

## Writing the Cauldron as Intersubjective Practice

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*I've reached a point of  
no-return in catching up what a  
semester! I know I will make it through and all  
will be fine all the same I am feeling quite fatigued  
me too I'm tired quite tired but the  
'old soldier' in me knows how to march on soldier soldier  
this word/image has arisen several times in our writing on the cushion I  
repeat the word to myself several times let it rest there let it rest  
on your lap breathe softly into it gently touch it and see  
what shape or image the word  
will assume almost immediately an image arises an  
army helmet green (army green) a piece of  
netting hanging off the back of it a different  
texture different from the heaviness the steeliness  
of the helmet there is something in this juxtaposition of  
textures the heaviness of the metal its  
solidity the airiness of the netting its spaciousness*

*stay with the image the word "protection" arises protecting  
the head an idea arises the helmet stops  
chi from flowing through the seventh chakra from moving freely in and  
out of the body from flowing through stagnant chi is no protection it  
cuts the connection between the person and the heavens<sup>1</sup> open space open  
open up let the heavenly chi flow through*

We began our exploration of contemplative and collaborative writing in a book chapter, entitled *Writing witness consciousness* (Walsh & Bai, 2015). "Writing witness consciousness" is a process we developed over time whereby, through writing and contemplation, and writing as contemplation, we notice in non-reactive ways the content of our thoughts (our own and one another's) and also their movement, shiftability and flow, their lack of solidity, and the spaces among them.

In our work, previous and current, we draw on our meditation practices and our understandings of Buddhist teachings in contextualizing our writing practices. For example, we intentionally create spaces for intersubjective<sup>2</sup> work, imbued with

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, "heaven" has a connotation different from that of the Christian context. It denotes open space, unconditionality, emptiness, *shunyata*.

<sup>2</sup> For our meaning of the 'intersubjective' in this chapter, we adopt Wallin's (2007) working definition of 'intersubjective relatedness' that points to not only understanding and meaning but also, more importantly, "resonance, alignment, and the 'sharing of mental landscapes' between ourselves and others" (p. 55). He goes on to comment that intersubjective relatedness "is the

qualities of what is known as the Four Immeasurables or Limitless Ones: lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) writes that the Four Immeasurables are considered “immeasurable” or “limitless” “because if you practice them, they will grow in you every day until they embrace the whole world.... They are the four aspects of true love within ourselves and within everyone and everything” (pp. 169-170). Immeasurability also signals that these qualities of the heart are of the kind that lie outside the realm of quantifiable, measurable, predictable, and controllable knowledge that the still dominant modern Western empiricist epistemic paradigm valorizes (Bai, 2012). Lovingkindness is unconditional love; compassion—the capacity to alleviate suffering; empathic joy—dwelling-with and sharing the present moment of joy we witness in each other; and equanimity—evenness and non-reactivity. These states of consciousness represent for us the flowering of humanity. Human actions that arise from this place result in ethical living that promotes the mutual viability of all beings: an increasingly urgent challenge to humanity today. Thus, from the ground of the Four Immeasurables, we (Susan and Heesoon) write together in the service of learning to live well in the world.

In our previous work with writing witness consciousness, we emphasized the intentional nurturance of lovingkindness and compassion in witnessing (with) one another (Walsh & Bai, 2015). In this chapter, we retain this ground as we emphasize the generativity afforded by working with/in the intersubjective space. We show how we are further developing our writing practice in doing so. Both subjectivity and intersubjectivity are open to a great range of development, and it is the work of cultivation, such as through contemplative and artistic practices, for example, writing and dialogue, that interests us. We use the term “practice” in relation to our collaborative writing in order to emphasize the importance of form and structure as a generative place and space from which to go deeper and become more expansive. Like practices such as meditation and contemplation,<sup>3</sup> we return

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permeability or ‘interpenetrability’ of personal boundaries that allow us to participate in the subjective experience of other people” (p. 55).

<sup>3</sup> We have been frequently asked what the distinctions are between ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation.’ We acknowledge that different people have slightly or not so slightly different meanings and nuances for these words. In our work, we adopt the working definitions by the Buddhist teacher, Tarchin Hearn, who said that (for him) meditation is like playing the scale on the piano whereas contemplation is like playing a whole piece of music, say, a symphony (personal communication, 2014). At the same time, we also include specific contemplative practices in our inquiry process. As we explain in our 2015 chapter, in our writing process, we take up the contemplative practice described by Shambhala Buddhist teacher Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche (2003). Briefly, the initial object of contemplation might be a word, phrase, an image, or an idea. The instruction is to attend to the object, returning the mind to it again and again when distractions arise, and then to “let the words drop away” and rest with the “heartfelt experience” that arises (Mukpo, 2003, pp. 200-201). In our work, the “object” or focus of our contemplative process might be a word, phrase, image, or feeling from our written texts; we *sit with*—contemplate—the object and write further from that space. Please see Walsh (forthcoming) and Walsh (2012) for further discussions about integrating the practice of contemplation into the inquiry/research process and Walsh, Bickel, and Leggo (2015) for an edited collection about contemplative and arts-based practices in research and teaching. Also see Bai et al. (forthcoming) for a chapter on spiritual research paradigm in the edited volume by Jing Lin, Rebecca Oxford, and Tom Culham, entitled,

again and again to a form of writing that grounds us and is, at the same time, generative and inspiring (in the sense of inviting breath). Our overall aim is to cultivate and deepen intersubjectivity in intentional ways through a collaborative writing practice that embodies lovingkindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity.

In one of our discussions about the importance of practice as form or “container”—a way of going deeper into something through sustained practice—Heesoon suggested the alchemical connotations of the cauldron, and, in the context of writing this chapter, many connections have since arisen. At the outset, we emphasize the ways in which the form of cauldron or bowl is associated with women and the womb. Knight (2000) reports that, in the Celtic tradition, the cauldron “represents the Goddess and the water element” (p. 187). Walker (1988) notes that the cauldron is “the prime female symbol of pre-Christian world” and writes about its significance in relation to female wisdom and power in different countries including Egypt and India as well as in Norse and Celtic stories (pp. 124-125). In such traditions the cauldron-womb symbolism is connected with fecundity and birth.<sup>4</sup> In Buddhism, the mother-womb symbolism retains its association with fecundity, but is not as clearly connected with female embodied beings. Rather, the mother is associated with vast open space, the space of generativity, that from which things arise. Klein (1995), in her discussion of a ritual related to the Great Bliss Queen (Yeshey Tsogyel in Tibetan Buddhism), writes about the generativity of the Great Bliss Queen, and how such generativity means that “her identity can never be captured or limited by a single type of being, or even a single form” (p. 177). Brown (2001) writes that, in Tibetan Buddhism, “*mother* does not refer to any gendered quality.... It is beyond relative terminology, duality, or concept of any kind” (p. 112). We are indebted to such insights as reminders that in Buddhist teachings “identity” is not solid, but shiftable, transformable—(re)constituted in ongoing ways in relation to others and the natural world. It is this creativity beyond self-ness that we are working with in this chapter.

The transformational aspect of what can happen through our collaborative and contemplative writing process is evident in the mutability of the forms our process has taken thus far. In our previous piece (Walsh & Bai, 2015), we developed a writing structure that was a like an echo chamber, a space in which our words “rebound[ed] back and forth, a sounding space for deep and care-filled listening” (pp. 26-27), a generous space that we intentionally created to witness whatever arose for us, individually and together.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, the echo chamber has become more cauldron-like in that it emphasizes the middle space,<sup>6</sup> what arises in the intertext of our writing, a permeable space which is neither one

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*Developing a spiritual research paradigm: Incorporating spirituality in research in social sciences and education* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> In discussing the symbolism of the spear in various contexts, Walker (1988) writes that “the cauldron was always a womb symbol” (p. 30); she also writes about the sexual connotations of the two symbols together. This kind of sexual imagery also connotes generativity and intersubjectivity in ways we have not yet considered in a fulsome way.

<sup>5</sup> Please see Walsh and Bai (2015) for further discussion about the witnessing aspect of this collaborative writing practice.

of us but both together and more than that, the unpredictable bounty of holistic collaboration through mixing our individual mental contents and contours. (Note below in our cauldron piece how the unpredictable process of mixing is partly represented by the texturing with grey words.) Such, we propose, is the nature of creativity.

*the helmet image a contrast to the free flow of energy the feeling  
of hiking along the coast yesterday listening the distant sound of boats their  
engines people's voices waves on the rocks the steady rhythm of  
my feet on the ground my breath moving in and out the easy feel of  
my body in motion springing over tree roots up and  
over rocks balancing along planks of wood that  
bridge puddles the splash squish of my boots in the mud  
how might we transform "soldier" into "warrior"?*

*soldiers march in formation trudge even warriors  
leap dance hang upside down sit  
still rest in awareness do nothing according to the spirit that  
moves invite the spirit to move dance  
with the spirit like brush strokes in  
the hands of a calligrapher*

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Some aspects of our practice or process remain the same from our previous witness writing: we work with feelings/sensations/images/insights evoked by what we read in each other's texts as exchanged through email. We contemplate one another's words, and then write whatever arises. In our previous work (Walsh & Bai, 2015), our "own" words were kept separate (right justified and left justified), and an echo text demonstrated the neutral (non judgmental) space of care-filled listening.

*I would feel this urge to go up to Susan and hug her and all other young  
children, too, who are trying to wield their ink pens in their little hands,  
focusing so hard . . . that probably some of them had their little tender  
tongues sticking out, quivering.*

*. . . silent sobbing silent laughing picture myself being the teacher urges to*

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<sup>6</sup> This middle space represents for us the Middle Way of the Buddha. We may indeed give the latter a contemporary interpretation with the help of neurobiology: the middle signifies the zone of psychic integration on the neural continuum between the two poles of chaos, where the felt sense of one's consciousness is too loose and disorganized, in which case there is not much of a self to work with, and rigidity where the felt sense of one's consciousness is too tight and rigid, in which case the self cannot flex and resists change (Siegel, 2010). Another way to think of this middle is as the space of intersubjectivity wherein two separate, autonomous individuals meet and come to negotiate their (permeable) ego boundaries, thereby becoming more empathic, adaptive, creative, reciprocal, resilient, and capable. This negotiation is visually signified with grey-shade texting.

However, as we saw in our two cauldron pieces so far, we have taken a different step through creating an open alchemical (cauldron-like) space for our thoughts, words, and images to commingle in the form of found poems<sup>7</sup> created from the texts we have shared with one another over the past year (including memories, responses, emails, and contemplations on specific words and phrases drawn from our writings) as well as new poems.<sup>8</sup> New and fresh insights gathered from smells, sights, tastes, feelings, memories, and ideas inform our inquiry into the “selves” we think we are, providing us with insights about emotional injuries to our ego-selves, and how we may hold each other and our selves in loving, kind and compassionate ways to heal and to grow; these processes are taking place in “writing the cauldron” as intersubjective space.

As in our previous writing practice, we locate our work in relation to that of colleagues who also work in the area of collaborative writing, including collective biography (see, for example, Speedy, Bainton, Bridges, Brown, Brown, Martin, Sakellariadis, Williams, & Wilson, 2010; Gale & Wyatt, 2008; Gannon, Walsh, Byers, & Rajiva, 2014; Gonick & Gannon, 2014; Wyatt & Gale, 2014; Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2010; Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2011).<sup>9</sup> We are particularly interested in those who discuss (inquire into) the space of intersubjectivity (even if the term “intersubjectivity” is not invoked). In a collective biography project in which Susan took part, seven feminist scholars from a range of disciplinary areas (including Cultural Studies, Musicology, Sociology, Women and Gender Studies, and Education) wrote memory texts about girlhood experiences of sexuality and schooling. They then wrote *into* one another’s texts through Image Theatre, photographs, and writing in(ter)ventions that “unhinged the writer from her text and allowed [them] to recast what subject, text, and body/embodiment might mean” (Gannon, Walsh, Byers, & Rajiva, 2014) pp. 185-186) and that “precluded . . . slippage into an individualized, psychological, linear, or chronological subject” (p. 186). The art/writing in(ter)ventions “interrupted the limits of the discursive and the conceptual by mobilizing sensation, force, and intensity, opening spaces where we [could] feel outside the boundaries of our ‘selves,’ our memories, physical bodies . . . the texts

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<sup>7</sup> Found poems are poems composed from words and phrases “found” in the environment, in this case, in the texts we write and exchange (including emails). In qualitative inquiry (specifically poetic inquiry), found poems are well-established as a means of processing/interpreting artifacts from research and also of re-presenting them; in such contexts, found poems may be composed from transcripts as well as other texts (see, for example, Butler-Kisber, 2002; Prendergast, 2009; Richardson, 1992; Walsh, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Susan shared a draft of this chapter with her mother, who then shared a journal entry with Susan. Susan integrated words and phrases from her mother’s journal entry into some of the found poems, thus expanding the cauldron work. Jannett Walsh gave permission for her words to be included. Heesoon, too, has been engaged in paralleling intersubjectivity work with her daughter, Serenne, via texting. Instantaneous back-and-forth texting enabled them to process their emotional responses in a fresh and spontaneous way with beautiful and moving resolutions.

<sup>9</sup> We refer the reader to our extensive footnotes (3, 4) (in Walsh & Bai, 2015) about methods of “writing with others,” such as memory work, collective biography, duoethnography, and some forms of life writing/métissage.

we write” (p. 187). Also working with collective biography, Gale et al (2013) write that they “endeavoured to create a textual space where individual subjectivities and authorial voices emerge, merge, and disappear, to emerge again in different configurations and rhythms. So too, art and words intersect and infect each other” (p. 254).

We (Heesoon and Susan) thus link our work with those who write collaboratively and who acknowledge the ways in which writing processes can unsettle the illusory singular, bounded, isolated self. At the same time, we also distinguish the practices we embody through our Buddhist investments. Our work with intersubjectivity is grounded in Buddhist teachings about the illusion of a solid, rigid, and bounded sense of *self* or ego. As Trungpa Rinpoche (1973) says, “our most fundamental state of mind before the creation of ego, is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality” (p. 122). What functions as *self* is “a collection of tendencies, events... the Five Skandhas or Five Heaps” (p. 123). Meditation and contemplative practices provide gaps in the illusion of a coherent sense of *self*, glimpses of nondual space, *shunyata*—emptiness.<sup>10</sup> Through writing together, we create generous and generative spaces for the other to be-with-what-is; we aspire to relate well with/in this intersubjective space. We intentionally engage in contemplation with our exchanged texts, and aspire to become more and more conversant with ways of being infused with lovingkindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity.

*an insight yesterday maybe the day before  
things do not have to be difficult I don't have to  
fight to live in the world everything is not a battle  
life is more than battle we are more  
than soldiers parts of us specialize in warring our  
evolutionary inheritance an ever-watchful limbic  
system activated by danger signals so that we can fight flight  
freeze but we are far more we are magnificent  
lovers forever apprenticing in becoming greater  
lovers towards all life all beings I don't have to tense  
my body steel myself against the day against pain other  
people another way of being that invites  
us into a relaxed poised gentle touching towards  
all of life including our selves I'm entering a period  
of my life where I wish to unburden lighten up relax free  
myself more and more we do not need to fight to  
struggle don't have to don't need to don't have to let  
the past arrive into the present compel us to  
grip and choke the present*

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<sup>10</sup> This ‘emptiness’ (*sunyata*) is, like our cauldron, potentially the most potently generative realm of being. It is supercharged state/space that can give rise to infinite possibilities of being and becoming.

*the gesture of open hand not grasping or gripping the breeze of the open  
hand its ripples across the surface of what is  
open to the present all that defined me who I was has no  
tight grip on me in the present moment breathe*

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Through our collaborative, contemplative, and artistic writing practice then, we consciously cultivate intersubjectivity—the capacity to know each other’s subjectivity, and to mix and infuse our subjectivities with new insights and patterns of knowing and being. Ours is a project in enactivism (Varela et al., 1992; De Jaegher & Paolo, 2007). According to the tenets of enactivism, knowing and doing are inextricably intertwined. In fact, knowing and doing constitute one feedback loop, informing and forming each other. When the two of us interlink our subjectivities as in this cauldron project, the very action of interlinking begins to shift our personal knowledge matrix into something more expansive and inclusive. The existential quality of intersubjective consciousness resides in the practice of co-creating, what we come to call “writing the cauldron”—a consciousness that dwells in a transformative liminal space into which we each pour, and together we mix, and transform our words and images. By entering into this interpsychic cauldron that collects, joins, mixes, and commingles words, images, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions, “we” participate in alchemical processes of transmuting matters of hearts, minds, and bodies. From this co-creation and participation, we invite larger and richer senses of our *selves*, strengthened by loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity—and expanded and inclusive views of what “reality” entails—and we are better able to work with whatever arises in everyday being and knowing.

*my mother was a real fighter known as Tiger Woman  
in her younger days she fought from day one as the only  
baby to survive amongst countless miscarriages still births infant deaths  
my mother her daring exploits during the Japanese  
Occupation of Korea my mother her stories  
taking care of household duties from the age  
of five not able to see over the ironing board attempting  
to keep order in a chaotic household as the eldest  
child defiant willing to take  
a whipping if necessary fiercely independent  
two simultaneous images one a tiger teeth bared striving to  
survive like what Vaillant (2010) describes  
a tiger with an environment closing in  
fighting back its stripes brilliantly  
colourful the other image like that of*

*the tiger in Shambhala Buddhist texts<sup>11</sup> the tiger  
sure-footed carefully placing its paws assessing  
its environment aware awake discerning  
connecting with the earth the neurotic and  
the wisdom aspects of the tiger coin-faced  
facets of paradox*

*fiercely independent scrappy even  
in her declining years as her Alzheimer's deepened my  
mother turned into a mild baby-like person did she  
do this for me, for my girls? I sure could not have survived those  
challenging eight years of looking after her while  
single-parenting and working towards my tenure if she  
was aggressive thanks for asking my mom  
had surgery a week ago pins and plate  
put in her broken wrist/arm she told me today that she  
is having trouble opening her apartment door with her left  
hand/arm so has asked for something to be changed in the  
mechanics each small thing in her day requires  
a different kind of attention  
her pneumonia improving love and courage*

*the sound of puddles a small splash as  
a car goes by someone on a bike gravel  
crunching the sound of black-capped  
chickadee calling fee-bee fee-bee piercing  
through the quiet dawn  
fee-bee . . . fee bee . . .  
again and again*

~

In our collaborative writing practices, we acknowledge that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are inseparably woven together in human consciousness. From a psychological perspective, intersubjectivity in its unconscious and unarticulated level is more primary than subjectivity. Intersubjectivity is not some esoteric phenomenon that only some scholars know about, whereas subjectivity is something more common and mundane. We began our little baby lives as intersubjective beings, albeit mostly unconsciously, as we interlinked our mind-body-heart-spirit/energetics with those of our caregivers.<sup>12</sup> The primordial and diffused “we” *field of being* (Evernden, 1993) is prior to the individuated and discrete “I.” It takes human babies a while before they can point to the “I,” the

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<sup>11</sup> The Tiger is one of the Four Dignities in Shambhala Buddhist teachings. See, for example, Mukpo, 2005, pp. 42-44.

<sup>12</sup> Here is Wallin (2007) again: “Infancy research suggests that rudimentary forms of intersubjectivity are present virtually from birth. We appear to be preprogrammed—neurologically ‘hard-wired’—for intersubjectivity” (p. 52).

separate self (Evernden, 1993), which is a developmental milestone: for, they have to learn to differentiate the individual self from its relational matrix, such as the familial matrix, especially the parent-child bond. This process of “self differentiation” (Papero, 1990) is an ongoing process that may take place throughout one’s life span. In this sense, the “I” of subjectivity is more of an earned (or learned) style of consciousness, rather than a given.

While we all are born with this capacity for intersubjectivity, and while it is in many ways more primary than subjectivity, its growth/development is fraught with challenges. For example, a baby (even as a fetus) who has been interlinked with a caregiver who suffers, for contextual and environmental reasons, from anxiety is most likely affected by the caregiver’s anxiety and feels it coursing through its entire being. (Of course, the anxious caregiver came to be the way she is through her own conditioning that involved her being intersubjectively affected by her significant others, especially and most probably in her early childhood.) Allan Shore, in summarizing his work in attachment theory and neuroscience states:

Grounded in both developmental psychoanalysis and developmental neuroscience, my overarching regulatory theory posits the long-held principle that the first relational contact is between the unconscious of the mother and the unconscious of the infant . . . . During attachment episodes of right-lateralized visual-facial, auditory-prosodic, and tactile-gestural nonverbal communications of the primary caregiver regulates the infant’s burgeoning positive and negative bodily based affective states. At the most fundamental level, the right brain attachment mechanism is expressed as interactive regulation of affective-automatic arousal, and thereby the interpersonal regulation of biological synchronicity between and within organism. (in Ginot, 2015, p. xv)

The chain of intersubjective influencing stretches afar horizontally through contemporaneous socialization and vertically through generational socialization. We are constantly affected by and affect each other intersubjectively. Both negative (emotional injury) and positive (empowerment and encouragement) influencing and shaping constitute who we are as human selves. Negative intersubjective influences we experience in life are encoded in the self, leading to subjective experiences, most often repetitious, that trap us in hurts and limited ways of being. Such are the challenges we face as intersubjective beings. Through writing the cauldron (and writing witness consciousness), we work with such challenges: those of the so-called *inner world* that has experienced all sorts of hurts and marginalization (as discussed above from a psychological perspective)—the aspects of being that render us unavailable at times for intentional kinds of intersubjective work. The *inner world* is inextricably connected to the *outer world*. Buddhism teaches us that seeing these two as separate spheres of being is an illusion. The social and political implications of this understanding are immense and, indeed, radical. The outer reality of the sociopolitical, economic, and

environmental states of the world is reflected in, and is a manifestation of, the human inner, subjective and intersubjective, reality (Bai et. al, 2014). This understanding is foundational to the form of activism known as “subtle activism” (Nicol, 2015).

The dominant culture around us still tends to privilege the affairs of the outer world over the affairs of the inner world (materialism), of the individual over the mutual (individualism). The conscious cultivation of intersubjectivity must, then, engage in psychological work as well as sociocultural and political critiques, in order to make room for intentional work with lovingkindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity. Writing together may well surface some of our graspings, attachments, discomforts—as well as new insights about the generativity of the spaces between/among. For example, in writing together, Susan and Rebecca Luce-Kapler (Luce-Kapler & Walsh, 1996) acknowledge their initial fears of letting go of their words—as well as their recognition of co-emergence in an enactivist sense, a self that is “constantly changing and being reconfigured as it interacts with the world. Just as [the] interaction changes the self, so the environment is changed” (p. 20). Further, in the collective biography writing project about girlhood, sexuality, and schooling discussed previously, the members of the interdisciplinary group of feminist scholars note that

we were at times uncomfortable with moving into another’s text, sometimes tentative and at others more confident and playful, as if working with someone else’s memories liberated us from our everyday, habituated ways of knowing. Even listening to someone else read out our original stories aloud ruptured the fabric of ownership, the sense of our stories, our memories as personal, individual territories. Our in(ter)ventions took place on two levels: at the level of the texts and also in the relations among us as researchers and colleagues, creating new affective flows across stories and among (and beyond) writers and texts. (Gannon, Walsh, Byers, & Rajiva, 2014, p. 187)

In *writing the cauldron*, we [Heesoon and Susan] open spaces for whatever arises in contemplation. We endeavour to sit with and hold whatever arises and also to allow the process/practice to surprise us into noting our habits and usual ways of being and knowing. For example, in the opening cauldron text, a contemplation about “soldier” from one of our email exchanges evoked the image of a helmet, its solidity—and also the contrast of netting and spaciousness. Following came a sense of constriction on the 7<sup>th</sup> chakra (the top of the head) and the contrast of freely hiking, body open to the world. We notice the ways in which “soldier” holds an array of sense perceptions, bodily feelings. Through the practice of placing our words, images, contemplations, and sensory experiences into the cauldron—while intentionally re-memorizing our ground of loving-kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity—returning again and again to this ground—we work intentionally with intersubjectivity in the space between us and also beyond.

*something about the constellation of*

associations around “mother” arrests me the  
complexity of it I have felt myself resisting Buddhist teachings  
that employ the love a mother has for her child as  
the exemplar of unconditional love can feel a strong voice inside  
that asks what about people whose experience of  
mother does not feel like love wonder at sadness unbearable  
pain need for love care  
how might such people  
relate (or not) to such teachings? what kind of “mother” is  
being assumed?<sup>13</sup>

(I know the range of “mothers” I have  
been to my own daughters protective impatient loving angry open  
indulgent confused frustrated etc. etc. etc.) and yet I invoked mother  
love the other day when one of my daughters asked  
me to send prayers to her friend a friend whose small  
child was undergoing serious  
surgery on the cushion I invoked the fierceness  
of mother love like the fierceness of a mother  
bear for her cubs for me the strongest kind  
of love I know the love for my girls something I could connect  
with and send to this little girl her mother her family doors of awareness

so “mother” is not singular not perfect in the sense of  
being an ideal the mother  
love I know so well its many complex dimensions perhaps  
it is actually “mother”  
as complex and multidimensional that is intended  
in the Buddhist teachings? (Kim reminds me that we might  
have been mothers to many sentient  
beings maybe even one another in different time  
spaces) it occurs to me on this sunny Halifax  
morning robins walking on the moss in the  
backyard crows calling from tree  
branches cool breeze mottled morning  
shade that maybe mother love is a metaphor for  
emptiness shunyata expansiveness inclusivity fullness  
interconnectivity what exists intersubjective space admitting  
all rejecting nothing heart opening intentionally this (the way

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**13** Examples of Buddhist writers/texts in which mother love is invoked as the exemplar of unconditional love and/or loving protection include the Friendliness chant (a Metta-Sutta in translation) (Chödrön, 2001, pp. 128-129; Goleman, 2015, p. 49-52). Our understandings about what the mother involves in Buddhist teachings continues to evolve. We wrote earlier about how *mother* is connected to vastness, space, emptiness, that from which things arise—that which is unconditioned—and how mother is not connected to gendered beings. Given the complexity with which “mother” can be experienced in Western culture, we demonstrate the ways in which we write with our confusions and emergent understandings.

*you and I are continually adjusting and coordinating  
and communicating with each other in the spirit  
of love and care and patience) is part of our intersubjectivity  
work gratitude and love wishes of  
wellness for you on the cushion I am aware of  
my ancestors standing with me behind and  
at the sides of me supporting I can  
feel their presence something I can  
open to fields of awareness beyond  
what exists in the physical (visible) realm doors of awareness*

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*the otherness is so difficult to accept and love confirms my daughter  
how we struggled in trying to accept each other's otherness  
culture shock!  
what? you are doing what? you are wanting that?  
monstrous! no no no oh no  
you were horrified yes i was  
does that make me love you less?  
i never felt I was loved says she i couldn't even love myself  
i feel loved now  
unconditional unpossessive love is an achievement  
decades of suffering and reconciliation  
all the while growing up together  
through pain and surrender  
let's merge and join worlds says my daughter  
in joining we change our selves and our worlds  
selves are ancient houses that undergo repeated renovations  
new windows new doors new stairs new gardens new rooms new  
nooks and crannies  
they even join up to make a housing complex  
or divide up to make duplexes quadruplexes laneway houses  
selves are not fixed and unchangeable  
suffering comes from insisting on fixed selves  
and defending them as such*

## **References**

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