster this mode and bring a greater balance to the normal dominance of the left brain the following things are suggested: slow things down, repetition, avoid words, use the non-dominant hand if drawing, work with the eyes closed.

This invitation to engage in creating is not about making artwork to show others. It is about using creative ways to break the surface below which lie aspects of self so that they can emerge. It is one way that can open the door to discovery of self and God. In preparing a directee to embark an adventure like this the following instructions may be useful:

- Encourage directee to set aside plenty of uninterrupted time.
- Begin with centring or breathing exercises.
- Encourage directees to trust themselves and let go of any end product i.e. not to put themselves under pressure to perform or produce.
- Remind them that thinking and planning are forbidden. The ideal is to be spontaneous. There should be no censoring, no editing.
- Begin, and let the process unfold as it will.
- Reassure them that there is no special talent or training in the arts required to do this and that technique is unimportant.
- It is sometimes good to use a medium that is unfamiliar. The range includes dance, clay, play-dough, paint, crayons, pencil, charcoal, natural materials, poetry, and recycled materials.

Think pre-school! Encourage the directee to trust the process, have fun, and to bring an attitude of play to this process.

If a directee brings a creative piece to a session the aim is not to analyse it but to honour it. This maybe done in silence. Invitation to talk about it and explore it can be done in the same manner that one would use to invite a directee to explore a religious experience or dream. The following questions are some that might be useful:

- What is the mood/energy of the work?
- What was it like creating this?
- What is primary, what draws your focus?
- What is the essence of this piece?
- What is in the background?
- What aspects of self does this illuminate?
- What aspects of God does this illuminate?
- What title would you give this?
- What does this remind you of?
- Does it feel complete?
- What meaning/symbols does this piece contain?
- What emotion did this come out of?
- Are there repeated ideas, shapes, elements?

The ideal is to allow people the opportunity to engage in the creative process themselves, however religious art can be used if there is no time or space to engage in being creative. I've included in appendix 3 a contemplative exercise where cards or post

cards are chosen and form the basis for a contemplative exercise. Mary Horn believes that to use an original piece of artwork rather than a copy or print is preferable. That contemplation on an original is more powerful.

I have discovered through working with groups that providing quality and a good selection of materials is important. It can entice reluctant people and there is more satisfaction with the end result. Inviting people to work in a medium that is new and which holds no negative associations can also be helpful. For example, I have used tinfoil on a number of occasions with groups where getting messy wasn't an option and I have found it extremely versatile. There is an air of intrigue rather than fear when people are presented with it. Setting aside a good length of time is essential. When directees are on retreat it is an ideal time to encourage creativity.

I have yet to talk to anyone who has not found some benefit from exploring different and creative ways of expressing their faith and self. Given a wider scope I would have liked to explore whether certain personality types are more attracted to this tool and find it more beneficial.

I suspect that the processes described also have implications for liturgy and services i.e. fewer words, more allowances for awkward waiting spaces when inner work is happening, finding new ways for deepening and new ways for bringing the treasures found to the surface for expression. There is always the risk that this, like anything, can become a distraction or an attachment and the director may need to watch that engaging in creative process does not side track the directee.

“The treasure secretly gathered in your heart will become evident through your creative work.” (German Artist Albrecht Durer)

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APPENDIX 1: A Comparison of the Left and Right Brain Modes of Functioning.

From: Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty Edwards.

L-mode	R-mode
Verbal: use words to name, describe	Non-verbal: awareness
Analytical: figure out step by step	Synthetic: put things together to form whole
Symbolic: use symbols	Concrete: relate to things as they are now
Abstract: small bits to represent the whole	Analogic: sees likeness between things
Temporal: keep track of time	Non temporal: no sense of time
Rational: draw conclusion from facts	Non-rational: will suspend judgement
Digital: use of numbers	Spatial: seeing where things are in relation to other things and how parts form whole
Logical: conclusions based on logic	Intuitive: insights, patterns, feelings
Linear: linked ideas, one thought leads to the next	Holistic: seeing the whole of things at once

Appendix Two: JOURNALLING AFTER FOCUSING

There are two aims for journalling after focusing.

- 1) One is to give yourself further time to be with the images and feelings that your body revealed to you, to allow them to continue to reveal and speak your truth.
- 2) The other is to honour what your body has revealed and to honour the commitment you made at the time of focusing to return to the feelings and places in your body that you hold as gift.

You can journal by any method that assists in achieving these aims.

You can draw in colour all or any of the images or feelings.

You can find a symbol of these images to hold.

You can write about the images or feelings that came in focusing especially any images and feelings that were central.

At the end of the focusing exercise, you noted what the images had been and the feelings and marked the place in your body where you had held them. Then you thanked your body for the gift of each of them and promised that you would return to them. Journalling is a good way to fulfil that promise.

You might also note in your journal the items that you put aside when clearing the space. Remember that you put them aside with the awareness that “it was OK to do so just for the moment”

If you return to the main image that came when focusing, you may want to dialogue with that image in order to offer it the opportunity to reveal more of its meaning for you.

EXERCISE

In your journal, write about the experience of being focused, paying particular attention to recording what your body felt and what images came. Note, too, any issues that you found but put aside for the moment.

Make a picture of the main images that came to you, choosing colours to express the feelings that the images held.

Now return to your journal and write about the picture you have drawn and what it tells you about what you held in your body during focusing.

Handout from a workshop given by: Lyndall Brown and Jim Dooley

Appendix 3: Meditation Using Art

This exercise is one that can be used either individually or in a group gathering.

Collect a series of post cards, pictures, etc.
[Original artwork is preferable but not essential]

Offer and allow person to chose one for meditation.

After a period of time with the image, suggest or offer the following questions for reflection.

1. What is in the foreground
2. What is in the background?
3. What aspects of self are present?
4. What aspects of God are present?
5. What is one sentence I would speak or write about it?

Pamela Warnes taught this exercise to me.

Appendix 4: An Exercise For Exploring Relationship With God.

1. Play some quiet reflective music.
2. Begin with relaxation and awareness of breathing exercises.
3. Close your eyes and hold the piece of tinfoil in your hands, or on your lap.
4. As you think about who God is for you and your relationship with God, as you allow your feelings to surface begin to embrace and play with the tinfoil. Be spontaneous. This is the time to engage with the tinfoil.
wrestle with it fold it
caress it touch it rip it
5. Allow yourself plenty of time, be aware of the process, what happens as you work with the tinfoil
6. When you have finished forming and shaping the tinfoil put it in front of you. Sit back and look at what you have created.

What has it been like for you working with the tinfoil as you ponder your relationship with God?

What can you learn from this?

What does this remind you of?

What does this reveal to you about your relationship with God?

Did any part of the process or the tinfoil form surprise you?

Appendix 5: Mandala

The word mandala means circle in Sanskrit.

The mandala, a design form that radiates out from the centre, is ancient and universal, appearing in art, architecture and dance of cultures everywhere.

Here it is intended as a drawing meditation for centring and integrating the self.

It is a tool for developing centredness through outward expression in graphic art.

Method:

Draw a circle on the page. Use a compass or a dinner plate will do!

Make a dot in the centre. Say to your self “this is my centre.”

Think of a symbol or image that could represent you, your unique inner core. Then let images, colours, shapes and lines unfold outwards, emanating from the centre. When you are finished spend some time in your journal reflecting on the process and what you have learnt.

If you have time do a series of mandalas.

Appendix 6: An Exercise To Help Observation (Adapted from Dan Wakefield)

Exercise On Looking Close:

“Miracles seem to me to rest not upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar but upon our own perception being made finer so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears hear what is there about us always.”

Willa Carther

Nothing is more creative than nature, more evocative of creation and the creative process. Nature is there to teach. But first we have to learn to look.

1. Pick an object in nature.
2. Sit quietly, empty preconceptions, look with fresh eyes.
3. Look at it to see what you can learn about it.
4. A period of concentrated observation will reveal to you what you didn't see at all on first glance.
5. Take at least twenty minutes to observe your natural object. Even if you get bored after 5 minutes keep looking, and keep looking.
6. Forget about self and concentrate fully.
7. Take notes on everything you observe:

colour	leaves
texture	seeds
smell	markings
taste	divisions
8. After studying it for 20 minutes answer these questions:
 - what else does it remind you of?
 - does it remind you of anything in your own life?
 - does it evoke any emotion, thoughts
9. Now, if you want to, draw it.

Appendix 7: End of the Rainbow Exercise (adapted from Venu)

Requirements:

Pencil, crayons, blank paper, space and time on you own.

Process:

1. Sit down, close your eyes, breath deeply into your stomach.
2. Notice how you are feeling deep inside yourself. When you have noticed how you are feeling inside and you have located the emotion, open your eyes.
 - Now you are ready to draw your emotions.
 - Concentrate on the blank piece of paper.
 - Wait until you have a sense of a place to begin or a form in your imagination.
 - Allow yourself to be drawn towards a colour.
 - If you want your inner child to talk to you use your non-dominant hand to write or draw.
 - Don't try to make it look like anything special.
 - Don't judge how it looks.
 - Allow yourself to express your feelings through the crayons.
 - Use as many or as few crayons as feels right.
 - Your drawing may be abstract or realistic
3. Write in your journal:
 - How did you feel as you drew?
 - How do you feel now?
 - Write about what is actually happening in your life?
 - Write whatever comes into your mind - don't change a word.
 - Write about what the drawing means.