The Fertility of Artistic Expression as a Two-Way Offering

Releasing the Prolific Self

by

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Abstract

Encountering art well invites inquiry, resonance, release and self-formation. It is common for people to talk and write about the gift an artist gives to an audience by sharing one’s art. I refer to this gift as an offering. It is, however, uncommon for people to talk and write about the offering an audience gives to an artist. The fertility of artistic expression involves a two-way offering of reciprocity between artist and audience; the language of art is incomplete without the presence of conversation. Giving an artist an actively present and attentive audience is one of the most generous, and often most transformative, of offerings one can give. The need to watch well and be watched well is a core human need. At times, watching one another well involves watching one another’s art well. This thesis explores the fertility of artistic expression confronting a diagnosis of infertility.

Keywords: art; art as language; arts education; artistic expression; audience; Auguste Rodin; Burghers of Calais; embodiment; encountering art; expression; fertility; formation; infertility; inquiry; La Vie; offering; Pablo Picasso; prolific self; reciprocity; release; resonance; stuck; two-way offering.
Dedication

To Peter,

my husband, most faithful companion and generously attentive audience.

You are the BEST. I love you.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to Celeste Snowber for creating in her embodiment course a safe space to be vulnerable, a space in which I felt the permission to address infertility. Thank you for your genuine enthusiasm and encouragement during my writing process. You were absolutely right: Good writing takes time to “marinate.”

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Thank you to my husband, Peter; you had to be the most patient of all, and you were. Thank you for your feedback and encouragement. Particularly during my most intense phases of writing, thank you for doing far more than your “fair share” of work at home so that I could write, write, write. To my favorite person in the world: Do you think we can finally take a long-anticipated vacation?

Thank you to my mom, Joyce Gunn, for reading me good books as a child and seeking out “children’s” books that couple good stories with good illustrations. I am so grateful you retired from your job as a librarian before I started writing this
thesis; your keen eyes to grammar and meticulous attention to detail have been invaluable to this process. Thank you, Mom, for being an outstanding editor!

Thank you to my family and friends for your patience and encouragement during this longer than anticipated journey—one of the most difficult aspects of this journey has been time spent apart from you. To my friends both near and far, from all pockets of my life, thank you for asking me about my writing, caring about my writing and inspiring my writing.

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Thank you to God for your generous kindness, loving hospitality and forever-attentive audience. And thank you for being an artist.

There are many others I could thank by name; although writing this thesis often felt lonely and isolated, I was not alone. The fruit of this journey was not achieved by my efforts alone but by the presence of your audience along the way. Thank you for understanding the two-way offering.
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Chapter One: Encountering Art

Encountering Art

Pablo Picasso’s large Blue Period painting *La Vie* (Life) was on my mind as I stepped into the Vancouver Art Gallery to view the *Monet to Dali* exhibit for the second time. *La Vie* was the painting that had most impacted me the first time I saw the exhibit; I wanted to sit with it awhile longer this time. What I had not expected was to be so taken aback by Auguste Rodin’s *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant, One of the Burghers of Calais*; one hundred and twenty-one years old, this sculpture spoke to me right into the present. I kept coming back to this sculpture, looking at it from near and far, circling it closely to observe the texture and emotion of this face.

*La Vie* was stunning to see again, standing nearly six-and-a-half feet high (just short of 2 meters) staring back at me, one hundred and four years alive, yet I kept wandering back to Rodin’s *Heroic Head*. Picasso’s painting spoke of abandonment to me; Rodin’s sculpture spoke of sorrow, yet left room for acceptance and healing from pain. It left room for hope, something that *La Vie* did not seem to allow. Both of these works spoke, and this time Rodin’s work empathized with me. It met me where I was; that face said something about not
being alone in life even when life is painful and hard to accept. Art can speak, even one hundred years ahead of itself.

Figure 1: *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant, One of the Burghers of Calais. 1886. Auguste Rodin, bronze, 85.3 x 47 x 55.25 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, photo used with permission, The Norweb Collection 1920.120*

**Face-to-Face**

I did not go to that exhibit with an empty mind (Do we ever truly have an empty mind?); I went searching for validation and comfort, for a place in which I could be honest—the next morning I was going to a memorial service for a baby
boy who did not make it to his first breath, urgently delivered by C-section one week before he was due because his heart had stopped beating. This was the fourth child lost by these parents-to-be. I felt their pain immensely and, simultaneously, the pain that I experience due to my husband and I being an infertile couple emerged in full force.

“Rodin, would you ever have guessed that this head study of yours would console me in my sorrow so many years after your expressive hands formed it?”

This face, this sculpture, seemed to understand the pain I felt for my friends’ loss as well as the pain I felt for my own loss. This face told me that it was okay to feel my pain, and it was okay not to hasten to fix it.

In the book Monet to Dali the author writes of Rodin, “His goal was the creation of figures evocative enough to strike an individual resonance in each viewer…” (Bradley & Mills, 2007, p. 51). Maybe Rodin would not be so surprised to hear how his work had spoken to me.

**Resonance**

It is not unusual to experience *resonance* with the arts. Three years ago “resonance” was not a word in my vocabulary, but as I began my masters degree in Arts Education this word started to follow me around (Or, more precisely, I realized I was years behind on noticing how frequently this word is used.). Now I hear and see this word everywhere. However, I try to avoid using “resonance”
lightly in my writing and conversation out of a desire for this word to maintain the depth of its meaning, something overuse can rob from it.

What is resonance? The way I hear it used most often is to suggest that one can connect, identify or be in tune with something. It can be used as a sort of synonym for the idiom “it rings true.” This is interesting because in the American Heritage Dictionary the first definition for “ring” as a verb is, “To give forth a clear, resonant sound” (Soukhanov, 1992, p. 1555). Resonance is a harmonic phenomenon that involves a sound wave causing an object to oscillate. “Resonance can occur in any vibrating system, including electrical circuits, the sound boxes of musical instruments, rooms, the cavities of the human body, including the vocal tract, and other objects” (Truax, 1999). One might say the now popular use of the word resonance is a metaphorical reference to “the cavities of the human body” mentioned in the explanation above; it is with this understanding that I use the word “resonate.”

To “resonate” is to “be received or understood” (“Resonate,” 2006), it is “to evoke a feeling of shared emotion or belief” (“Resonate,” 2000). I am certain this is why a professor of mine, Stuart Richmond, prefers to define resonance as “a sympathetic vibration” (also a term related to sound waves) (Richmond, 2007, pp. 1-2). “A common illustration of sympathetic vibration is to sound a tuning fork and bring it close to, but not touching, another fork of the same frequency,
which will then begin to vibrate sympathetically” (Truax, 1999). The less restrained something is, the more likely it will resonate, resulting in a sympathetic vibration. This might explain why I experienced such an intense resonance with \textit{Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant}—my grief for my friends in their loss, and the reminder this was of my own grief of infertility, created for me a healthy lack of restraint on my emotions. I was available to resonate with Rodin’s sculpture.

\textit{Art & Resonance}

Aristotle wrote, “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance” (as cited in Fujimura, 2009, p. 109). It is this inward significance of things with which we resonate the most deeply. Rodin is praised by many for his ability to express in sculpture “internal depth through external features” (Rodin Museum, 2010). Through sculpture, Rodin was able to make visible the inward significance of things that words often fail to express well. The sculpted face of Pierre de Wiessant invited me to feel the unspoken significance and depth of my emotions associated with infertility.

When our spoken language lacks the vocabulary we need, art offers a second (alternate) language for expression. In his book \textit{Ground Breaking} the architect Daniel Libeskind (2004) writes:
If architecture fails, if it is pedestrian and lacks imagination and power, it tells only one story, that of its own making: how it was built, detailed, financed. But a great building, like great literature or poetry or music, can tell the story of the human soul… Buildings—contrary to popular thought—are not inanimate objects. They live and breathe, and like humans have an outside and an inside, a body and a soul. (p. 4)

Art with both “body and soul,” art which avoids being pedestrian—dull, ordinary, uninspired—will bring the occurrence of resonance. Art is an essential vehicle for this powerful communication.

**Following Resonance**

When the language of art is received in a resonant encounter, a face-to-face meeting, a conversation occurs between artist, art and audience. The making visible of personal expression during such a conversation has the potential to result in liberation from areas in one’s life where a persistent feeling of stuck will not evaporate. I refer to these experiences of newly-gained freedom as “release.” In the places of our lives where we find ourselves static in our life stories and emotions precisely because we have not found a voice for expressing our hurts and longings, we are in need of release. Experiences of resonance move us closer toward release. Resonant encounters with the work of Picasso and Rodin prepared me to attain future release and initiated my journey into the fertility of artistic expression.
The Journey Ahead

Let me give you an idea of the journey we will be taking through this thesis.

In the next chapter, I will introduce the concept of understanding art as a language, a vehicle offering a voice for untangling and unravelling our expressions into form. I will revisit resonance in this chapter and begin a discussion about release. To aid our understanding of art as capable of speaking for both artist and audience, we will return to my encounters with the work of Picasso and Rodin. Additionally, I will clarify in this chapter what I mean by use of the term “art.” Discovering the language of art for making our expressions visible and audible can lead to experiences of resonance and release for artist and audience.

In chapter three I will share how the final project of a required course in my Arts Education masters program offered me a language for expression and a pathway to release. My inert emotional state with infertility was met by this assignment; here I found language to express my story through writing, music, movement, paint and the generously attentive audience of my classmates. In order to most effectively share my experience of creating, performing and sharing this assignment, we will consider the role of personal inquiry in Arts Education. We will also discuss the increased potential for experiences of artistic
expression as release to emerge when an environment is cultivated in which vulnerability is not only accepted but also encouraged. This chapter is about the fertility of artistic expression confronting a diagnosis of infertility.

The need to watch well and be watched well is a core human need and also a component of the transformative power of artistic expression as release. At times, watching well will involve watching one another’s art well. I learned from my Arts Education performance that giving an artist an actively present and attentive audience is one of the most generous, and often most transformative, of offerings that one can give; chapter four will explore the nature of this gift. We will return to understanding art as a language. I will focus on art as a means of communication that invites conversation between artist, audience and artwork. Having an audience for expressions of who we are and who we want to become can welcome our newly-released self into community. The fertility of artistic expression as release involves the active reciprocity of a two-way offering; it is a shared conversation.

From here we can examine how our discussion thus far impacts our lives and, more specifically, impacts our selves. If, above all of its functions, “art is about exploring what it is to be human” (London, 1989, p. 34), which I believe to be true, then the result of such exploration must play an essential role in not only the expression of self but also the formation of self. The result of this formation
can reveal and release our *prolific selves*, a term into which we will immerse ourselves and consider the pursuit of in this final chapter.

    I intend for this thesis to be an offering of the arts to you and I will keep you, my audience, in mind as I write. It is my hope that you will experience a “ringing true,” an evocative resonance, with some aspect of this thesis so that to some degree I might extend to you Rodin’s gift to me.

**A Sympathetic Vibration**

The funeral I attended the morning after visiting the Vancouver Art Gallery embraced the arts more effectively then I had seen before in a single ceremony. The finely-crafted wood casket, so small and so significant, was audience to a dancer who communicated the parents’ pain through movement to a new gospel hymn which affirmed both sorrow and hope. There was poetry read and singing through tears. The service program contained a pencil drawing of this baby’s foot in his father’s hand. The cover of the program had a colorfully painted background and the imprint of this child’s tiny footprints. At the reception, a painted banner containing a poem about connectedness was decorated with handprint footprints from each guest. The arts mingled that morning with deep, deep grief and, as a participant in a large sympathetic (and one might say “symphonic”) audience, I encountered a second profound
experience of resonance. The fertility of artistic expression as a two-way offering made real to me again.
Chapter Two:
Art, a Language for Expression & a Pathway to Release

*I went searching for validation and comfort,*
*for a place in which I could be honest.*

Figure 2: *La Vie.* 1903. Pablo Picasso, oil on canvas, 196.5 x 129.2 cm, photo used with permission, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Hanna Fund 1945.24
Introduction

In a 1935 interview for the French journal Cahiers d’art Pablo Picasso declared, “All I want is for my painting to release the emotion” (Zervos, 1935, p. 174). A release of emotion is definitely displayed within Picasso’s 1903 painting La Vie (Life). The imagery and color express a feeling of sorrow. The figures, though multiple, suggest isolation. I see loneliness in this painting. This painting is over six feet tall; daunting, overwhelming, difficult to take in emotionally and yet beckoning, luring, enticing and honest.

La Vie is the largest, and often considered the most complex, of Picasso’s Blue Period works. The term Blue Period refers to the dominant color in this body of work as well as to the prevailing mood. Picasso linked the beginning of his Blue Period, which occurred from 1901 to 1904, to the suicide of his close friend, Carlos Casagemas. La Vie, one of Picasso’s final Blue Period paintings, is why I returned to the Vancouver Art Gallery for a second visit with the Monet to Dali exhibit.

It is clear by the emotional intensity of the Blue Period paintings that for Picasso painting provided a language for exploration and expression, a vehicle that gave him form for voicing his grief, confusion, and difficult questions; and a vehicle which gave him release. I returned to the gallery to see La Vie a second time because I was drawn into the language for expression that this painting had
given to me. La Vie gave me a voice at a time when my grief, confusion and difficult questions had fallen mute, a time when my story of loss was stuffed deep down, far from release.

Release involves the untangling and unravelling of our expressions into form, often resulting in experiences of freedom and liberation. The language of art offers opportunities for release through expression, not only release of and from painful emotions, but also release of and from the life stories in which we find ourselves paralyzed. Discovering the language of art for making our expressions visible and audible can lead to experiences of resonance and release for both artist and audience.

The provision of language for expression is one important purpose art serves and, while it is not the only purpose of art, it is the purpose on which we will focus throughout this chapter. I believe Picasso’s La Vie is a testimony to this provision.

What do I Mean by Art?
To begin our discussion, it is important that I clarify what I mean when I use the word “art.” I will not attempt to define art—that would take far more than one chapter. Instead, I intend to clarify what sorts of forms and mediums I include when I use the word art, and to introduce one attribute of art on which we will focus most of our attention—the ability of art to speak.
When discussing art I am not only referring to the visual arts, but to any form that could be considered an artistic discipline or a means of artistic expression. The design and creation of architecture, furniture, installation, music, dance, painting, sculpture, fashion, illustration, theatre, film, fiction, poetry and storytelling, for example, can all be offered and received as art. New forms of art are always emerging. As a primary medium for communication, art may use the body, words, sound, paint, clay, the computer and endless other media. When referring to art, I include an endless list of potential forms that art can take and unlimited media in which art can be made, created, performed, shared and received. For the purpose of this discussion, we will understand art as something formed by human creativity and imagination. I will often use visual arts terminology in my writing because my artistic background has concentrated on the visual arts of drawing and painting, but this vocabulary use is not intended to raise one art form above another.

There are many valuable and important distinctions that one can make about art that will not be considered in this discussion. I will not make a distinction between the professional artist and the recreational artist—I believe we are all artists, some of us just act in this role more frequently than others.

There is no helpful distinction between “fine art” and “craft” for this discussion—art is created in the second grade classroom just as frequently (if not
more frequently) as it is made in an art school, a studio or your home. A
discussion about what distinguishes “good” art from “bad” art is also better left
for another time and place, although, let me be clear, there is great value to such
a discussion and I will briefly touch on this topic later.

Controversial discussion topics about art such as those above make
deciding what art is often lead to ruthless arguments which rarely lead to
resolution (People really do get ruthless.). While there are many ways of
defining art with which we would all certainly find much agreement, a problem
arises when we say, “All art is ______.” No one has nailed this down. No one
has developed a definition for all art that the mass majority has applauded—I
certainly will not be resolving this here, nor is this the purpose of our discussion.
There does not seem to be a description into which all art fits, except to say that
all art is art—a satisfactory conclusion for no one. Let us therefore focus our
discussion on some art and on what some art does.

I appreciate the stance Jeanette Winterson (1996) takes in her book Art
Objects when she states, “I am sure that if as a society we took art seriously, not
as mere decoration or entertainment, but as a living spirit, we should very soon
learn what is art and what is not art” (p. 17). When we take art seriously, we
move away from thinking of art as an object. When we receive art as living and
breathing, we will have less interest in what art is and more intrigue with what
art does. As a side note, with this understanding we can also begin to better
discern “good” art from “bad” art, and I suspect Winterson would agree with
this stance. Architect Daniel Libeskind, whom I quoted in chapter one, would
likely agree as well. Libeskind (2004) believes that buildings live and breathe,
and he explains “a great building, like great literature or poetry or music, can tell
the story of the human soul” (p. 4). “Good” art is living and breathing art.

It is interesting then that in her book What Is Art For? Ellen Dissanayake
(1988) writes, “Perhaps if we examine what the arts do for people (rather than
what they appear to be in their various manifestations), we might find a
satisfactory starting point from which to understand and describe art . . .” (p. 60).
This is precisely the approach I intend to take. It is not my intent to devalue
what art is—a valuable topic of discussion—I simply choose, for the purpose of
this thesis, to focus our attention on what some art does.

What Does Art Do?

Art can be serious or playful, literal or abstract, activist or ignorant. Art
can address and undress social issues and can lead us to beauty and truth. Art
can perform utilitarian purposes. Art can focus on tuning the artist and the
audience into specific senses such as hearing music, tasting food, feeling the
texture and fit of clothing, seeing a photograph. One thing art is doing when
playing these diverse roles is acting as a language.
The Language of Art

What I mean by use of the word “language” is simply that art performs as a vehicle for communication and expression. Art offers a form and means for making statements, asking questions and telling stories. As Winterson (1996) has written:

I know of no better communicator than art. No better means of saying so precisely those things which need so urgently to be said. It has been a baton handed on to us across centuries and through differences. (p. 99)

One thing art does constantly is speak. And speaking through art can help us to identify or understand what it is that we feel and have to say, as Brand and Adrienne (2001) explain in their book Art and Soul:

All of us experience sensations which we are unable to grasp because they operate at a subconscious level and, hence, defy verbalization. The artist manipulates a particular medium in such a way that it can somehow allude to those feelings, making them visible or audible to herself as much as to her potential audience. (p. 126)

Art makes our expressions visible and audible by giving them voice. Art does not always make large life-changing statements, but art always speaks; art always has something to say or to ask. Composer Aaron Copeland (1980) has written:

I think it is safe to assume that although a conscious desire for communication may not be in the forefront of their minds, every
move towards logic and coherence in composing is in fact a move toward communication. (p. 47)

Art is a language that communicates, a language that invites both artist and audience into conversation. Engaging the language of art involves entering into conversation with art, a topic we will discuss further in chapter four. You and I rely on the language of art for expression far more frequently than most of us realize.

The Shape We Need

Imagine a world without the language of art. Say goodbye to the music you listen to on your drive or bus ride to work, delete the photo of the mountains you have set as your computer desktop background, remove the paintings and photos from your office walls and the child’s drawings from your refrigerator at home, cancel your tickets to the theatre for Friday night, and take note that an evening at home watching a film is not an option either. And your dance fitness class? Cancelled. Your books? Gone. The restaurants with that special flair? Closed. And of course if you own any paint, clay, creative writing journals, musical instruments or a camera, all these things must be tossed out, for if you are not careful, they may produce art.

Now, think of the arts gone from your life and see if you can identify what it is that you miss. Certainly you miss the entertainment art provided for you—
art was a simple pleasure of life that brought you enjoyment, relaxation, and a frequent escape from the fast-paced rush of life. More significantly, the arts at times may have helped you to sort through your thoughts; provided you with a view of your life from a fresh angle; offered you comfort, hope and companionship; and asked you questions you had not realized you needed to consider. In these moments, art provided you with language for expression. Your lack of words for expression led you to the language of art because some of what you needed to say and hear truly did defy verbalization.

Winterson (1996) describes this provision of language well “Art offers the challenge we desire but also the shape we need when our own world seems most shapeless” (p. 114). Art as a language nourishes needs and desires deep within us by offering a “shape” for our expressions. Art provides a vehicle for the representation and outward manifestation of our stories, thoughts and emotions that seem shapeless. Art makes visible and audible that which was invisible and silent. “Making images,” and, I would add, making music, telling stories, dancing, etc., “is as natural a human endeavor as speaking” (London, 1989, p. xiii). Art provides an essential means for the artist and audience to speak. Without art a portion of one’s self is left speechless.
**A Recent Example of Art Speaking**

A recent example of art speaking well for both artist and audience can be seen in an April 2009 sand animation performance by Kseniya Simonova on the television show *Ukraine’s Got Talent*. Simonova’s sand animation of The Great Patriotic War recounts Germany conquering Ukraine in the Second World War. Using sand as her drawing medium, Simonova creatively combines visual art, music, sound and storytelling. She proceeds from image to image with impressive grace and ease. The imagery she creates with the sand is not particularly unique or stunning, yet the story she tells, which is clear and easy to follow, captures acute attention from her Ukrainian audience. “The Great Patriotic War, as it is called in Ukraine, resulted in one in four of the population being killed with eight to eleven million deaths out of a population of 42 million” (Johnston, 2009). Simonova illustrates an ordinary story of a young couple falling in love yet, before the romance matures, the war arrives in a foreboding interruption and we watch how the horrors of war impact this relationship.

As the camera pans during the performance, tremendous resonance can be seen on the faces of those in her audience. Sighs, tears and, at the end, a standing applause also provide evidence that the audience is with Simonova as she journeys through this story of loss and pain that they know too well. As the British Guardian News and Media website states:
It's clear that Simonova has achieved her goal as an artist. If we take it that art's purpose is to illuminate the world in a new way, provoke a reaction, somehow alter the consciousness of the viewer then her work is a huge success. (Donaghy, 2009)

Simonova’s performance not only won her first place in this talent competition, it won her a striking resonance with her audience—Ukrainians who know the horror of this war firsthand as part of their personal stories. Even more shocking is that her performance was not only a deeply resonant experience for her Ukrainian audience—as of March 2010, her performance had been viewed on YouTube just short of thirteen million times, a sum exceeding the number of Ukrainian deaths resulting from the Great Patriotic War. It is incredible that although it is very likely much of this online audience does not know Ukrainian
history well and does not understand the language of the words in the songs, this sand animation performance still drew them (myself included) into a place of resonance. This large and presumably very diverse audience has understood and received Simonova’s language of artistic expression, and as is common with art, this reception has resulted in resonance.

**Resonance Revisited**

Recall from chapter one our exploration of the word resonance. Remember that to resonate is to “be received or understood” (“Resonate,” 2006). Somehow, despite language, culture and life experience differences, a great number of people have received and understood Simonova’s sand animation performance. This performance has evoked feelings of shared emotion and belief in people with a wide diversity of personal history. The sheer number of online viewers paired with their written comments of praise, acts as convincing evidence of occurrences of resonance. There is no doubt that Simonova has given something unique to her fellow Ukrainians, and in the midst of this gift she has found a way to additionally give a larger population an experience of resonance. Somehow this greater audience can understand the language of the songs, the language of the imagery and the language of the story well enough to experience the “ringing true” of artistic expression. Resonance, I believe, is what happens when art is honest.
**Honest Art**

Honest art gives permission for expression. Art that speaks honestly portrays the life we know, not the life we ought to have; it questions, invites, offers, enjoys, aches, grieves and acknowledges life. Honest art is not afraid to approach topics such as war, unanswerable questions, death, grief, pain and long-term illness. Honest art speaks into our relationships, our culture and our world. It does not offer quick resolution, easy righteousness, cheap grace, perfect families, simple answers; honest art offers truth, and that is why we resonate with it.

**From Resonance to Release**

Aristotle wrote over two thousand years ago, “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance” (as cited in Fujimura, 2009, p. 109). When we, in an act of surrender, in a moment of permitting ourselves a healthy lack of emotional restraint, receive the representation of things of inward significance, as I did with the works of Picasso and Rodin, we will often experience not only resonance but release. Release can be seen in the tears and facial expressions of Simonova’s Ukrainian audience and can be read in the comments shared online in response to the performance video. Resonance with art is closely related to release.
Art is not pedestrian; it is not intended to be mere decoration or entertainment. Art is a powerful language. When we experience the untangling and unravelling of our expressions into form, we are experiencing release. When we experience in our depths the exclamation, “Finally!” when it seemed we would never move far from a place we felt forever stuck, we are experiencing release. Release is the act of letting go and the result of having let go. It is a gaining of significant insight. It is breaking bonds of sorrow, finally experiencing some peace in places of grief and loss. It is not forgetting, moving on in the sense of ignoring pain, but moving and acting into the pain, going there, being there, for the span of time that is needed in order to get unglued and unstuck from a place we know we cannot stay forever, a place we do not want to stay forever. Release gives us whatever we need next, gets us to the place we long to be and to which we have struggled to find a pathway. Sometimes we pursue or seek out release and sometimes it sneaks up on us. Art offers a pathway to release.

Picasso was right; release has a lot to do with emotions (Zervos, 1935, p. 174). I have found that it is common for the release that art brings to be accompanied by tears, such as the tears I found myself holding back in the Vancouver Art Gallery during both of my visits. Often when we are not expecting it, we are captured by the offering of art, by the beauty, truth and
honesty of art. Release is expression no longer trapped inside of us, and release commonly escapes during an encounter with art.

**Art & Release**

Art plays a significant role in our lives. This is not news, and one need not look far to find evidence of agreement with this statement throughout history.

“[A]rt as a search for personal and collective power and well-being is still held as central for most primal people” (London, 1989, p. 10). One hundred years ago Leo Tolstoy (1896/1960) wrote, “Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement; art is a great matter. Art is an organ of human life, transmitting man’s reasonable perception into feeling” (p. 189). Yale University professor Nicholas Wolterstorff (1980) has strong views about the role of art in our lives. “To envisage human existence without art is not to envisage human existence. Art—so often thought of as a way of getting out of the world—is man’s way of acting in the world” (pp. 4-5). Art is active and it is partly because art involves action that it can bring release. For the artist, release comes with the actions of imagining, making and viewing one’s art; for the audience it comes from active, not passive, engagement with art.

Of course it is not art alone that can move us to release. Witnessing the beauty and astonishing power of nature (often referred to as the art of God); soaking in the stillness and quiet of solitude; engaging in the action of play;
getting off the couch and going for a walk, a run, a swim; receiving the gentle
touch and listening ear of a loved one can all make visible and audible the secrets
of our hearts and can all bring release. And, when we are honest, we know that
art does not always provide the verbalization we need; sometimes it fails us.
Sometimes the artist cannot find language in his sculpting, sometimes he finds
himself stuck. Sometimes works of art appear silent to us, yet speak to another.
Some art appears to speak only to those who frequent gallery spaces. Some
gallery art appears not to speak at all and we may wonder if what the gallery is
calling art is just an appeal for publicity. However, sometimes art appears not to
speak because we are too proud or too lazy to listen. Sometimes art appears not
to speak because we are too quick to say we do not understand it, or if we are
honest, we fear the truth it has to speak so we hold back our tears and we do not
listen.

Art is one thing that can move us to release, one offering we will greatly
miss out on if we constantly turn it down. Colin Lyas (1997) wrote in his
provocative book on aesthetics that our encounters with art “go as deep as
anything in our lives can go” (p. 2). If we never approach art as artist and
audience looking for language, if we never seek or receive artistic expression in
hopes of release, oh how we will miss out. Art offers a voice worth falling in
love with.
On Using the Term Release

When I chose the word “release” to describe my most recent experiences with art, I had not heard this term used in context with art. Later, during my research, I stumbled on Picasso’s use of this word (Zervos, 1935, p. 174). You can imagine my surprise and encouragement to discover Picasso using release in a similar context. I have recently encountered “release” in a few more of my readings (hooks [sic], 1999, p 84; Snowber, 2002, p. 28; Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Celeste” entry, para. 1). I am encouraged by the companionship I have found on my journey. If the making and viewing of artistic expressions indeed can and often does bring release, then this is not a new thing, rather I am joining in on a long history of art as release.

Release for Artist & Audience

It appears Picasso’s reference to painting as “a release of emotion” (Zervos, 1935, p. 174) refers to the act of painting as well as to the viewing of a completed painting. If the viewing of art can result in release, then both artist and audience can experience liberation through art.

Picasso understood a painting develops while it is painted:

It would be really interesting to record photographically, not the steps of a painting, but the transformations. . . . The painting is not thought out and established in advance; while we do it, it follows the movement of thought. (Zervos, 1935, pp. 173-174)
Painting is not only a release of emotion; it is a release of thought. Not only does the painting follow our movement of thought, our thoughts and emotions will follow the movement occurring in the painting. Therefore, creating art results in new understandings of one self.

Picasso continues, “Once finished, it [the painting] changes even more, according to the state of the one who looks at it” (Zervos, 1935, p. 174). The painting changes when we identify with it, resonate with it, read our stories into it. However, it is not only the painting that changes; we change as a result of viewing the art. Art lives when we present our lives before it and receive what it offers us in return. “A painting lives its life like a living thing, subjected to the changes that daily life imposes on us. This is natural because a painting lives only through the person who looks at it” (Zervos, 1935, p. 174).

The process of creating art can bring release to the artist; viewing a completed work of art can bring release to the artist and the audience. The experience of sharing one’s art with an audience can further reinforce an artist’s experience of release. It is significant that Picasso chose to share his Blue Period work with the public; the exposure of this work may have influenced Picasso’s experience of release as well as shaped his audience. We will explore the offering an audience gives to an artist in chapter four.
The Truth in the Lie

Picasso is well known for saying, “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand” (as cited in Borofsky, 1923/2003, para. 4). Honest art can reveal truth through depicting lies. Some art is honest precisely because it lies. La Vie offered me truth in a lie.

The first time I saw La Vie the resonance I needed was evidence that I was not alone in feeling emotionally stuck in grief. Witnessing the tangle of hopelessness, pain, and isolation in this painting offered me honest companionship in my pain. It did not matter that Picasso’s specific experiences differed from mine; I resonated with the emotion portrayed in this painting and received a shape for my expression. Picasso’s authentic and vulnerable release through paint gave me permission to be truthful about my thoughts and feelings related to infertility. Viewing this painting enabled my pain to surface. It made it human to hurt; I was no longer alone. Receiving permission for expression was my first step toward release; however, the second time I saw this painting it was the lie that stood out to me more than the truth.

The Lie of La Vie

Look again at La Vie. Do you see release in the facial expressions and postures of these figures? These figures are forever stuck in hopelessness; they
will never be released. “Ideas and emotions will be forever prisoners of his [the artist’s] work” Picasso wrote, “no matter what they do, they will not be able to escape the painting” (Zervos, 1935, p. 174). The figures in La Vie are stuck in postures of pain forever, released by Picasso onto the canvas in poses of desolation. However, by depicting the lie that we must stay forever in our pain, Picasso exposes the truth that the painter and the audience need not be as stagnant as the painted figures.

Did Picasso need to produce a collection of paintings of hopelessness in order to bring him hope? Was it an action of surrender to the truth to put hopelessness and sorrow into visual form? Did the lie of La Vie expose truth to Picasso and lead him toward release as it did for me? It may be that precisely through Picasso’s visual depiction of physically near though emotionally lonely isolated figures, he found the companionship he needed on his journey through grief.

While observing these figures posed in a lie gave me permission to acknowledge the truth of my pain, this painting offered me little guidance for actioning out of my pain. The second time I stood before La Vie I was surprised by the dominant lack of hope in the imagery. While I had needed to start with acknowledging my feelings of hopelessness, this was not the posture in which I
desired to stay. Rather than release me, staying with this imagery of life would tie me to a lie.

**Resonance with Rodin**

Auguste Rodin’s *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant, One of the Burghers of Calais*, met me next in my search for release. This sculpture is about pain, loss and loss of life; it is also about triumph and hope in dire circumstances—triumph and hope that I do not see portrayed in *La Vie*. By representing not only an expression of pain but a moving forward out of pain, this sculpture presents a different approach to truth than I see in Picasso’s painting. Rodin’s sculpture validated my loneliness but it also offered me an invitation of release from my loneliness. *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant* offered me hope.

**Strength Together**

The *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant* was not designed to stand alone; it was designed to be part of a larger work. In the entire sculpture, titled *The Burghers of Calais*, this head connects to a body and the body stands among five additional full figures. According to the fourteenth-century Chronicles of Jean Froissart, these six burghers (wealthy, leading citizens) of the French town of Calais offered themselves as hostages in 1347 to King Edward III of England in exchange for the freedom of their city. Edward III had held Calais captive for
eleven months; this was a starvation-forced surrender. The king agreed to the
burghers’ offer and ordered them to “dress in plain garments, wear nooses
around their necks, and journey to his camp bearing the keys to the city”
(Benedek, 2000, p. 11).

In 1885 a counsel was formed to commission a monument to these six
sacrificialburghers of Calais. Their desire was for a heroic monument in
recognition of greatness, bravery and triumph. The counsel wanted the six
heroes of Calais represented by just one figure—Eustache de Saint-Pierre—
known to have been the first of the group to step up as hostage. In opposition to
these wishes of the counsel, Rodin’s monument proposal displayed all six men,
placed the men in postures of equal status (no special attention given to one
heroic leader) and portrayed these heroes in their most vulnerable moment of
surrender. Rodin chose “to portray the moment in the narrative when the men,
believing they are going to die, leave the city” (Benedek, 2000, p. 21). “Their
faltering steps, despairing gestures, and anguished expressions eloquently
express the inner turmoil of each man struggling in his conscience between fear
of dying and devotion to their cause” (Plaque in Rodin garden, Stanford
University, CA).

Rodin’s depiction of these heroes as vulnerable conflicted with the vision
of the commissioning committee. The committee not only wanted a single heroic
figure, they wanted Eustache de Saint-Pierre portrayed before he disrobed of his fine linens and hung a noose around his neck. As the counsel explains:

This is not the way we envisaged our glorious citizens going to the camp of the King of England. Their defeated postures offended our religion . . . the silhouette of the group leaves much to be desired from the point of view of elegance. (Benedek, 2000, p. 16)

Rodin resisted the pressure he faced from the counsel to depict one heroic figure and persisted with his proposal for six full figures who exhibit desperation and hope simultaneously. The commissioning counsel ultimately accepted Rodin’s refusal to present hope and triumph falsely; the result is a sculpture that resonates with honesty.

Figure 4: The Burghers of Calais. 1889. Auguste Rodin, bronze, photo used with permission, © 2009 Ron Reznick, Retrieved from http://www.digital-images.net/Gallery/Art/NrtnSimon/Bronzes/bronzes.html
In contrast to the sullen mood conveyed by the gathered yet desolate figures in *La Vie*, the figures in *The Burghers of Calais* appear to find strength among one another. This small community of sacrificial citizens, though individually conflicted and ravaged by war and starvation, offer themselves together. Even as I looked into the solitary face of Pierre de Wiessant at the Vancouver Art Gallery, I found the companionship and strength of this community of six citizens gathered together. This expressive face looking back at me invited me to release honest expressions of my pain and loss while simultaneously giving me my first glimpse of hope for achieving freedom from my static position with sorrow.

**Art Without a Pedestal/An Invitation to Conversation**

In addition to considering how to portray the burghers of Calais, Rodin held specific desires concerning how viewers would interact with this sculpture. *The Burghers of Calais* was commissioned for public display in Calais and Rodin desired that the people of this town encounter the burghers eye-to-eye. He resisted the then prevalent tradition of placing sculptures on high pedestals. As stated by Rodin:

I did not want a pedestal for these figures. I wanted them to be placed on, even affixed to, the paving stones of the square in front of the Hôtel de Ville in Calais so that it looked as if they were leaving in order to go to the enemy camp. In this way they would
have been, as it were, mixed with the daily life of the town: passersby would have elbowed them, and they would have felt through this contact the emotion of the living past in their midst . . . (Benedek, 2000, p. 21)

Rodin wanted *The Burghers of Calais* received shoulder-to-shoulder in an intimate encounter, similar to how I met Pierre de Wiessant face-to-face in the Vancouver Art Gallery. Inviting the townspeople to walk among these sculpted figures would increase the ability of the audience to enter into conversation with each figure. Just as Rodin’s figures stand together, he desired that his audience stand together with them and share in their story. This close-up meeting would also increase the potential for experiences of resonance.

Recall that Rodin’s “goal was the creation of figures evocative enough to strike an individual resonance in each viewer” (Bradley & Mills, 2007, p. 51). The resonance Rodin desired to achieve through the placement of *The Burghers of Calais* was a specific gift to the people of Calais, similar to the specificity of Simonova’s gift to her Ukrainian audience. However, just as Simonova’s gift extended far beyond the borders of Ukraine, Rodin’s gift of reciprocity extended far beyond time and place. Honest art knows few boundaries. Art without a pedestal offers a language for expression. Art without a pedestal offers an invitation into conversation. Extending this invitation to reciprocity with art is an act of generosity.
When The Burghers of Calais was first installed in 1895, all six figures stood high on a pedestal encircled by an iron fence, intimate conversation between audience and art hindered. Rodin expressed his disappointment in this decision:

But the commissioning body understood nothing of the desires I expressed. They thought I was mad. . . . Statues without a pedestal! Where had that ever been seen before? There must be a pedestal; there was no way of getting around it. (Benedek, 2000, p. 21)

It was not until The Burghers of Calais was relocated in 1924 that the iron fence was removed and the pedestal was reduced to Rodin’s original specifications.

When we put art on a *pedestal*, although we may look at it, we fail to listen to it and receive it as living. When we enter into a two-way conversation of reciprocity with art, we will recognize art as living and discover language for our own expressions.

**In Conversation with Picasso & Rodin**

The combined honesty of Picasso and Rodin gave me permission to drop my guard and experience sympathetic vibrations with their artistic expressions. Both works gave me courage and brought me farther along on my journey toward release.

Picasso gave me permission to express and experience my pain. The paintings Picasso had done prior to Carlos Casagemas’ suicide “reflected the
vibrantly decadent life he and Casagemas had been leading, with lots of color
and colorful subjects” (Nola, 2008, para. 4). The drastic change in color, subject
matter, and emotions represented in Picasso’s Blue Period paintings reveal the
faithfulness with which Picasso sought out painting as a language for honest
expression and release.

Picasso wrote, “I paint how others write their autobiography. My
canvases, finished or not, are the pages of my diary” (Museu Picasso of
Barcelona, 2008). La Vie, rather than providing answers, suggests a search. The
face of the male figure in the foreground of La Vie is that of Carlos (Picasso’s
friend lost to suicide); however, x-rays have shown that when Picasso first
painted this face he made it a portrait of himself. The use of x-ray has also
revealed additional figures and relationships underneath the image we now see.
When Picasso lost Carlos, did he feel as if he had lost a part of himself? Is that
why he first painted his own face on the man? Picasso considered a painting to
be the sum of destructions, in contrast to the more common understanding of a
painting being the sum of additions. Is this x-ray evidence of destructions a
diary entry of Picasso’s journey toward release?

The first time I saw La Vie I resonated with Picasso’s search for language
and release. La Vie gave me a voice in a time when my grief, confusion and
difficult questions had fallen mute, a time when my story of loss was stuffed deep down, far from release.

In the fall of 2009, I walked among a replica of *The Burghers of Calais* on the Stanford University campus; here each figure stands on a low pedestal just barely rising above the cobble stone of the garden. Satisfying Rodin’s original desire for this sculpture, I bumped elbows with these men as we mingled together, audience and art. I stood among these honest figures. I ducked under their downcast heavy bronze heads in search of the face of Pierre de Wiessant. In this garden, two years after our original encounter, I again discovered a deep sense of resonance with this face.

![Image of Pierre de Wiessant statue at Stanford University](image)

Figure 5: *Pierre de Wiessant. The Burghers of Calais. 1889. Auguste Rodin. bronze, Stanford University, personal photograph, November 2009.*
Conclusion

*La Vie* and *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant* welcomed me into conversation by offering me a shape for my expressions during a time in which I lacked language for my story. What Picasso knew almost one hundred years ago about art is still true for us today—painting is a release of emotion. Art offers a language for expression and a pathway to release and the released self is en route to the prolific self.
Chapter Three: The Fertility of Artistic Expression

When we experience in our depths the exclamation, “Finally!”
  when it seemed we would never move far
  from a place we felt forever stuck,
  we are experiencing release.

Release is the act of letting go and the result of having let go…
  It is not forgetting, moving on in the sense of ignoring pain,
  but moving and actioning into the pain, going there, being there,
  for the span of time that is needed in order to get unglued and unstuck
  from a place we know we cannot stay forever,
                            a place we do not want to stay forever.

Introduction—Stories of Stuck

When I was a young teen while staying at Vancouver’s historic Sylvia
Hotel on a family vacation, my brother and sister and I decided to all three jump
at the same time in the descending hotel elevator. It was my big sister’s idea; I
had never jumped in an elevator before. We jumped, felt the brief sensation of
flight and then our feet hit the floor and the elevator stopped with a thud. When
the man on the emergency intercom asked if we knew why the elevator had
stopped, “Did you jump or something?,” we replied, “No, of course not.” It was
a long time getting that old elevator out of its mid-floor stop. To this day, I’m
afraid to jump in an elevator should a rescue squad have to be called again for
me.
When I was a freshman in university my friend Mike called me on my dorm room phone to ask if I had any nail polish remover. “Yes,” I replied. Then, as curious as the elevator rescue man, I asked, “Why?” “Someone told me it would remove super glue.” He paused. “Well, I was making a couch out of pop cans, been collecting them for a while now, and uh, I’ve super glued one to my hand….” Stuck (and embarrassed)—a story that makes me smile every time. Did I mention I had a crush on this guy? Nail polish remover to the rescue.

One evening when I was nine I got stuck under a pool tarp at the end of swim team practice. I had been swimming my last lap and somehow the tarp was pulled over me with no one noticing. The tarp was too heavy for me to lift to take a breath; so alone, I found a pool edge as quickly as possible. Observing everyone around me going about their usual business as I pulled myself out of the pool and packed up my things to go home confirmed what I had feared—no one had noticed I had been stuck under the tarp.

We all have stories of stuck. Some of our stories have solutions as obvious (though varying in degree of ease) as the stories I have just shared, but not all of our stories of stuck have such a clear path to release. How do we get unstuck when the solution is not as obvious as pressing the red alarm button in the elevator, making a speedy delivery of nail polish remover or swimming to the edge of a pool? How do we get unstuck when we are in places we know we
cannot stay forever, places we do not want to stay forever and yet places from which we see no clear path toward release? How do we action into and out of places of stuck like this?

This was my experience with grieving infertility; I wanted to be unstuck, but that was not enough to unstick me. It took three-and-a-half years for my deep sense of longing for release to be satisfied and, of all things, it was an Arts Education assignment in my masters degree program that finally met me in this story of stuck and welcomed me into release:

Created (alone)  
A sixteen-minute performance (watched)  
Twenty seconds of silence (shared)  
Seven minutes of debriefing (together)  
Finally yielding me Release.

Forming this expression and then performing it with my peers as a generously attentive and present audience was a “finally” experience of artistic expression providing release. Each step of this assignment actioned me into and released me from the grief of infertility, healing and releasing three-and-a-half years of stuck.

“Disclaimer”

If the arts have not changed me then I cannot with genuine conviction, strive to convince you that they can make a difference in your life, so I share with
you this story of stuck and release. I do not share my story to self-indulge or to earn pity; this story is the richest, deepest, most profound evidence I have for my conviction that artistic expression as inquiry is very fertile ground. This is my most reliable research and my best evidence. Art has unstuck me.

This chapter is about me; this chapter is about the fertility of artistic expression confronting a diagnosis of infertility. And this chapter is about us, you and me; this is our story. For I believe, with my professor Celeste Snowber, that, in some mysterious way, “our stories utter each other” (C. Snowber, performance debriefing, July 29, 2008). Something is given to all of us when our stories are shared.

**Stuck**

Early in our marriage my husband had a brief stint with cancer, and test results revealed that we cannot have children together. We were in our late twenties. We had been married for only three years. We had yet to have a serious talk about whether or not we wanted children, much less tried to get pregnant. We learned the answer before deciding our answer, before even asking the question. I was angry. I was stuck.

At first, I did not realize my immobility. Yet as time passed, and I stayed in nearly the same place emotionally, I began to wonder, “How on earth am I going to move from this place? Will I ever move from this place?”
[Note: Each section of indented italic text in this chapter is an excerpt from my bodygraphy performance narrative *Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility.*]

I feel sadness when I think about never experiencing pregnancy  
Never feeling my abdomen expand, life pushing out from the inside  
And watching this little bump grow bigger and bigger  
Feeling my breasts enlarge  
Breastfeeding  
Nourishing a child with the provision of my body  
It’s all such a miracle

Figure 6:  *Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility.* Performance Still 1. 2008. Krista Little.

I had no idea how to get unstuck—nothing I tried seemed to move me very far. I wanted to be unstuck, but that was not enough to unstick me.

**Possibility**

I felt nervous when I signed up for a required course in my Arts Education masters program called *Embodiment and Curriculum Inquiry.* I did not know much about the term “embodiment,” but I knew it had something to do
with the body. It was almost a year after I had been moved closer toward release by resonant encounters with Auguste Rodin’s *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant*, Pablo Picasso’s *La Vie* and an infant’s funeral, yet still the most significant thing going on with my body was feeling the grief of infertility. First words, first steps, baptisms, birthdays were all still difficult to celebrate with my friends who are parents. I was still stuck, static in my emotions, and I wanted this to change.

Taking a class about learning in and through the body, a class that would encourage me to extend my learning beyond head-knowing to body-knowing sounded scary to me. Would this class provide a safe and hospitable place for me to be vulnerable and honest about feeling defeated by the sorrow of infertility? Is what is going on with my body right now going to work its way into the course curriculum? Does “curriculum inquiry” make room for stories this personal? And if it does, was I ready to share my story, and could I envision myself doing so in a classroom? The question remained: Would I ever be released from my position of stuck with infertility?

When trapped in the Sylvia Hotel elevator, I knew the suspense of awaiting rescue would be short lived; however, many years later I did not feel a similar guarantee of release from the inert state of my thoughts and emotions associated with infertility. I had no idea what to expect from this Arts Education course, but I knew it was going to require that I give attention to my body.
The Need for Some Background

Before sharing the assignment that met me in my story of stuck and freed me from immobility, it will be beneficial to consider first some particulars about the course in which I received this assignment: Embodiment and Curriculum Inquiry. I will also introduce the understanding of “inquiry” I encountered in my Arts Education program. Awareness of this background will help you to better understand how personal inquiry encourages the fertility of artistic expression.

Arts Education & Embodiment

In her own words, Celeste Snowber, my embodiment professor, describes herself as “an educator who is passionate about lifewriting, autobiography, narrative, poetry and embodiment” (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, final para.). The practice of “embodiment” entails recognizing “the body as a site for knowledge”—a serious and oft-neglected area of study (Snowber, 2008). The writing exercises in this class, of which we did many, involved listening to our bodies and composing what we perceived; Snowber terms this practice “writing the embodied self into being” (Snowber, 2002, p. 21). She explains, “[T]he dancer, writer, or artist forms the unformed until that which is invisible becomes visible” (Snowber, 2002, p. 25). Her methodology for teaching Embodiment and Curriculum Inquiry involves drawing on “phenomenological curriculum research, narrative inquiry, autobiographical writing and performative inquiry” (Snowber,
Writing and physical movement are the primary actions engaged for inquiry in this course.

**Arts Education & Inquiry**

“Inquiry” is a coming to know as a result of asking a question. In arts-based inquiry, being with both the questions and the answers is important, the process of inquiry no less important than the result. Thus, both art making and a completed artwork can be understood as research and inquiry. Any art form can be engaged as inquiry. Even a novice in a particular art form can produce a powerful work of arts-based inquiry.

Inquiry is a familiar term in Arts Education and is often partnered with various art-related terms in order to specifically describe the research methods used. For example, using the art of drama for inquiry is called “performative inquiry.” Fels and Belliveau (2008) explain in their text *Exploring Curriculum: Performative Inquiry, Role Drama, and Learning,* “The key to performative inquiry is that drama (and other visual and performing arts) offers a valuable venue for inquiry and learning” (Fels & Belliveau, 2008, p. 12). “Performative inquiry brings the personal, the political, and the experiential into curriculum” (p. 44).

Inquiry through embodiment is often paired with performative inquiry. Various forms of artistic inquiry frequently overlap in arts education. I now
understand that my work in *Embodiment and Curriculum Inquiry* was additionally influenced by narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry (Monica Prendergast, 2008), autobiographical inquiry, and, to some degree, a/r/tography (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, Gouzouasis, 2008; Irwin, de Cosson, 2004). These are all “solid avenues of research methodology within arts-based research which connect artistic ways of knowing and rendering with lived reality” (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Celeste” entry, para. 2). In the embodiment course, I finally found an artistic way of “knowing and rendering” to connect with my lived reality of infertility.

**Surprised by Academia**

At its best, inquiry through the arts articulates “the personal which is truly embedded in the universal” (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Celeste” entry, para. 2). “[T]he arts in inquiry allow us to access the crevices of our souls and bring the fullness of our humanity to the process of being, living, knowing, and teaching” (Snowber, 2002, p. 20). Art as inquiry can be deeply personal and simultaneously profoundly communal. The most surprising aspect of my pursuit of an Arts Education masters degree has been the surfacing of personal inquiry within course work.

In the past, I would not have brought especially personal and vulnerable topics into academia, much less discovered this vulnerability to be welcomed by my professors. And yet, my struggle with the grief of infertility emerged in the
introduction and conclusion of the final paper I wrote for my very first course. As foreshadowed by my questions earlier in this chapter, my struggle with infertility also surfaced in my embodiment course. However, when I considered allowing my story of stuck to emerge in this class, I was still ruminating over several questions about vulnerability in the classroom: How could it be that highly personal inquiry would be of universal good to maturing as an artist and an educator? Certainly when we mature, our growth can benefit those whom we serve, but is this journey really appropriate to undergo in the setting of a classroom? I struggled with whether or not I truly believed that “our stories utter each other” (C. Snowber, performance debriefing, July 29, 2008).

Nancy Mairs (1989), essayist, says the gift of autobiography and narrative “invites you into the house of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own” (p. 11). … It is in our own vulnerabilities that we open the space for others to meet their own vulnerabilities and truly do the work of the soul, and more accurately the bodysoul. (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Celeste” entry, para. 2)

To whom is this “gift” of autobiography and narrative given? Isn’t sharing a highly personal arts-based inquiry with an audience selfish?

**A Safe Place**

Creating a welcome place for personal inquiry is an important element of Snowber’s courses which she encourages and models. “...I realize my own
classes have at the heart of them a fragrance of vulnerability” writes Snowber (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, second “Celeste” entry, para. 6). Earlier in this article she writes:

To teach from our vulnerability is to teach with a sense of being absolutely present to the shifts and patterns of our own interior lives. This alone changes the curriculum. This alone makes room for the living curriculum rather than what is prescribed. It goes from prescribed to alive. (second “Celeste” entry, para. 4)

Being welcomed into a living curriculum created a classroom environment that reverberated with hospitality and generosity. In Snowber’s embodiment course, receiving this invitation to “being” cultivated not only presence to one self but also attentiveness to one another. The result of this attentiveness was the development of space in which it was safe to express and probe deep places of being.

The embodiment course was a welcome and safe place to be honest and vulnerable, a place of acceptance and reciprocity. I suppose it helped that I had been in courses with most of my peers for almost one year. There were, however, several students in this class whom I had just met that semester, and I did not feel different about being vulnerable among them.

The mutual acceptance of this class as a welcome place for personal expressions influenced me and many of my peers to choose vulnerable themes for our final projects in this course, themes present to our interior lives. I felt
permission and courage to attend to my struggle with infertility in my final project. Taking this risk stood in stark contrast to my lack of confidence to draw attention to myself as I squeezed out from under the pool tarps alone as a child. Although sharing my story of infertility was a risk of greater weight, it resonated with the risk of potential embarrassment and judgment that my college friend faced when he picked up his phone to call for a nail polish remover rescue.

**Finding a Language**

The final project for the embodiment course was a presentation Snowber refers to as a bodygraphy:

Bodygraphy is a term that I am utilizing which is a combination of autobiographical inquiry, phenomenological curriculum research and arts based educational research methods in order to create an intertextual piece, which expresses the depth of your embodied learning and how it connects to you personally and professionally. (Snowber, 2008)

Snowber’s explanation of the term “bodygraphy” leaves much room for interpretation. The lack of constraints on this assignment along with the hospitality of my peers granted me permission to speak my story of infertility.

My peers and I were given the freedom to achieve our bodygraphies with the art form or forms of our choice. This provision encouraged me to take a risk with my use of art as language; I wanted my bodygraphy to be a performance. Although as a visual artist I had virtually no experience performing on stage, I
suspected approaching the paralysis of my emotions with the material of my body would create room for a more embodied and direct expression than I had previously allowed myself.

**Taking the Risk**

A year-and-a-half before taking the embodiment course I bought three mannequins at a department store closing sale:

*Every artist needs a mannequin or two…*

Although I purchased three mannequins, I knew the one that would be the most important to me was the pregnant torso. When I saw it in the store, tears filled my eyes; I experienced resonance, I admit, a strange response to have to a mannequin.

*The first time I saw you,*

*I paused.*

*When I walked away,*

*Your image in my mind looked back at me not allowing me to forget.*

*“Come back.*

*Don’t miss this opportunity for your heart to be soft,” you called out.*
I invested fifteen dollars in this pregnant mannequin, but in no other way answered the resonance I felt with it until I took the embodiment course.

Selecting the pregnant torso mannequin as a companion for my bodygraphy finally gave her an opportunity to speak to me.

You’ve been in our home for awhile now,  
Not a member of our family,  
although you have certainly contributed in courteous ways.  
You’ve held chips, and salsa, and guacamole  
And caught tossed bottle nipples for points  
    You’re the perfect guest to bring to a baby shower  
You’ve posed  
    to be observed  
    studied and drawn by my students  
    your white surface providing a good study in value  
    you have been kind to their amateur attempts at depiction.  
(pause)  
I have yet to draw you.  
You get attention and inquiry from guests in our home
You haven’t exactly sat around, 
but you haven’t spoken much to me either; 
Time to listen to you not allowed by me yet.

During my bodygraphy I carried on a conversation with the mannequin. I titled my performance *Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility*, enjoying this play on words as it was at a store closing sale that the mannequin and I had first met.

**Amateur Without Apology**

My bodygraphy was an amateur performance. Being “on stage” with my peers as audience for the duration of my performance was certainly out of my comfort zone. Knowing what to do with my body during my presentation did not come naturally. A couple of times during the performance I set the mannequin down on the floor less quietly and gently than fit the mood at the moment and when I picked up the mannequin I did not always choose the most graceful grip.

The sound recording wasn’t perfect. I had given myself a crash course in a computer program that enabled me to prerecord myself reading the narrative I had written so that I could freely interact with the mannequin without having to read or remember lines. I overlapped the reading with a few deliberately selected songs. This was my first use of music in art, a medium I had long
wanted to incorporate into my work. It was intimidating to use the medium of music, but it felt great to dive into this risk.

My inquiry was real and raw. It did not matter that my work was amateur; the performance was honest. My story of stuck was clearly expressed and was received by my classmates, professor and husband (whose attendance at my performance greatly touched my peers and me). While training would have made the choreography more stage-worthy and the sound more professional, it would not have made the expression any more authentic nor the performance any more effective.

In some ways I suspect that my amateur capabilities with this art form (how I performed the bodygraphy) helped me to be less restrained and allowed for greater resonance. *Stuck* is messy; the inability to conceal the evidence of this mess sometimes achieves a strikingly innocent beauty in amateur art. I told my peers and instructor before giving my presentation, “I’m not going to apologize for my work; it’s amateur. I’ve never done this before, but I’m excited about it… and I’m really nervous.”

As the narrative and music played, I moved and posed in inquiry with the mannequin. Some movements and poses were awkward, but most were perfect, vulnerable representations of the *stuck* I needed to expose to this pregnant torso and to my peers.
At one point I laid on the floor adjacent to the mannequin with my hand placed gently on her large belly,

Figure 8: Performance Stills 3 & 4. 2008. Krista Little.

and another time I put my ear to her belly just after the narrative cried out:

*Say something to me.*

Figure 9: Performance Still 5. 2008. Krista Little.
The mannequin torso is close enough to the length of my torso that when I held it up next to me or in front of me it was easy to imagine it as my own torso.

This performance was amateur, but it was not lacking in the language of artistic expression. It was a wonderful reminder that one need not be a professionally trained artist in order to access the fertility of artistic expression. You simply need to choose a language and speak.

When we go into the tender places within ourselves, we break open to the page, where blood is transformed to ink. Here the sinews, tendons, flesh of our flesh are formed in language, which is resonant with bone reality. . . . the embodied self . . . has the capacity to heave, breathe, sigh, contract and release into all the magnificent and painful ways of being human in this world. (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Celeste” entry, para. 1)

Discovering a language that enabled me to risk publicly exposing this tender place within me was precisely what I needed for release.
Bringing the Self to Class

As I prepared my performance one question still lingered, “Is it selfish to ask for a present audience to receive my story of infertility and to enter this place of stuck with me?”

When my peers had been vulnerable during their bodygraphy presentations, I had not resented or questioned the appropriateness of their public vulnerability. The class generously received each story shared. Why then should I fear they would resent or question my vulnerability?

Space had been cultivated in this classroom for vulnerability and, just as when I purchased the three mannequins, I knew I could not miss an opportunity for my heart to be made soft. I wanted to trust the words of Mairs and Snowber, “the gift of autobiography and narrative ‘invites you into the house of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own’ (p. 11)” (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Celeste” entry, para. 2). I requested the presence of my peers for my performance, which was not a short one, and hoped it would not be felt as an imposition on their time.

A Present and Generous Audience

My peers did not disappoint me. They were a present and generous audience for my bodygraphy. As I prepared the stage for my performance, several peers asked if they could assist me in any way; although they did not
know the vulnerability I was about to perform, it felt as if they sensed my anticipation. One peer whom I did not know well filmed my performance on my camera for me, a favor that continues to reap fruit by making it possible for me to easily share my performance with others. I had already arranged for another peer to run sound for me. During the performance the hospitality of my peers continued. Their laughter during the silly, quirky moments of my performance and their sighs and silences during the more sombre moments informed me that they were with me in my story and that this was becoming our story. Together we occupied a space of hospitality.

After my performance, I shared with the class my hesitation about allowing myself to be so vulnerable. Snowber and my peers called this vulnerability “courageous,” not selfish. When art is shared, it “relates individuals to one another intimately” and that is what sharing my story had done (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, fourth “Sean” entry, para. 2).

Curriculum theorist, William Pinar (1988) has written, “Understanding of self is not narcissism; it is a precondition and concomitant condition to the understanding of others” (p. 150). Wholeness of self, or at least the pursuit of this, promotes wholeness of others and this is a perfectly appropriate pursuit to undergo in public. Requesting the presence of an audience for my bodygraphy performance was not a selfish act.
First Dance

You’re just a piece of plastic
Can you meet me here?
In all this pain and questioning
Say something to me
Make it easier for me to celebrate first words, first steps, birthdays…
    with our friends who are parents
Comfort me when my tears pour out because I can’t have what they have
Encourage me to notice
To notice other kinds of births in my life
Encourage me to discover joyful curiosity when I wonder what the future holds
If there’s a norm or a traditional into which couples tend to fall
That won’t be us

After these words were heard, the narrative paused for a few moments to allow music to speak into the space. This was a long narrative and there were only seven lines left to be spoken; it was time for a pause, time for my audience and myself to be still with all that had been said. I lifted the mannequin from the floor and rocked her in my arms like a baby as musician Yael Naim (2008) sang:

Far far there’s this little girl
She was praying for something big to happen to her

Something shifted inside of me as I moved the mannequin to my hip and we swayed side by side:

But if it fades she begs oh lord don’t take it from me
don’t take it she says
I guess I’ll have to give it birth

This was a turning point for me. Here the mannequin and I became friends:

There’s a beautiful mess inside
And it’s everywhere
Just look at yourself now deep inside
Deeper than you ever did

It was during this song that I was finally able to admit my grief and start letting go of what I cannot have. It was during this song that I realized my anticipation of this bodygraphy possibly bringing release was well-founded.

Just before the portion of the song that I included in my bodygraphy, Naim (2008) sings, “Take a deep breath and dive.” This was exactly what I had done in order to create and perform my bodygraphy. I believe that for Yael Naim this diving involved her undergoing the hard work and risk of composing and recording her music in order to share it with the world. Naim’s courage to create was a welcome companion during this first dance.

Painting into Release

Everything must go
Must be let go of
The stereotypes and roles that people expect
of a married thirty-something woman
Everything
Must go
That’s where we first met
And that is where we meet again.

These are the final lines of the narrative. After they are spoken the mannequin and I sit together on the floor one last time while Van Morrison (1991) sings in his gruff, yet poignant voice:
I’ve been walking by the river
I’ve been walking down by the water
...

I’ve been feeling so sad and blue
I’ve been thinking, I’ve been thinking, I’ve been thinking
...
There’s so much suffering, and it’s
Too much confusion, too much, too much confusion in the world

As Morrison (1991) sings and harmonica hums, guitar and piano join in
and I squeeze paint straight from the tube onto the belly and breasts of the
mannequin and smear it around with my fingers, my hands, and a paintbrush.


Red, yellow and blue, primary colors for the painter; the place where we start.

*Take me back, take me back, take me back,*
*Take me way back, take me way back, take me way back*
...
*...help me understand*

I remember my hands shaking while I painted.
…do you remember the time darlin’
*When everything made more sense in the world*
*Oh I remember, I remember*
*When life made more sense* (Morrison, 1991).

Right before I transferred paint from the plastic belly and breasts of the mannequin onto the belly and breasts of my shirt, I felt the anticipation, both my own and that of my audience; somehow we all knew this needed to happen.

![Figure 12: Performance Still 10. 2008. Krista Little.](image)

I also drew directly on my shirt with paint and shared this paint with the mannequin. This back and forth was intentional; in a sense, we both had something to give each other. There was a giving, a receiving and a sharing in this moment. There was reciprocity.
Smearing paint onto the white canvas of my shirt was an embrace of acceptance. There was a suspension of knowing in this moment. Snowber (2002) writes:

It is in that suspension of knowing that one can see something with alertness, as if seeing for the first time. T.S. Eliot has eloquently stated, “And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time” (1944/1972, p.59).

There I was at a department store closing sale, again experiencing resonance with a pregnant mannequin; but this time I allowed the time and attention for resonance to lead into release. This time I allowed my heart to be made soft.

Take me back, take me back, take me back, take me back

... 
Take me back to when the world made more sense (Morrison, 1991).

Second Dance

I was hesitant to conclude my bodygraphy with the U2 song Beautiful Day, afraid it might sound kitsch, too celebratory, too resolved, incongruent with the previous content and mood of my performance. Upbeat resolution seemed too big of a result to expect from my performance, yet every time I practiced my bodygraphy this song came to mind for the conclusion.

As the Van Morrison song faded out and the U2 song was to begin, there was a longer pause than planned and then my pre-recording started to play
again from the beginning. My friend in charge of sound struggled to stop the recording from its repeat cycle and to attend to getting the U2 song to play. I sat still and quietly waited, an opportunity for me to extend hospitality. This “error” of pause and waiting may have additionally prepared the space for a transition of mood.

When the playful pace of the beat began, the painted mannequin and I rose from the ground. I held her in front of my torso and turned to give a front, side and back view as if this large colorfully painted belly were my own:

![Figure 13: Performance Stills 11 & 12. 2008. Krista Little.](image)

*The heart is a bloom*

*Shoots up through the stony ground* (Hewson, 2000).
I lifted her high enough to cover my face for a moment and then reached my arms out full length, holding her at my side, arm’s length away revealing the paint she and I shared as Bono sang:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{You’re out of luck} \\
\text{And the reason that you had to care} \\
\text{The traffic is } \textbf{stuck} \text{ [emphasis mine]} \\
\text{And you’re not moving anywhere (Hewson, 2000).}
\end{align*}
\]

Then, she and I danced. She and I swayed hip to hip with my painted hand on her colorful belly.

![Figure 14: Performance Still 13. 2008. Krista Little.](image)

And just before walking off the stage, we shared one playful twirl as Beautiful Day (Hewson, 2000) proclaimed:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{You thought you’d found a friend} \\
\text{To take you out of this place}
\end{align*}
\]
Someone you could lend a hand
In return for grace

It’s a beautiful day
...
Don’t let it get away

Had I not earlier shared the paint from the mannequin onto myself, and the paint from myself onto the mannequin, this song of resolution would have been an interruption of our shared conversation. These acts of reciprocity made the use of this song honest. It felt terrific for the end of my bodygraphy to be a tender celebration.

The following verse of Beautiful Day (Hewson, 2000) did not play during my bodygraphy, but if I again perform Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility I will include this:

Touch me
Take me to that other place
Teach me
I know I’m not a hopeless case

It was a beautiful day for getting unstuck.

Awakening

The most vulnerable moments of my bodygraphy opened places in me for what David Appelbaum (1995) calls a “stop.” Stops are moments that offer a choice “[e]ither to remain habit-bound or to regain a freedom in one’s approach to an endeavor” (Appelbaum, 1995, p. xi). Release is a regaining of freedom as
well, a freedom we once walked in, even if very long ago. Stops often precede release.

Lynn Fels (Fels & Belliveau, 2008) refers to stops that arise through performance and/or performative inquiry as moments of recognition. She writes that moments of recognition “occur during or upon reflection following a performative inquiry” (p. 12). These are “pregnant [interesting word choice] moments of learning within a curricular context. This learning invites new questions, new perspectives, and new understandings” (p. 12).

As I wrote the narrative and read it aloud for recording, unrestrained tears of clarity finally interrupted my story of stuck. As I rehearsed the performance, deciding on movements and poses and selecting moments for improvisation, I experienced moments of recognition that began to lay a path to release. The generous presence given to me by my classmates during my performance beckoned me into new places of freedom. This process of being in inquiry brought me to new understandings. I was paused and awakened by A First Person Commentary on Infertility. Following this performance, my story of infertility was no longer habit-bound.

**Twenty Seconds of Silence**

After I had swayed off the stage hip to hip with the mannequin and Beautiful Day had faded into silence, the mannequin and I returned to the stage
and I sat on a stage block and propped the mannequin up beside me. There was time set aside for a debriefing discussion to follow each bodygraphy, time for artist and audience to reflect on their experience of the inquiry shared. So, there I sat, wet paint on my shirt and hands, paused... for twenty seconds of silence. No one spoke. No one applauded. Everyone simply sat and waited.

What exactly we were waiting for was never spoken. However, those twenty seconds of silence cemented in me a newly gained identity, a newly released self. Those twenty seconds of silence *shared together* were as crucial to my release as the creation of my bodygraphy, the sharing of the sixteen-minute performance, and the seven minutes of debriefing discussion that followed. I was finally released. And then, there was applause; a shared celebration.

**In Conclusion**

The grief of infertility will always be part of my story, but I am no longer paused in this scene of my life narrative. Artistic expression of self and grief has finally given me a means with which to approach, address, share and embody infertility. Art as inquiry *actioned* me into release.

In my bodygraphy I found language to express my story of stuck through writing, music, movement, paint and a generously present audience. I experienced the untangling and unravelling of my expressions into form. By
doing this I discovered something I’ve long believed the arts have to offer—fertility. Peter London writes:

The purpose of making art is seen as the creation of a preferred self rather than an inherited self… The overarching conception of art and its purposes posited herein is that what we are and what we were is not yet all that we might become and that the creative process is a powerful vehicle to probe what may lie ahead. (London, 1989, pp. xiv-xv)

A couple of months after performing my bodygraphy I attended a baby baptism. I sat in a church pew near the front and watched as my friends, a couple who had long desired to be parents, celebrated this significant moment with their young son. And I smiled.


“The discipline of creation, be it to paint, compose, write, is an effort towards wholeness.

(L’Engle, 1980, p. 70)
Bodygraphy Narrative as Performed

Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility

You’ve been in our home for awhile now,
Not a member of our family,
although you have certainly contributed in courteous ways.
You’ve held chips, and salsa, and guacamole
And caught tossed bottle nipples for points
   You’re the perfect guest to bring to a baby shower
You’ve posed
to be observed
studied and drawn by my students
your white surface providing a good study in value
   you have been kind to their amateur attempts at depiction.
   (pause)
I have yet to draw you.
You get attention and inquiry from guests in our home
You haven’t exactly sat around, but you haven’t spoken much to me either;
Time to listen to you not allowed by me yet
“Will you really use this for your art, Krista, or will it just sit around?”

The first time I saw you,

I paused.

When I walked away,
Your image in my mind looked back at me not allowing me to forget.
“Come back. Don’t miss this opportunity for your heart to be soft,” you called out.
How did you know it was me that needed to take you home,
   not someone else eagerly wading through the assortment of store closing goods?
Did you feel resonance with me?
I followed my husband through the disarray of this everything must go
I pretended I hadn’t noticed you or at least that you’d had nothing to say to me.
Was there anything of interest to either of us here?
Shirts for two dollars
Binders emptied of employee manuals and inventory statements.
I spotted two more mannequins yet to be snatched up
  a set of legs and a far too thin female torso.
    Every artist needs a mannequin or two…

I had made up my mind.
Peter chose a two-dollar shirt.
I chose you.

Explaining in the store wasn’t going to happen
    I knew I couldn’t vocalize all that I was thinking without releasing tears
    Tears too personal for this cold consumer carpet to catch.
I just told Peter I wanted to purchase you.
I think you were fifteen dollars,
  he couldn’t argue that was beyond our means.
“Will you really use it for your art, Krista, or will it just sit around?”
He is sensible and he knows my good intentions often don’t make it to fruition.
“I don’t know. But I want it. I think I need to buy this.
It’s important. I can’t explain it right now.”
I held back the tears, which I could explain later,
  he didn’t know his questioning hurt me.

I thanked him for trusting me as we exited the store
Carrying two torsos
  and a set of lady-length legs with preadolescent hips and a small tight ass
    impossible for a female older than ten to achieve.
I bet you envied that ass.

We walked to our car
    Light rain and heavy tears on my face
Then (pause) Peter understood how important you were to me
He’s always been good at hearing my tears
You with your large belly, you listened in
Your time to speak more to me would come later, I hoped

(longer pause)
I think I’m okay with not having children
On this subject my thoughts and feelings constantly collide
Maybe the pain is more about a desire to fit in
Is this what it’s like to be a single parent?
Having one and not the other?

I’ve had some company on this quest for resolution, conclusion, acceptance
For us it was a definitive no
For my sister and her husband it was four years of trying
Infertility, something she and I shared
She’s pregnant now
IVF is a grueling process.
My joy for them is great
So is my fear of losing our closeness, our commonality
Will I still fit into her life?

An early miscarriage
She told me today
They will try again in a month
The four years of trying wearily drags on

I’ve never really felt like I fit in,
But, has anyone?
Really?
Do I fit into the lives of our friends with children?
Their schedules don’t fit in with our idea of a Saturday excursion.
Do we have more in common with younger couples?
Or are they just more available?
Singles or older couples, kids grown and long gone from the house,
Are they more like us?

Fitting in, finding our place;
   Actually that sounds pretty boring…
So, why do I long so much for that?
It’s the human condition I guess
   We all long to fit in
   To share in common
And none of us thinks we’ve achieved it
Well, we don’t, do we?
What is this into which we long to fit anyway?
If there is nothing really there to fit into…

You are waiting for me still, aren’t you?

I feel sadness when I think about never experiencing pregnancy
Never feeling my abdomen expand, life pushing out from the inside
And watching this little bump grow bigger and bigger
Feeling my breasts enlarge
Breastfeeding
Nourishing a child with the provision of my body
It’s all such a miracle

Being a parent
How would our child reflect part of Peter and part of me?
Would we have enjoyed being grandparents?
What would our child look like or grow up to be and to do?
“You two would have such beautiful children,”
My mentor’s words spoke long, long before we knew this would not be an option for us.
She meant no harm.

But it’s the question everyone assumes permission to ask:
Neighbors, relatives, the lady at the bus stop, my students, people at church,
my dentist while my mouth is pried open and drooling
We at least have learned from this to ask questions less lightly

It is as if we have been given more time and more flexibility
Isn’t that what everyone else wants?
Maybe I should brag about this
The next time I’m asked if I have children…
You’re just a piece of plastic
Can you meet me here?
In all this pain and questioning
Say something to me
Make it easier for me to celebrate first words, first steps, birthdays…
    with our friends who are parents
Comfort me when my tears pour out because I can’t have what they have
Encourage me to notice
To notice other kinds of births in my life
Encourage me to discover joyful curiosity when I wonder what the future holds
If there’s a norm or a traditional into which couples tend to fall
That won’t be us

Everything must go
Must be let go of
The stereotypes and roles that people expect of a married thirty-something woman
Everything
Must go
That’s where we first met
And that is where we meet again.

[Contact the author to view the first performance of *Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility.*]
An Opening Vignette to Chapter Four: Unseen

Unseen

We were assigned in class to write a loss of innocence narrative, a true story from our lives. The reality of nearly drowning had slipped deep into my memory; I did not realize, until I began to write, that my experience of nearly drowning was a defining moment of lost innocence.

Now an adult, I had never addressed the frightening truth of the story—when I was nine years old I nearly drowned. I remembered this incident as one reconstructs a recurring dream, unreal yet still haunting, until I wrote it down:

b r o k en text like b r o k en breath,
    a gasping narrative.
        appearances of disconnect,
            dream-like.
    a story of almost drowning.
    (a story of) Rescuing oneself.

When I was nine years old a pool tarp was accidently pulled over me at the end of a swim practice. I nearly drowned, but nobody noticed. I rescued myself, and I told no one what had happened.
Unseen

Smooth glide... Abrupt stop. My head hits the pool tarp with a thud. Rough tarp presses was slick water, textured-heavy-blue, all I can access above. No air here. Pool lights on, still; minimal light fights to get to me through tarp edges.

“It’s so eerie,”
Dad often comments when he picks me up from evening practice, “I can hear water splashes and voices, but I can’t see anything through that fog.”
A weatherman always impressed by the mysteries of nature.

Dad liked to watch me swim, sometimes gave well intentioned tips, although he wasn’t a swimmer himself.
He liked to watch me swim and cheer me on during races.
In high school, I was tempted to be embarrassed him sitting alone on the cold bleachers watching the team practice Secretly, I was glad to be noticed.

I’d been swimming breaststroke, deep enough to be hidden, down long enough for tarp to be pulled over me.
Nine years old, nine feet of water below, no pool edge in sight.

Tonight the tarps compressed the mist, preventing rising warmth of breath from colliding crisp evening air.
The team packed up to go home to warm dinners, Leaving without me swim practice over.
Inside - heart wild,
Outside – ordinary (I know I felt embarrassed)
I walked into the locker room, packed up my things,
and walked out to the parking lot to find the patiently waiting minivan,
my carpool ride home.

I don’t remember if I ever told my parents
about the night I was tucked in with the pool.
Laying in bed that night,
weight of covers heavy on me.

No one had noticed
Me pulling myself out of the water,
tight between side of pool and rough edge of tarp,
heart pounding,
breathless,
Audienceed only by cold empty bleachers
Alone
Unseen.

“There is an art to watching and being watched,
and that is one of the few arts on which all human living depends.
If we are unwatched we diminish, and we cannot be entirely as we wish to be.
If we never stop to watch, we will know only how it feels to be us,
never how it might feel to be another.
Watched too much, or in the wrong way, we become frightened.
Watching too much, we lose the capacity for action in our own lives.
Watching well, together, and being watched well, with limits on both sides,
we grow, and grow together.”

(Woodruff, 2008, p. 10)
Chapter Four: From Language to Conversation—
Artistic Expression as a Two-Way Offering

Introduction

“Healing, like wounding, takes place on a social stage” (Harrison, 2009, Performative Identity, para. 4). Performing Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility for an audience awakened me to the depth of truth within this statement. The social stage had been one missing piece for my release from the grief of infertility. Finding an artistic form for expressing my story had been the other missing piece. While the artistic form of a bodygraphy performance gave me the voice and language I knew I needed and had been lacking for so long, the audience I had in my peers turned this artistic expression into a shared conversation—a necessary pathway for my release.

Prior to my performance, I did not realize that in order to achieve release I needed not only language for expression, but also an opportunity to have others join me in conversation with this language. I needed an audience with whom to share my story. Many times I had been the one watching art, and by doing so I had been moved closer toward release through experiencing moments of
resonance; but I had yet to be the one watched, the one with whom others could resonate.

It is common for people to talk and write about the gift an artist gives to an audience by sharing one’s art; I call this gift an offering. In previous chapters you have read about some of my experiences of receiving such an offering from Picasso, Rodin, the sand animation artist Kseniya Simonova, and even from attending two ceremonies, a funeral and a baptism (Paul Woodruff, author of *The Necessity of Theater* [2008], would call these ceremonies types of theater.). It is, however, uncommon for people to talk and write about the offering an audience gives to an artist. There is a two-way offering occurring between artist and audience, and I am not referring to a goods and cash exchange.

As a result of performing *A First Person Commentary on Infertility*, I have experienced the offering of being given audience. I have learned from my performance that giving an artist an actively present and attentive audience is one of the most generous, and often most transformative, of offerings that one can give. The need to watch well and be watched well is a core human need, and it is also a component of the transformative power of artistic expression as release.
We Need to Watch & be Watched Well

The need to watch and be watched well is a core human need. Recall Margery Williams’ (1975) well-loved story *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Having all his whiskers loved off, his spots faded from hugs, and the pink from his nose worn from an abundance of little boy kisses is what made this sawdust-stuffed rabbit “real.” The velveteen rabbit is made real by being given audience by the boy, but also by his own giving of audience to the boy.

The child in this story loves the stuffed rabbit not only for himself to be seen through the doll’s boot-button eyes, but for those button eyes to be seen by him. The child’s imagination captures the truth that both the child and the doll (who is very much alive, to the child) need to be seen by each other. And while the close relationship between child and doll does not last into adulthood, the need to see and be seen does not diminish as we grow into adults. Not only from the perspective of a stuffed animal, but also from a human perspective, we resonate with this need to be made “real” by being seen. As the wise Skin Horse in the story explains, real is “‘a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real’ ” (Williams, 1975, p. 17).

We identify in a similar way with the boy and the tree in Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* (1964). We know that when the boy in this story receives what
the tree offers him, his receiving is also a giving to the tree; their relationship is more reciprocal than it appears. The tree is only sad from giving once, and it is because the boy has been far away from her for a long time; when she gives him her trunk for building a boat, she knows he will be far away again for a long, long time. The tree is sad because while the boy is gone she can neither give nor receive audience.

We identify with the stuffed rabbit and the generous tree, not only when we hear these stories read as children, but also when we read them again as adults. In both of these “children’s” stories, whether we are children or adults, it is easy for us to identify with the importance of the watching and being watched that is happening. The need to watch and be watched well as a core human need is captured successfully by the brilliance of these two “children’s” book authors.

An Audience Made

The 2000 film Cast Away (Hanks, Rapke, Starkey, & Zemeckis) demonstrates how important it is to give and receive audience. After washing ashore as the lone survivor of a FedEx plane crash, Chuck Noland, the main character in this film played by Tom Hanks, finds himself alone on an isolated island. Initially, Noland is without audience; aside from his own presence, this island is uninhabited. After a short time however, he creates audience for himself.
For several days after being rescued from death by the island, FedEx packages released from Noland’s plane wash up onto the sandy shore. Noland opens all but one of these packages, and attempts to make use of their apparently useless contents, one of which is a Wilson volleyball. Not long after these packages wash up on shore, in a surge of anger after an injury to his hand during one of many failed attempts to make fire, Noland palms this volleyball and thrusts it away. Later, still without fire, Noland observes the blood stain he has left on the volleyball and uses sweat from his forehead to erase and tenderly create (or reveal) a face in the stain. Noland names his created companion Wilson.

During his first of many conversations with Wilson, Noland finally succeeds at making fire—although it is not stated, this immediately signifies to Noland, as well as to film viewers, that this relationship is a good omen, a promise of, or at least hope for, survival. As film viewers we understand that this created audience not only moves the film along more smoothly by introducing the possibility of dialogue, it also reflects our own desire for Noland to not be cast away alone.

Noland now has companionship, someone with whom to share the story of his present life. While a salvaged photo of his girlfriend Kelly provides Noland with a link to his past and a hope for his return to society, it is Wilson
alone who provides the attentive presence Noland needs during his time on the island. Wilson alone offers Noland a face looking back at him in the present, and this ability to be witnessed in the present is crucial for Noland’s survival.

**Resonance, Again**

It is not necessary for the dialogue in *Cast Away* to explicitly state Noland’s need to be seen; we understand and resonate with this need just as easily as we identify with the needs of the velveteen rabbit and the generous giving tree. We are likely surprised by how easily we accept and grow attached to a volleyball, understanding Wilson as Noland’s closest companion and as Tom Hanks’ loyal supporting role, but this does not prevent us from accepting their relationship. We never think Noland is crazy for talking to Wilson. In fact, it would not take much for us to imagine how likely we would be to perform in a similar way given Noland’s circumstances.

Keep in mind that in film we are not only to consider what the actors perform, but also what is given to them to perform by the writers and directors. Consider not only the film as a fictional story, but as a story that may offer us insight into reality. When we identify with the actions of characters within a film, it is because the writers and directors have effectively identified something true about us, or at least something we believe to be true or deeply value. Our acceptance of and attachment to Wilson says something about *us*, and when the
time comes for Wilson and Noland to part ways many of us will feel Noland’s
desperation as our own. In this moment of parting is a moment of resonance;
here we will recognize something true about ourselves—our own deep human
need for relationship. In *Cast Away*, the art form of film gives us language for
expressing, or realizing, our need for conversation.

**From Language to Conversation**

Recall from chapter two my mention of the familiar reference to art as a
language. Art, like language, speaks. Art gives us a voice and a vocabulary for
expression. It makes visible and audible that which, among other things, we had
otherwise failed to find a way to express.

But what good is language if it is only spoken, never heard? What good is
language if it is never received by some sort of audience? What good is language
if it is not involved in conversation? Sometimes we realize better what it is that
we have to express when we are engaged by another person within conversation.
Language and art involve a reciprocity that calls for actively engaged speaking
*and* listening. Language, like art, is most valuable (and fertile) when it is a two-
way offering.
**Sculpting, A Metaphor for Conversation**

We can easily recognize the reciprocity of conversation in Noland’s relationship with Wilson. Their relationship reminds me of the way a textbook in my undergraduate Communications course used the term “sculpting”:

The crucial attitude behind sculpting is a commitment to the cooperative constructing and shaping of meanings. …[T]he meanings that count between people are not just the ones inside somebody’s head but the ones that are constructed in conversations. (Stewart, 1993, p. 214)

Sculpting is what Chuck Noland does with Wilson. In conversation with Wilson, he develops his thoughts and even achieves new ideas as a result of Wilson’s inaudible suggestions. Although Wilson does not audibly speak, he and Noland are able to construct shared understandings during their conversations.

In a similar way, the artist often experiences a conversation of cooperative understandings with her art medium while she paints a composition, writes a poem, rehearses a theater performance, composes a song. “[T]he page which listens to me starts to talk as soon as it is full,” curriculum theorist and philosopher Jacques Daignault writes of autobiographical writing (2005, para. 5). Art-making, like “sculpting,” is a two-way conversation of meaning-making. When the artist creates she is carrying on a reciprocal conversation with her medium, and when the work is “completed” this conversation continues.
When the artist shares her work with an audience, another dialogue begins, and both artist and audience must choose how active to be in this discussion. The audience may talk directly to the artist or converse with the artwork itself. John Drury (1999) explains that looking at paintings “entails a contemplative waiting upon them which puts us alongside those who painted and viewed them so devoutly” (p. xiii). Henri Nouwen’s entire book The Return of the Prodigal Son (1992) is a wonderful record of a long conversation with a single painting. Devoting time to being with Rembrandt’s painting Return of the Prodigal Son, moved Nouwen from the position of bystander to participant (pp. 12-14). By learning to recognize himself in each figure of the painting, Nouwen not only observed the embracing figures in the imagery, he received this embrace for himself and learned to offer it to others. “The Dutch master [Rembrandt] . . . brought me into touch with the deepest longings of my heart” writes Nouwen (p. 135). Viewing art well is an active engagement of reciprocity, not a passive receiving.

As cited earlier, Pablo Picasso clearly understood that sculpting occurs during the process of painting when he wrote, “The painting is not thought out and established in advance; while we do it, it follows the movement of thought” (Zervos, 1935, p. 173). Picasso additionally understood the invaluable offering audience gives to a work of art and thus to the artist:
Once finished, it [the painting] changes even more, according to the state of the one who looks at it. A painting lives its life like a living thing, subjected to the changes that daily life imposes on us. This is natural because a painting lives only through the person who looks at it. (Zervos, 1935, pp. 173-174)

Art lives through the looking of audience. Looking at a painting well involves sculpting; it is a conversational engagement. Sculpting is co-creating. Looking at a painting, or any other art, well is a two-way offering. Even when a work of art is in the physical sense finished, the conversations that emerge with and around it, in a very real sense, involve a further creation, or sculpting, of the work. When a work of art is viewed well, meaning-making can occur for the audience, the artist, and even the art. (That is, if we can bring ourselves to embrace art not as inanimate, but as living, just as we have embraced Wilson, the velveteen rabbit and the giving tree.)

How superb it is that those in the discipline of Communications have looked to art terminology in search of a metaphor for explaining the reciprocity of what these textbook authors call dialogic listening:

With this understanding [of sculpting] you will be willing to sit down at the potter’s wheel (focus), throw your clay on the wheel, and encourage the other person to add clay, too. Then you need to be willing to get your hands dirty, to participate in the cooperative process of molding meanings together. (Stewart, 1993, p. 214)

Because sculpting occurs even after a work of art is completed, artists need not physically form wet clay with another or apply paint onto a canvas in tandem in
order to participate in molding meanings together. The metaphor of sitting together at a potter’s wheel is a helpful one for illustrating the shared activity required of sculpting. Although the “clay” which an audience brings to sculpt with artist and art is not a physically malleable mud, it is definitely an active presence that is very much tangible.

**Sculpting is Not Synonymous with Agreeing**

It may be important to note here that it is not necessary for those sculpting together to agree. The artist, for example, can intend a meaning for a painting with which the audience disagrees and yet is still able to receive well. In the same way, an artist can openly receive and even invite a variety of interpretations of her work from an audience and enjoy this shared conversation as sculpting.

When the audience and artist are active in sculpting, they engage in a back and forth exchange, both receive what is given and reciprocate the offering. Reciprocity does not mean an equal giving and receiving on both ends. Within conversation, that which we give and receive differs and the meaning-making we achieve will often differ as well. We need not come to the same conclusions at the end of our conversation in order to experience the satisfaction of sculpting. For an artist and audience to be truly attentive and present in sculpting, a spirit of cooperation and generosity is essential; agreement, however, is not essential.
Sculpting & Release

Because sculpting brings us to new understandings, it is able to bring us to release. Remember, release involves gaining more or new insight and coming to a fresh understanding and acceptance of the way things have been and the way things are. Release is both the process involved in coming to a new understanding and the result of accepting this new understanding. The result of accepting a new understanding of one’s self is a new lived identity which Peter London (1989) would call “the creation of a preferred self rather than an inherited self” (p. xiv). Stepping into a new understanding will influence one’s becoming.

Artistic expression as release helps us to understand ourselves better than we could have alone, especially when engaged in conversation by a generously attentive and present audience. The artist at work, Noland and Wilson sharing in conversation, and an audience who is attentive to an artist and her creation all understand sculpting from this perspective:

Sometimes I feel that our talk helps me understand myself better than I could have alone. At other times we produce something that transcends anything either of us could have conceived of separately. That’s because the figure we sculpt is not mine or yours, but ours, the outcome of both our active shapings. (Stewart, 1993, p. 213)
This description of sculpting can be used to describe the release an artist may experience with the presence of a generously attentive audience. Release, like sculpting, is not acquired alone. At times discovering a language for expression is sufficient companionship for release, yet more often, especially in the times we find ourselves relentlessly stuck, we will need to partner our discovery of language for expression with the companionship of an audience.

**The Companionship of Audience**

Sculpting requires active reciprocity, yet the only activity Wilson performs is that which is ascribed to him by Noland. Their conversations achieve nothing for Wilson, still ultimately an inanimate object, a mere volleyball. This of course is where their relationship shows its limits – Wilson can only be whatever Noland creates him to be. There is still the reciprocity of companionship here, but it has limits.

The relationship between artist and artwork has similar limitations, particularly when a work of art is approached with the hope of achieving a greater discovery of self. The act of sharing one’s art with an audience is often able to move the artist to deeper places of discovery and release than the forming of the work can accomplish alone.

The relational limits between artist and artwork fantastically illustrate our need for companionship with other humans—Noland, for example, was not
forever satisfied with Wilson as his lone conversation partner. Just as
performing *A First Person Commentary on Infertility* with and for the pregnant
mannequin alone would not have satisfied my need for expression and release,
so Noland, even with the created companionship of Wilson, still desired to
escape the island and re-enter civilization.

*An Example of the Need for Audience
for Artistic Expression as Release*

Richard Harrison, a registered psychologist and sessional instructor in the
Counseling Psychology program at the University of British Columbia, has
written about his experience of transformation through audience presence in a
2009 issue of *Educational Insights*, an on-line journal of the Centre for Cross-
Faculty Inquiry in Education at UBC. In this article Harrison (2009) discusses a
“video diary” he made that centers on his identity in relation to the death of his
mother to hepatitis when he was two-and-a-half years old. His video diary is
titled *the new room/ruth means sorrow* [sic] (His mother’s name is Ruth.). Creating
this video and sharing it with an audience was “a conscious effort to revise my
relationship to loss,” writes Harrison (2009, Introduction, para. 2). Through the
creation and sharing of his video diary he explores the strong presence that the
absence of his mother has been in his life.
This entire issue of *Educational Insights* is dedicated to what the editors have chosen to call “performing repair.” “A focus on the performativity of repair,” explains Mary Bryson (2009), director of CCFI, “suggests that one cannot take repair for granted—that it is enacted” (para. 8). As explained by the editorial staff of *Educational Insights*:

Repair is about the recovery of the self; it is beyond coping, surviving but returning to living more fully again. . . . Humans are capable of repair psychologically, emotionally and relationally many times over the lifespan. As writers, academics, researchers and therapists we [the journal editors] are inspired with the power of the human ability to heal or repair the self. (Buchanan, Westwood, & Harrison, 2009, para. 2)

Harrison (2009) believes that the enacting of this repair and the recovery of self cannot occur without the presence of an audience:

…[P]eople do not enact their lives in isolation... Being witnessed is at the heart of being human. It is in the eyes of an/other that human identity unfolds (Winnicott, 1965, 1971). This is true for adults as well as infants. Being seen fosters self-perception. My actions, my doings-in-relationship, affect how I am seen and consequently how I come to know myself. When my actions are witnessed, received, held and reflected in the eyes of another being, I too am being. I become. (Performative Identity, para. 3)

Apparently the wise Skin Horse in *The Velveteen Rabbit* got it right—being witnessed is at the heart of becoming “real” (Williams, 1975, p. 17).

While Harrison was able to use the art form of video diary to discover language for expressing the loss of his mother, he knew he needed to share this
expression with others in order to better become (or come to know) his newly repaired self. Harrison (2009) explains that he created his video diary “with the intention of performing and thereby reinforcing” what he refers to as “a reparative identity claim” (Introduction, para. 2). Performing in the presence of an audience can be reinforcing of self repair. Harrison explains and supports well his claims about the human need to be witnessed:

White & Epston (1990), Jerome Bruner (1990), and others have suggested that identity is storied and performed on a social stage. Retelling a preferred account of one’s identity story before a new audience can be a powerful, generative experience that yields repair. The experience of being witnessed in the performance of a reparative identity claim can reinforce the potency of a preferred identity position and engender future such performances in new social arenas. (Introduction, para. 1)

Harrison further explains:

Purposeful witnessing communities such as those constellated around definitional ceremonies allow the person whose life is at the centre of the identity performance to enact and thereby reclaim a preferred account of their life story (White & Epston, 1990). (Performative Identity, para. 4)

A definitional ceremony requires the presence of “purposeful witnesses,” a presence which I received from my peers, professor and husband during my embodiment performance. I now understand this attentive and generous presence was crucial for my experience of release from the grief of infertility; my bodygraphy performance was indeed an identity performance and a definitional
ceremony. Publicly enacting an artistic expression of release can reinforce the potency of the release gained.

**Who is this Audience?**

Harrison (2009) has written:

Following Winnicott (1965, 1971), Bruner (1990), White and Epston (1990), and Reissman (1993), I have come to recognize that the act of being a self, the performance of identity, always occurs in a social arena. . . . [P]eople can become agents and authors of their own reparative performances of identity. However, these performances of repair cannot be enacted alone. Any act of change or repair requires audience. (Performative Identity, para. 5)

The essence of this well-supported statement rings true to me, and I resonate greatly with Harrison’s article. However, “*any* [emphasis mine] act of change or repair requires audience”? “The act of being a self . . . *always* [emphasis mine] occurs in a social arena” (Harrison, 2009, Performative Identity, para. 5)?

If by “audience,” Harrison means to indicate that there must always be other people present in order for repair to occur, then Harrison and I disagree. He has made absolute a general principle. For example, as established earlier in this chapter, art in itself can perform audience. Although there were no people offering me audience at the Vancouver Art Gallery, I was in no way *alone* in the presence of Picasso’s *La Vie* and Rodin’s *Heroic Head of Pierre de Wiessant*. These works of art provided me a *social arena* for receiving repair. Works of art provide
us with audience while we create them, and these same works, as well as art made by others, offer us a face looking back at us, an audience. Although an audience of people is often key in the process of performative repair, it is not required for all acts of change or repair. Audience comes in many forms.

**Requesting Audience**

Sharing our stories with one another is one common way we acquire audience for ourselves. Our identity is, as Harrison (2009) writes, “storied” as well as “performed on a social stage” (Introduction, para. 1). The author bell hooks [sic] (1999) understands the importance of our identity as storied and shared:

[T]he longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. (p. 84)

Storytelling can preserve, as well as propel forward and uncover, our life narratives.

I recently visited an elderly friend in the hospital and was surprised how quickly he skimmed over why he was in the emergency room, only to share in great detail during the remainder of our visit his most cherished life stories—how he had come to meet his wife, be stationed in British Columbia rather than being sent to the frontlines during World War II, and discover the gift of
community in a church he still loves. As this elderly man told his life stories, his impersonal hospital bed became his pulpit. By leading me into his rich life stories, he dissolved the hospital setting and instead solidified images of his preferred self in my memory. His greatest concern was not to preserve his body, it was to preserve his stories, and he did this from a hospital bed, a place we often fail to recognize as a likely stage for the art of storytelling.

Our stories are not always this easily shared. In order to share our stories we need a vehicle for expression as well as a stage on which to offer our expressions to an audience. Sometimes finding a stage from which to share our stories and an audience with whom to share our stories is a larger challenge than discovering a vehicle for composing our stories. Making spaces for an expression of visual art, an art form without a natural "stage" or formally assembled audience, can be especially challenging.

A friend of mine who is a retired teacher recently shared a story with me about a past student of hers for whom she found a way to create such a stage for expression. This student was restless in class and often sought attention in disruptive ways. "It was a Grade one class of lively, happy children and coming to school was a delightful experience," my friend wrote in a letter to me. "[T]here were no kindergarten classes in those days so the children took time to get adjusted to each other" (O. McBay, personal communication, September 2010).
One particular student was having a difficult time adjusting. “Her behaviour in the classroom became a problem and I could see the other children were avoiding her.” So she kept this little girl after class one day:

I said that I could tell she liked to use the easel so I asked her to come a little early in the morning so she could make a picture on the easel and then tell us about it. It was interesting [the] next morning to see her looking happy as she came a little early and made her picture—with dark crayons.

(My friend points out earlier in her letter that the girl’s “favourite colours were the darkest ones.”)

This student “found it difficult to talk about her picture but she was obviously delighted to be able to do something special.” The girl behaved well in class all day every time she came early to do a drawing and share it with her peers. And over time she also began to choose brighter colored crayons for her drawings.

This retired teacher is in her eighties and she still tells the story of how drawing and sharing drawings changed one of her students. “How pleased I was to see the change in colour—and the change in her.” This wise teacher offered one little girl not only a medium of artistic expression but also a stage and an audience with whom to share her art. Through sharing her art on a classroom stage she shared herself, and as a result, transformation occurred in this student, her peers and her attentive teacher. Watching art well is watching
the artist well. Providing this little girl with a safe place to share vulnerably her identity through her art gave her a setting for receiving attention well and thus released her from some of her restlessness in class.

When paired with the presence of an attentive audience, artistic expression offers effective access to making our stories shared. Offering the presence of audience is a powerful force often necessary for transformation and release. In his book *Painting the Word* John Drury (1999) writes that engaging with visual art “can be a way of learning the ropes of community” (p. 36). When a stage is made for sharing one’s stories, transformation of self is given room to occur. Being given a stage for sharing her art welcomed this child’s preferred identity into community with her peers and teacher. Space for release through the sharing of life stories is *made* by the presence of a hospitable audience.

**Audiences Sometimes Fail**

It is important to acknowledge here that audiences do not always watch well. Audiences are not always attentive, generous or present. We all know the disappointment of realizing mid-story that no one is listening. The presence of a social stage does not guarantee reciprocity. How often, for example, do we spend more time in an art gallery reading the plaques adjacent to paintings, than we spend actually looking at the art?
When a space is made for sharing an artistic expression, the audience is given a choice of how to receive what the artist offers. The Theatre of the Oppressed theorist, Augusto Boal, says, “The aesthetic space thus comes into being because the combined attention of a whole audience converges upon it” (as cited in Prendergast, 2008, p. 42). If the audience does not choose to give generous attention to the art and artist on the stage, then the provision of the stage is without effect.

Without the reciprocity of a two-way offering of active engagement, release through artistic expression is unlikely to emerge. This reciprocity does not need to be perfect, and it may never be, but it does need to be strived for by the artist and at least a significant portion of the audience in order for a shared space to emerge.

**Considering Reciprocity in the Classroom**

To help us better understand the power an audience has to impact an artist and vice versa, consider the classroom as providing a sort of stage for the teacher as well as for the students. Consider that both the teacher and students perform the role of audience. Those of us who are teachers know that without the reciprocity of our students even the best lesson plans fail. This is one reason why the same lesson taught more than once can be a great success the first time and the next time fall short.
I have six years of teaching experience and have taught a few groups of students with whom I struggled weekly to find a way to achieve reciprocity. Gratefully, this has been an infrequent struggle; however, these challenging groups of students have been a very real reminder that a group gathered does not guarantee an environment ready for conversation. The space for learning, just like a space for artistic expression as release, is made by the presence of active engagement by all.

The classroom situation can also fail on the part of the teacher. Paul Woodruff writes about the teacher who spends the entire class time making notes on the board and lecturing with his back to his students. He writes of this teacher:

No one has told him that he should have any purpose in the classroom beyond making information available to the students. . . . No one has told him that he might actually engage the students on his subject through a mutual encounter that would awaken their minds to the wonders of the new science. No one has told him that when he enters that space and the students gather around him in a semicircle, he could be a storyteller, and they could be captivated. (Woodruff, 2008, pp. 5-6)

By failing to invite reciprocity into his classroom, this teacher has failed to make himself worth watching.

Woodruff recognizes the similarities that the classroom has to theater. As a “bare beginnings” definition Woodruff (2008) explains, “Theater is the art by
which human beings make or find human action worth watching, in a measured
time and place” (p.18). For the classroom to be a space of reciprocity, both the
teacher and the students must make an effort toward creating a shared space for
watching and being watched.

**An Example of Art Received Poorly**

I suspect all artists have multiple stories of being given audience poorly.
A few years ago I completed a large painting for my church. Several artists, of
whom I was one, were asked to create paintings for an Easter service. My
finished painting showed three abstract figures gathered around an infant; in
many ways it resembled a nativity scene. Although I did not initially expect this,
this painting became my first public work of art in which I explored a
representation of what it means for my husband and me to be an infertile couple.
As I engaged in designing and creating my painting, language for release found
its way into the process.

Although our paintings were very much public, not a word was said
about these paintings to the church congregation, either verbally or in writing.
These paintings quite simply appeared, were displayed for several weeks and
then disappeared. Having my audience fail to join me in conversation with my
work was disappointing. Certainly there were conversations within the
congregation about these paintings, but few into which I was invited. I now
realize these paintings were intended primarily for decoration of the sanctuary, an understanding of art with which I take considerable issue. With this approach came a missed opportunity for several artists to experience their work being watched well. Because an invitation to engage the art was not given, the potential for experiences of resonance in a shared space was limited.

This lost opportunity for the audience and the artists left me with a number of questions: How would the audience reception of these paintings have differed if each artist had been given a few moments to speak about their art during the church service? If a brief statement about each painting had been written by each artist and printed either in the church bulletin or displayed on the walls near the art, would space for a two-way offering have naturally emerged? Was it unrealistic of me to expect people in the church congregation to notice the raw questions and longings in my painting without some sort of explanation or invitation being given? When few people knew who the artists were, how were conversations to begin around these paintings which could in some way serve the artists? How could I know the impact our art had without entering into conversations with congregation members?

Ironically, my Easter painting was an abstract representation of figures watching and being watched. I had hoped the reciprocity occurring visually in this imagery would be an invitation into conversation with and for my audience.
Figure 16: An Easter Nativity/Captivated. 2007. Krista Little, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 125 cm, (Right: partial crop, Center: full image, Left: partial crop)

A Reminder – Requesting Audience is Not Selfish

As adults we are often most aware of our need for audience during difficult seasons of life; in these times we are usually aware that something new could be sculpted into existence if we were given a language for expression and the presence of a generous audience. Yet in these difficult times many of us hesitate to request audience for our expressions thinking there is something selfish about making such a request. Why we believe we must suffer alone is truly a mystery, a great misunderstanding of a core human need.

You may recall from the previous chapter that I questioned if it was selfish to ask my peers to receive my performance of A First Person Commentary on Infertility. I feared that asking my peers to receive my story of grief would
appear self-indulgent until I realized two things: I took no issue with receiving the vulnerable stories of my peers; and I needed to experience my story of infertility as shared and was being offered a stage and an audience with whom to do this. Accepting that we must suffer our painful stories alone is a lie that Harrison (2009) confronts head-on as cited earlier:

[P]eople do not enact their lives in isolation . . . Being witnessed is at the heart of being human. It is in the eyes of an/other that human identity unfolds (Winnicott, 1965, 1971). . . . My actions, my doings-in-relationship, affect how I am seen and consequently how I come to know myself. When my actions are witnessed, received, held and reflected in the eyes of another being, I too am being. I become. (Performative Identity, para. 3-4)

Coming to the conclusion that our stories are shared freed me to request audience from my peers, as well as to realize the potentially transformative offering my giving of audience to my peers might have been.

Monica Prendergast (2008) writes that spectators are “part of something that is brought into existence in key part by and through their presence” (p. 37). In a sense, we bring one another into existence by watching one another well, a gift we all must give and receive. And, at times, watching well will involve watching one another’s art well.
Cast Away Again

For four years Chuck Noland was able to receive Wilson as adequate companionship for keeping him alive. Yet once Noland had learned enough about the island weather patterns, gained enough courage and felt enough desperation, he was ready to attempt a dangerous escape from the island on a handmade raft. Noland carefully secures Wilson onto the raft and pushes off towards the large foreboding waves that encircle the island.

“Okay, here we go Wilson,” exclaims Noland, “you don’t have to worry about anything. I’ll do all the paddling, you just hang on!” (Hanks, Rapke, Starkey, & Zemeckis, 2000).

The island escape is difficult yet successful, but the trials are not over. It is not smooth sailing. During a fierce storm, not long after their escape, Noland is knocked unconscious by a violent blow from the boom of his raft. Wilson cannot hold up to the force of the storm either and repeated gentle post-storm waves complete the jostling of Wilson, unable to “hang on” to his secured spot on the raft. Noland awakens to a distant Wilson being pulled farther and farther away by each wave. Noland must choose between his own rescue on his beat up raft or losing his life to rescue Wilson.

If you watched only this one scene of Cast Away, you would be surprised to observe what a painstakingly difficult decision this is for Noland—rescue his
own life or die for a volleyball? However, this volleyball has been Noland’s only companion and audience for four years. With the loss of this no longer inanimate object, Noland also loses four years of his life story as shared.

In the exasperation of this difficult decision, tiredly treading water between Wilson and the remains of his storm-damaged raft, Noland cries out, “Wilson. Wilson! I’m sorry, I’m sorry . . . I can’t” (Hanks, Rapke, Starkey, & Zemeckis, 2000). He then grabs the handmade rope tied to his raft and Noland is again “cast away.”

While we hope Noland will choose the raft over Wilson, after watching them for four years on the island, we understand the agony of his decision—to save himself Noland must lose his only companion and witness. When Noland makes the decision to grab the rope rather than swim for Wilson, we know that if he does not find a new audience soon he will die.

**Remaking Wilson**

In the last scene of *Cast Away* after corporate and community celebrations of his return from the dead, we see Noland driving down a long dirt road in the same car he drove to the airport four years earlier. This dirt road drive is an obvious metaphor for the brand new life Noland must enter. Noland’s return to civilization has been relationally painful. Time did not wait for his return; Noland must start over. There is a subtle detail in this scene, a detail which
could be easily missed, yet one which is important to notice—on the passenger seat of Noland’s car sits a brand new, still in the display box, Wilson volleyball.

With the presence of this inanimate volleyball we are made aware of the first thing Noland will do as he enters his new life—he will attempt to recover four years of lost stories, stories washed away by ocean waves during a violent tropical storm. Noland will recreate Wilson and thus reclaim these stories as shared. And the first question that comes to my mind is: With whom will Noland first share his remade island companion? And then I wonder: How will Noland’s sharing be received? And how will Wilson be received by his expanded audience? Will Noland and Wilson be watched well?

Noland will recreate Wilson, and at some point he will share Wilson with someone special in his life, and if Noland’s offering of artistic expression is received well and reciprocated, THAT will be a moment of release!

**My Isolated Island**

Prior to my bodygraphy performance, being stuck in the grief of infertility was my isolated island. I had no effective language for expressing my loss, no vehicle for releasing what I was experiencing. Once I discovered a language for expression, I needed an audience with whom to share my story. When I created and performed *A First Person Commentary on Infertility*, I finally had the language, the audience and the stage for release.
Expressions of release are expressions of who we are and who we want to become. Having an audience for these expressions welcomes our newly released self into community.

"Healing, like wounding, takes place on a social stage."

(Harrison, 2009, Performative Identity, para. 4)
A Closing Vignette to Chapter Four: *Seen*

*Unexpected Seen*

This summer my sister delivered twins, a boy and a girl, and I had the privilege of meeting both babies just hours after they were born. Born several weeks early and underweight, both babies were taken immediately to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) after meeting their joyful parents.

My sister could not go down to the NICU during her C-section recovery, and her husband, who was diagnosed the day before with pink-eye, was not allowed in the NICU due to concerns that his infection was possibly contagious. So, very soon after I arrived at the hospital, my sister and her husband sent me down to the NICU with their camera. I was assigned to capture images for them of their newborn little ones. During this first meeting, I enjoyed an unexpected experience of being seen about which I later wrote this poem:
Meeting

Warmth

(An Ode to Beckett)

Beautiful
Unveiled warmth

Wires, machines, and second-rate comfort
attempt to veil
nearly interrupt
yet
Beautiful is unconcealable.

Beautiful
two
  warm flesh
  lonely for each other

Cotton warmth layered in threes,
false warmth of wavelengths blue,
warmth of chest and breast
  waiting,
  waiting
warmth of chest and breast
waiting
warmth of two
waiting, waiting
Matchless
  warmth
awaits.

A guest
Assigned
to capture living, breathing, looking warmth
in brief moments
through camera lens
I looking seeing naked beauty

Mother and Father
    waiting
    together

I Assigned to capture sacred in millisecond moments.

Beautiful two.

She and I
    meet eyes
    beautiful inquisitive ocean
    unexpected sacred exchange.

I present to see her not be seen by her I now witnessed beautiful inquisitive ocean looking into me.

Alive embracing eyes open receiving and giving, already giving.
Seeing,
and being seen
  this unexpected exchange.

I
there to capture glimpses
glimpses translated through camera lens
for parents who cannot
cannot yet glimpse unveiled warmth.

Beautiful.
Beautiful.
Beautiful.

How to *capture* an ocean (that has first captured me)?

“There is an art to watching and being watched,
and that is one of the few arts on which all human living depends.
If we are unwatched we diminish, and we cannot be entirely as we wish to be.
If we never stop to watch, we will know only how it feels to be us,
never how it might feel to be another.

Watched too much, or in the wrong way, we become frightened.
Watching too much, we lose the capacity for action in our own lives.
Watching well, together, and being watched well, with limits on both sides,
we grow, and grow together.”

(Woodruff, 2008, p. 10)
Chapter Five: Releasing the Prolific Self

“I would love to live like a river flows
 carried by the surprise of its own unfolding.”
(John O’Donohue, 2005)

Expectancy

I entered the masters in Arts Education program at Simon Fraser University with excitement and expectancy. I expected to learn more stuff about education, teaching and the arts. To my surprise, far beyond learning more stuff, I encountered an expanded knowing of myself. I experienced release and transformation and was surprised by my own “unfolding” (O’Donohue, 2005). Becoming better acquainted with the fertility of artistic expression as a two-way offering, particularly during my bodygraphy performance, released me to live more fully out of my prolific self, a self previously held back by the stuck of infertility.

An Effort Toward Wholeness

Artist, author and teacher Peter London (1989) has written, “The art object made is not only a product of the moment or one of mere dexterity but a specific example of a general characteristic of its maker” (p. 34). That which we express
through art and resonate with in art created by others is a reflection of who we are and who we hope to become. The lack of an effective language for expression can hinder us from proceeding into this becoming. Art offers one solution to this initial need to find a shape for our expressions.

As author Madeleine L’Engle (1980) explains, “The discipline of creation, be it to paint, compose, write, is an effort towards wholeness” (p. 70). Sometimes artistic expressions make visible things we already know about ourselves; other times these expressions reveal things hidden or trapped within us:

If we recognize the parallelism between the structure and rhythm of our selves and the form and pattern of our images, we will be provided with a revealing display of our inner lives [Consider this reference to “images” as including the art we make in addition to including all art with which we resonate.]. (London, 1989, p. 34)

Expressing my story of infertility through an embodiment performance finally made visible a portion of my inner life. This making visible released me from the paralysis of my thoughts and emotions associated with infertility and beckoned me into living as a fertile, rather than an infertile, self.

From Expression to Formation

The fertility of artistic expression is the ability of art not only to give form to expression, but also to form artist and audience. Fertility involves having the capacity to produce anew—to produce one’s self anew, to encourage and spur on
the springing forth of one’s self in abundance and to breathe life into the areas of our lives that appear to be barren. London (1989) has written that above all of its functions, “art is about exploring what it is to be human” (p. 34). If this is true, then the result of such exploration must play an essential role not only in the expression of self but also in the formation of self.

Receiving shape for expressing our inner lives has the potential to transform us:

As Joseph Zinker has pointed out, “the creative process is therapeutic in itself because it allows us to express and examine the content and dimensions of our internal lives. We live full lives to the degree to which we find a full range of vehicles which concretize, symbolize, and otherwise give expression to our experiences.” (as cited in London, 1989, p. 34)

For me, discovering art as an effort toward wholeness resulted in an experience of formation. Writing this thesis, an artistic expression in itself, has been a continuation of the self-formation and unfolding begun by creating and performing *Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility.*

The fertility of artistic expression entails the entire journey toward formation (it is a process)—the conception of an idea, a vehicle for language discovered, expression finally spoken and shared, and release and formation gained. The fertility of artistic expression is not purely about birthing a newly released self; the fertility of artistic expression starts with the ability to even

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begin to conceive of a released self, and follows with a choice to risk this pursuit. Moments of beckoning toward the fertility of artistic expression welcome the initial notion of, or belief in, the potential of a liberated self; these moments are the substance of resonance with art, and resonance requires the two-way offering of conversation.

**The Two-Way Offering**

Artistic expression does not only achieve voice and formation for one’s self, it offers expression and formation for multiple selves. Even for the formation of the artist, an artistic expression is most formative when shared. Scholar Darlene Swanson (2008) has profoundly stated, “It is in the collective—not the self—that the possibility of freedom resides” (p. 181). Swanson follows this statement with words from Nelson Mandela, “... to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others” (as cited in Swanson, 2008, p. 182). Wholeness of self is not achieved in isolation; the fertility of artistic expression is a two-way offering.

Unfortunately, particularly in Western cultures:

[H]uman beings are most often regarded fundamentally as individuals and only derivatively as social creatures. As a result, human gatherings are widely considered as primarily expressive of common self-understanding rather than being formative of them. (Kenneson, 2004, pg. 53)
However:

Human beings are social creatures. As such, they are always being formed and shaped by structures and powers outside themselves, as well as participating in those structures and powers that form and shape others. (Kenneson, 2004, pg. 55)

Patti Pente (2004) illustrates the potency of artistic expression entering the context of a human gathering when she writes, “It is only in the sharing of my personal inquiry that the research is valid, that the object is art, and that the teaching/learning occurs” (p. 97). Could it be that one missing piece for achieving a satisfactory definition for art is that of understanding art as a two-way offering?

Art offers a language for the formation of our expressions and the formation of our selves, formation that occurs most prevalently in community. When artistic expression is given and received as a two-way offering an invitation is presented for releasing fertile and prolific selves.

**A Vulnerable Offering**

There is a story in the New Testament about Jesus being invited to dinner at the home of a religious leader and there being given an offering by a woman of whom we know very little, except that the author of this story thought it important to note that this woman was a sinner. This is how the story reads:
Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table.

When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Luke 7:36-38

In the spring of 2006 I depicted elements of this story in a painting which I titled Offering. I aimed to capture in this painting the significance of the vulnerable, sacrificial, and extravagant gifts this woman poured onto the feet of Jesus; I did not, however, illustrate perfume flowing from the alabaster jar. In Offering, paintbrushes and the primary colors of paint (red, yellow and blue) descend toward the naked feet. My intent was to issue a call to artists to realize that their art is an offering that can bring transformation when generously shared with an audience.

As I look at this painting today and ponder the near completion of our journey together, my attention is drawn to the naked feet resting at the base of the bottom canvas. My attention is drawn to these feet that wait for a collision with paint.
If we read the story in the New Testament, we discover Jesus’ reaction to this vulnerable and generous offering of tears and perfume. If we consider the
painting alone, a response of reciprocity and the formation that could follow remains only one potential outcome.

**Unanticipated Presence**

When I returned to the stage after my performance of *Everything Must Go: A First Person Commentary on Infertility*, I expected applause and a short debriefing discussion. When I positioned myself on the stage and encountered silence instead of applause, I was surprised. I had a split second to make an important decision: say something, or sit silently and patiently and wait for my audience to break the silence. I decided to wait. It took a moment to adjust to the unexpected response of my peers, but then I settled into silent waiting with them.

In general, I find it easier to move on to the next thing than to wait; it takes discipline to be still and wait, to not interrupt a potentially salient silence. I would have been grateful enough to have been given a stage on which to perform my story of stuck, a story for which I desperately needed a stage and an audience, but my classmates were not satisfied with this as their offering. So we sat and waited, allowing time to be still with the expression of my performance and allowing this moment of resonance to transform into release. This was it—my chance to express my story and be released from my static posture with
infertility. My classmates honored the pause needed for this moment of self-recognition.

The Prolific Self

You’re just a piece of plastic
Can you meet me here?
In all this pain and questioning
Say something to me
...
Encourage me to notice
To notice other kinds of births in my life
Encourage me to discover joyful curiosity when I wonder what the future holds

As much as she could, the pregnant mannequin did meet me in my pain and questioning; she joined me as a companion for an expression of infertility through arts-based inquiry. However, receiving the generously present audience of my peers both during and after my performance tremendously formed and reinforced the release I gained from the stuck of infertility. I did not realize the birth to come out of this inquiry would be a rebirth of self, a releasing of my prolific self.

To be prolific one must produce in great abundance, be fruitful, generative and fertile (Soukhanov, 1992, p. 1449). The opposite of prolific is barren. The implications of the word prolific have much to do with the word or words to which prolific is linked. An author wants to be a prolific writer. A painter wants to be a prolific artist. What if we strived to be prolific selves?
Psychologist Rollo May “conceived the self [emphasis mine] as a dynamic entity, alive with potentiality” (“Self,” 2009). The prolific self would be a yielding of one’s self in abundance, continuously producing oneself, a fertile, growing self, alive with potentiality. The prolific self is the self sprung forth in abundance, unrestrained and fully present to sympathetic vibrations—released. More than a status to be attained, the prolific self is in a continual process of becoming. The prolific self is always arriving, always being formed. We will rarely arrive at this self alone. The prolific self is not an isolated self; restoration to wholeness occurs within community. Together is the way to flourish as selves. The pathway of and to the prolific self is a two-way offering.

Reciprocity/Jesus’ Response

An excess of fragrant perfume remaining on her hands and evidence of released tears on her face, the woman, certainly unfamiliar with being given audience well, waits at Jesus’ feet. Her vulnerability expressed is worth the potential of a two-way offering—this may be her opportunity to be set free. Many eyes were on her when she made her offering; now all eyes are on Jesus. How will Jesus respond to this offering given? There must have been a moment of silent suspense as all present awaited Jesus’ response.
Then he turned toward the woman
and said to Simon [the Pharisee whose home they were in],
“Do you see this woman?

“I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet,
but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.
You did not give me a kiss,
but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.
You did not put oil on my head,
but she has poured perfume on my feet.

“Therefore, I tell you,
her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much.
But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

Then Jesus said to her,
“Your sins are forgiven.
...Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Luke 7:44-50

Jesus praises the woman for her vulnerable offering, and reciprocates the hospitality she has given. Jesus does not miss this opportunity to perform generous, present and active audience for the woman who offered him the best of what she had. He accepts her offering, and in doing so, he accepts her. He frees her from being defined by who she has been. He invites and releases her to become anew. She is no longer enslaved. Jesus sets her free.

Silence Shared

I do not know what occurred in each of the hearts of my peers, but I know that I encountered a newly released self as a result of twenty seconds of silence
shared. Some of my peers, I suspect, recognized the gift that was being given to me in this silence and joined in the giving. Some of my peers may have simply played along, for who wants to be the one to interrupt a silence being accepted by others? A portion of the audience, I hope, became aware of something in their own hearts, extending to me a gift of silence while simultaneously experiencing resonance and receiving this salient gift as their own.

I experienced reciprocity from the perspective of audience a few years earlier at an infant’s funeral. I grieved deeply with my friends who were enduring profound loss, while simultaneously grieving my own loss of the possibility of having children. I realized at that funeral that I needed a communal ceremony for my struggle with infertility; I needed an audience with whom to share my story, an audience to witness my grief, sorrow and deep questioning. I also realized that particularly in Western cultures we limit definitional ceremonies to a small variety of occasions.

Exploring artistic expression as a two-way offering, an offering that paves the way for formation, opens up an additional setting in which definitional ceremonies can occur. I am grateful to have discovered this offering in my embodiment course with Snowber. Inquiry through artistic expression gave me a language for making my story shared.
Whenever I share my embodiment performance with a friend, I tell the story of twenty seconds of silence shared—space for release given, received and reciprocated. Without the generous presence and hospitality of audience for my artistic expression of infertility, the release I gained and the fertility I accessed would have been incomplete. I now understand the gift of presence an audience can extend to the one at the center of a definitional ceremony. And I understand that release for both artist and audience is a natural outcome of a definitional ceremony witnessed and watched well.

**The Feet that Wait**

In *Offering*, the same colors the pregnant mannequin and I shared—red, yellow and blue—descend toward the naked feet. These are the primary colors of the painter, the place where we start, a place of potential *becoming*.

I see now that this painting embodies a call to artist *and* audience.

Will these feet receive well the springing forth of paint? Will a space be cultivated that reverberates with hospitality and generosity?
The freedom of release awaits the invitation of a two-way offering.

Figure 18: Offering (cropped image: The Feet That Wait). 2006. Krista Little, acrylic on canvas.

**Releasing the Prolific Self**

“Art—so often thought of as a way of getting out of the world—is man’s way of acting in the world” (Wolterstorff, 1980, pp. 4-5). Encounters with art “go as deep as anything in our lives can go” (Lyas, 1997, p. 2). The voice that we often discover during an encounter with art, the voice worth falling in love with, is our own. Without art a portion of one’s self is left speechless.
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