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PRAYING WITH IMAGES: ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

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PRAYING WITH IMAGES:
ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Arts

By

Mary L. Coffey

2016

The essay of Mary L. Coffey is hereby accepted:

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THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning is a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Treat each guest honorably...
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.
~ Jalal Al-Din Rumi

INTRODUCTION

At the intersection of spirituality and creativity, there is a place of understanding and empowerment, an oasis of rest and rejuvenation, and a point of connection with the divine. It is at this intersection where one can make sense of life. Two encounters are relevant here. I met a woman whose husband had passed recently at too young an age. She told me she had been repressing feelings of anger toward God, perhaps because she had been taught that some feelings shouldn't be expressed. If she could draw a picture of what she was feeling, what would it look like? A good friend's son had been struggling with drug addiction that understandably caused much consternation between my friend and his wife. When I asked him to describe the image that came to his mind when he thought back on where God was at that time in his life, he described shards of dark colors, grays and blacks, with one bright shaft of light shining down from heaven. For him, that image was the beginning of healing; it gave him solace because it represented God's presence in the midst of his darkness.

In my own life, I used acrylic paints to produce an image that came to mind when praying for confirmation that I was following God's path. That image portrays dark purples and reds around the perimeter with increasingly brighter oranges, yellows and white as the viewer's eye is drawn towards the center, and a message at the bottom reads: "come, this is the way." Meditating on that image helps me to keep my focus on God as the center of my life, and gives me consolation that I am on the right path.

As a spiritual director, I accompany directees on their spiritual path towards God. Together, we try to find God in the hills and valleys of their lives. Sometimes, where God moves is obvious and the face of God is readily apparent; at other times, God's presence is less noticeable, even hidden. One of my directees reported feeling the presence of Jesus, sensing his coming up beside her and putting his arm around her shoulder at a time when she was feeling very alone. Others report hearing no response to impassioned and repeated prayer requests. My role as a spiritual director is to listen and hold open a safe space for directees to encounter God in their lives. My hope for my directees is that they have a rich experience of God's lavish love for them, and are transformed after becoming aware of that unconditional love. Prayer, the Christian tradition holds, often leads to encounters with God. There are myriad opportunities and circumstances that invite one into prayer and a variety of ways to pray: prayer can be personal or communal, praise or petition, shouted from the mountaintops or meditated in silence. This essay will explore the enhancement of kataphatic prayer with artistic interpretations of visual images from one's imagination as a way of encountering God. It will also examine creativity as a way to express one's voice, which is especially critical in those places and under those circumstances where one is encouraged to be

silent. The importance of expressing emotions, generally and through prayer, will be unpacked, and the benefit of expressing emotions through the modality of art making will be addressed. Finally, this essay will assess the helpfulness of this approach in an art journaling retreat setting by analyzing questionnaires completed by participants in the retreat.

What happens when one prays with images? What are the benefits of giving concrete form to images that arise in one's imagination? The imagination is a place where God connects with humans. It is in the imagination that images arise which represent aspects of one's truest self. By tapping into one's imagination, and concretizing the images that are found there, a number of things are enabled:

- A. Emotions can be freely expressed, especially ones that are difficult to express verbally;
- B. Insights can be discovered that may lead to greater understanding and awareness of what is going on interiorly;
- C. God's movement and leading in one's life can be more clearly seen;
- D. Hope is nurtured and the possibility of healing is opened, if necessary.

Assumptions

This essay is based on several assumptions and uses terms that may be susceptible to a variety of interpretations. For purposes of this essay, individuals are assumed to have a deep longing to develop an authentic relationship with God. They are also assumed to be open to creative modalities of praying and are willing to try a different method that may resonate with them in a new way. These assumptions rest on certain underlying foundations of religious faith:

- A) That God exists.
- B) That God wants to have a relationship with humans.
- C) That one way to improve and deepen a relationship with God is through prayer.
- D) That God's self-communication can be experienced by humans and that one can respond to God through either an apophatic or a kataphatic mode of prayer.
- E) That it is God who initiates communication with humans and as such, humans cannot compel the experience.

Definitions

Prayer is a way of being in relationship with God. The history of Christian spirituality has identified two complementary but very different approaches to prayer - "kataphatic" and "apophatic." Simply put, kataphatic prayer emphasizes the similarity between God and humans, recognizing that God can be known through all things; God's presence can be perceived through nature, imagery, symbols, and metaphors. Apophatic prayer emphasizes the difference between God and creatures, and encourages silent reflection and contemplation in the presence of God with a mind emptied of words and images.¹ This essay will emphasize the kataphatic way of encountering God because of its exploration of created images in prayer.

Prayer is a major component in spirituality. Spirituality can be defined as a search for the purpose and meaning of life, which is premised on an awareness of and intimate relationship with, God as central to life. The search often results in a call to

¹ H. D. Egan, "Affirmative Way," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael

transformation, a process through which one moves into a continually deepening relationship with God. This process has been described as the “inner journey” and refers to “the flow of thought and reflection that contributes to making sense of what is happening in and around all aspects of life, whether through conscious, subconscious or unconscious experiences.”²

Humans are created in the image of God, the Creator. As such, one’s capacity for creativity is a gift God gives to everyone. All can embrace creativity in daily life by capturing divine energy and transforming it into a gift to present back to God.³ God calls humans to be co-creators, so all have “the need as well as the responsibility to create.”⁴ One way to use the gift of creativity is through creative expression - the making of art in all of its various forms. In this essay, the focus will be on the kataphatic approach to prayer using visual creative expression – the making of drawings and collages on paper in an art journal with the intent of capturing imagery in the imagination while engaged in prayer. Imagination is the “act or power of forming mental images of what is not actually present.”⁵ The imagination is what allows one to create mental pictures, or images, of a real object that is not physically present and within view (e.g., the table in the next room). It also allows one to mentally picture an object that does not currently exist (e.g., personal jet packs) or an object of fantasy that

² Peter Stuart Bentley, “Development of an art retreat that will assist retreatants to describe and more fully understand the experience of spiritual direction through ‘art creation,’” (Master’s thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia, 2007, Libraries Australia ID 43777024), 19.

³ Julia Cameron, *The Artist’s Way, A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee Books, 1992), 3.

⁴ Karen Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality: Two Threads of the Same Cloth,” *Religion & Theology* 18 (2011): 62.

⁵ Sally Ann McReynolds, “Imagination,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 531.

will never exist (e.g., unicorns). Imagination is essential to spirituality because it helps one grasp that which is invisible and mysterious: the spirit of God. It is the imagination that can envision an alternative reality, a better place, such as the kingdom of God. Having envisioned that place, with our “prophetic” imagination, one can move forward in hope toward that ideal and work to make it a reality. Imagination is closely linked to the soul, that inner place, which is neither mind nor body; it is where the divine spark resides within all humans. Carl Jung describes the soul as containing “the faculty of relation to God, i.e., a correspondence, otherwise a connection could never come about.”⁶ The soul is hard to define and impossible to locate; it is thought to be somewhere between understanding and unconsciousness.”⁷ Perhaps the attempt to pin down a precise definition of soul is futile because “the soul prefers to imagine.”⁸ All of these terms will be explored more thoroughly later in this essay.

PRAYER

The desire for God is written on one’s heart. Humans have been created by God and for God who constantly invites humans to come closer.⁹ The oft-quoted phrase from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is a recognition of this truth: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” And so God calls, and one

⁶ Aniela Jaffe, editor, *C.G. Jung: Word and Image* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1979), 229.

⁷ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), xiii.

⁸ Moore, *Care of the Soul*, xi.

⁹ “Man’s Capacity for God: The Desire for God,” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), n. 27.

searches, and when at last God is found, one can rest. It is the searching and the finding and the resting that are done through prayer.

Prayer is the expression of the desire to enter into a relationship with that sacred, invisible mystery some call God.¹⁰ Through prayer, one is opened to an intimate relationship with God, a relationship that thrives when one is willing to be present and reciprocate God's offer of love. According to Thomas Merton, prayer is "a yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for capacity to hear and obey him."¹¹ It is the "raising of one's mind and heart to God."¹² The desire to draw close to the creator is well acknowledged and the stuff of Sunday morning sermons. What is lesser known and harder to believe is that God is wild about humanity. God desires a relationship with humans with a "greater intensity than we can imagine, an intensity that made the cross worthwhile."¹³ That level of intimacy can be intimidating but ultimately rewarding. A close, committed relationship with God requires honesty, openness, and vulnerability before God. God already knows everything about humans, better than they know themselves, but that transparency is essential to a growing intimacy with God.¹⁴ The Book of Psalms provides ample examples of Israelites pouring out their hearts to God in all manner of petition. These prayers of lament and praise have been preserved in the Bible as a guide

¹⁰ Britannica Academic, s. v. "prayer," accessed October 17, 2015, <http://0-academic.eb.com.library.jcu.edu/EBchecked/topic/474128/prayer>.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1996), 45.

¹² "What is Prayer? Prayer as God's gift," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2559.

¹³ Susan Pitchford, *God in the Dark: Suffering and Desire in the Spiritual Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), xviii.

¹⁴ William A. Barry, *Paying Attention to God* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1999), 21.

to how and when to call out to God. The psalms are proof that it is good and proper to tell God how one is feeling. To expose oneself to God requires a degree of trust and a belief that God loves humanity just as, and where, they are. Of course, God does not leave them there. God calls them to transformation, to a place where they become what they are meant to be.¹⁵ “God sees us in our absolute truth and seeing us, He loves us and brings us to blissful fulfillment.”¹⁶ But transformation can only happen if one is open to God. It cannot happen if God is offered only “our goodness, our successes, our strengths.”¹⁷ If one hides some of what one is truly feeling when one turns to God, then some transparency is lost. “It is the giving up the control to God that makes prayer true.”¹⁸

How does one give up control and break down the barriers that hide weakness? How can humans be truly authentic in prayer and be free to let God see them as they are? At different times, and for different people, there are different answers. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”¹⁹ There is a time when authentic prayer is sitting in the dark silence, contemplating the “cloud of unknowing.”²⁰ There is a time for dancing and singing in joyous praise. There is also a time when words fail to express the emotions bubbling up inside and that is the time to look into the imagination for images that describe the soul.

¹⁵ Sister Wendy Beckett, *The Gaze of Love: Meditations on Art & Spiritual Transformation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 9.

¹⁶ Beckett, *Gaze of Love* 10.

¹⁷ Beckett, *Gaze of Love* 10.

¹⁸ Beckett, *Gaze of Love* 10.

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:1.

²⁰ Anonymous work of Christian mystic written in Middle English in the latter half of the 14th century.

Kataphatic and Apophatic Prayer

As noted above, there are two different, but complementary, approaches to prayer that can be used to encounter God. Although some insist that one approach is “holier” than the other and therefore only attainable with deeper spiritual maturity,²¹ both approaches can be useful because, like with any human relationship, in a relationship with God there will be times to talk and times to be silent.²² Each approach brings its own rich experience of God. It is important to remember that it is God who initiates the experiences and that one is not able to compel either the beatific vision or the cloud of unknowing.²³ God is free “to choose how and under what circumstances God discloses God’s self to contemporary people.”²⁴

Prayer that engages imagery, song, dance, scripture, nature, ritual, or any created object is categorized as kataphatic. Prayer that endeavors to remove all created objects from one’s mind is categorized as apophatic. These two categories of prayer have existed since the beginning of Christianity and provide two very different ways to pray. The apophatic prayer tradition emphasizes the enormous difference between the transcendent God and humans, and is contemplative in nature. Also referred to as the *via negativa*, in using this type of prayer, one attempts to encounter God through negation – emptying one’s mind of all distractions, whether images, symbols, or

²¹ Janet K. Ruffing, “The World Transfigured: Kataphatic Religious Experience Explored through Qualitative Research Methodology,” *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995): 232. Undertaking a qualitative research project to examine and validate the kataphatic mystical experience, Ruffing concludes that that kataphatic experience of God is not necessarily either an inferior experience or merely a prelude to an apophatic experience of God.

²² Pitchford, *God in the Dark*, 32.

²³ Ruffing, “The World Transfigured,” 233.

²⁴ Ruffing, “The World Transfigured,” 234.

scripture passages –and just sitting in God’s presence, giving “quiet, silent, loving attention toward God.”²⁵

By contrast, the kataphatic prayer tradition emphasizes the similarity between the Creator and humans and is based on the understanding that the immanent God, the one who can be found in all things, can and does use all things to get one’s attention. This tradition employs an “imaginative rainbow of how God might look, act and reveal himself in the world.”²⁶ Also referred to as the *via affirmativa*, kataphatic prayer refers to experiences of God that rely on objects which are *external* to a person, such as nature, art, language, sounds, rituals, and other people, as well as objects that are *internal*, or within one’s imagination, such as visions, dreams, or locutions.²⁷ Janet Ruffing, spiritual director and educator, explains the difference between the two approaches to prayer by describing the kataphatic experience as looking through a window at God. “The window is there, but what one sees through the window is more important than the window itself.” For people using the kataphatic approach, anything can be a window. For people using the apophatic approach, there is no window.²⁸

Kataphatic Prayer — Illustrated

In order to illustrate the variety of kataphatic experiences, a sampling of scripture passages and medieval mystics will be explored. These will demonstrate how God was encountered via the kataphatic tradition. Since the beginning, religious

²⁵ Pitchford, *God in the Dark*, 28.

²⁶ Gueric DeBoa, “From Lectio to Video: Praying with Images of Jesus,” in *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer*, ed. Christian Raab and Harry Hagan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 255.

²⁷ Ruffing, “The World Transfigured,” 232.

²⁸ Ruffing, “The World Transfigured,” 235.

imagery was used to explain the mystery of God and the mission of Jesus to the illiterate masses.²⁹ Beginning with Genesis, the Bible records an early use of imagery – all humans are images of God: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Jesus himself is the incarnation, the very image of God; Jesus is the icon of God:³⁰ “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 4:9). The gospels include examples of Jesus using words to pray to God: he teaches his disciples to pray in Matthew 6:9 and engages in fervent prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Throughout his teaching, Jesus relied on imagery familiar to his followers when he was trying to explain the mysteries of God and the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus used a variety of metaphors to illustrate these things: Jesus is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:5); Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12) and the bread of life (John 6:35); we are wheat or weeds (Matt 13:24-30); the kingdom of heaven is like a farmer (Matt. 13:24), a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31) or a house with many rooms (John 14:2). His parables, such as the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7), the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the lost son (Luke 15:11-32), used common things and everyday experiences people could easily understand and relate to so that they could begin to understand his teachings and embrace his mission.

Since the beginning of Christianity, imagery was used extensively as an aid to worship in churches and catacombs, in illustrated manuscripts of sacred writings, and extensively in icons in the Eastern Catholic Church. During the Medieval period,

²⁹ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 132.

³⁰ H. D. Egan, “Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 1978): 403.

imagery was paramount in the prayer lives of several medieval mystics, including Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), and Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556). During this period, spiritual imagery had become complementary to “contemplation as an accepted avenue of insight and access to the divine.”³¹ Among her numerous other accomplishments in the fields of liturgical music and pharmacology, Hildegard left behind a legacy of voluminous writings and images that revealed her encounters with God. Hildegard, a German Benedictine abbess, started having visions of God at the age of five. She was embarrassed by them, thinking them childish, and tried to ignore them. Her visions persisted and she became physically ill in attempting to resist them. At age 42, she was finally convinced to record her visions, after which she believed that she gained complete wisdom and understanding of scripture from the divine illuminations, and her health improved.³² Hildegard described the nature of her visions: “not in dreams, nor sleeping, nor in frenzy, nor with the eyes of my body...but watching them, and looking carefully with an innocent mind, with the eyes and ears of the interior man.”³³ Her extraordinary visions included *Veriditas* (see Figure 1, on page 51), a symbol for fertility, grace, life and proof of God’s presence, and a vision of the Trinity in Book II of *Scivias* (see Figure 2, on page 52), which she described as follows:

³¹ James Hamburger, *Nuns as Artist: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1997), 217.

³² Mary T. Malone, *Women & Christianity, Volume II: From 1000 to The Reformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 110.

³³ Quoted in Elizabeth Avilda Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 151.

Then I saw a most splendid light, and in that light, the whole of which burnt in a most beautiful, shining fire, was the figure of a man of a sapphire colour, and that most splendid light poured over the whole of that shining fire, and the shining fire over all that splendid light, and that most splendid light and shining fire over the whole figure of the man, appearing one light in one virtue and power. And again I heard that living Light saying to me: This is the meaning of the mysteries of God.

From just these two examples of Hildegard's visions, it is evident that for her, God could be found everywhere and in everything. She was a true kataphatic mystic.

Another example of a mystic who used imagery in prayer is Teresa of Avila, a Spanish-born Doctor of the Church and co-founder of the Discalced Carmelites religious order along with John of the Cross. Responsible for urging a return to piety in her Carmelite order, Teresa emphasized the importance of prayer which she described as "nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us."³⁴ In her book *The Interior Castle*, Teresa notes that prayer becomes contemplation "when God takes over;" contemplative prayer is principally initiated and directed by God rather than the person praying.³⁵ Others have defined contemplative prayer as unique to the apophatic tradition – beyond words, thoughts and feelings.³⁶ Teresa considered her approach to prayer as mental or interior prayer and she used plenty of images. In the same way that Jesus used parables about everyday objects and activities, Teresa used images of common experiences as metaphors to teach her young nuns and to describe the steps "toward mystical union in

³⁴ "Contemplative Prayer," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2709.

³⁵ Pitchford, *God in the Dark*, 34.

³⁶ Pitchford, *God in the Dark*, 34. According to Pitchford, this definition is too restrictive. I think Teresa would agree.

ways that will be intelligible to people who may not have experienced it.”³⁷ Teresa relied heavily on metaphors in *The Interior Castle* in which she describes the soul’s journey to God through a beautiful castle made of diamonds and many chambers.³⁸ Prayer is the gateway into that castle,³⁹ the way to a closer union with God.

In her personal prayer life, Teresa used her imagination to journey inward, using holy pictures, nature scenes and simple gospel reflections to recall the mysteries of Christ’s life.⁴⁰ Devotees of both approaches to prayer, kataphatic and apophatic, claim Teresa as an advocate as she is a perfect example of the integration of the two paths to spirituality.⁴¹ Arguing that contemplative prayer can be experienced as apophatic *or* kataphatic, it has been said that Teresa “experienced God in as well as beyond the image.”⁴²

Experiencing God through the imagery of the scriptures is an essential component of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, a fellow countryman and contemporary of Teresa. As Ignatius led directees through each week of his Spiritual Exercises, he asked them to express the desire to “know better in order to love better and to love better in order to follow more faithfully.”⁴³ In order to realize this desire, Ignatius developed the concept of imaginative contemplation which requires directees

³⁷ Elaini G. Tsoukatos, “Finding God in All Things: Teresa of Avila’s Use of the Familiar” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2011), 1.

³⁸ Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 21.

³⁹ Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 3.

⁴⁰ Ernest E. Larkin, “Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer,” in *Carmelite Studies, 3: Centenary of Saint Teresa*, ed. John Sullivan, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1984), 397.

⁴¹ Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 36.

⁴² Larkin, “Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer,” 390.

⁴³ Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing, 2008), 91.

“to see with the eyes of the imagination,” to watch and notice the scene of the gospel story under contemplation, and to use all of the senses in order to bring to life the scene, setting, and action of the participants in each story. He wanted directees to go one step farther. Ignatius invited directees to become part of the action. The one doing the exercises “is not an onlooker, outside the situation, but present within it.”⁴⁴ He urged directees to bring their five senses to bear on the stories of the life of Jesus by seeing the people in the story, hearing what they might say, smelling and tasting “the infinite gentleness and sweetness of the divinity”⁴⁵ and touching - embracing or kissing - the people, places or things involved in the gospel stories so as “to derive a greater increase of devotion or of any spiritual good.”⁴⁶ By putting one’s self into the action, many have heard the voice of Jesus, felt his direct gaze upon them, or experienced his healing touch. When one engages the senses in imaginative contemplation, one becomes part of the action and the scripture stories become real. In this way, one can develop a felt sense of divine presence, a true encounter with the God, which results in knowing better, loving better and following more faithfully the way of Jesus.

The reliance on an imaginative use of senses by Ignatius is kataphatic contemplation at its best. The participants of the art journaling retreat described and evaluated below are affiliated with the Ignatian Spirituality Institute at John Carroll University and therefore have a kataphatic bent resulting from their training in Ignatian Spirituality. Given the subject matter of this essay, this essay’s focus will be on the use of kataphatic prayer to facilitate an encounter with God. Kataphatic prayer as a way to

⁴⁴ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 95.

⁴⁵ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 99.

⁴⁶ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 100.

communicate with God and as a vehicle for expression will be explored through the lens of creativity.

Why Pray?

Prayer, as noted above, is foundational to a vital spiritual life, regardless of the approach used. In a study of the kataphatic religious experiences of 24 individuals with substantial experience in spiritual direction, Janet Ruffing used an interview methodology to collect their self-reported life and prayer experiences.⁴⁷ Her participants all indicated that through prayer, they felt a strong presence of God, whether pervasive or intermittent.⁴⁸ Prayer, then, is a place where God can be encountered. Most of the participants reported that through prayer, they were able to experience a consciousness of Jesus as a model for life, and as an intimate friend.⁴⁹ While opening up to God, one becomes aware that one is part of something bigger than one's self. In prayer, one can transcend one's self and one's world and touch the divine. In addition to this sense of transcendence, Ruffing's participants reported a variety of additional benefits resulting from their kataphatic prayer experiences. Themes that emerged included healing of psychological blocks or wounds in the participants, increased freedom in relationship with God which led to more authentic prayer, and improved life-circumstances which affected the experience of prayer.⁵⁰ They also

⁴⁷ Ruffing, "The World Transfigured," 234-35. Ruffing's goal was to prove that the kataphatic experience of God is not necessarily either an inferior experience nor merely a prelude to apophatic experience of God. "The same divine reality is experienced through kataphatic mediations as is experienced through apophatic modes of attention" 235.

⁴⁸ Ruffing, "The World Transfigured," 245.

⁴⁹ Ruffing, "The World Transfigured," 247.

⁵⁰ Ruffing, "The World Transfigured," 247.

claimed improvements in relationships with others because of an enhanced confidence “in the knowledge that they were loved and accepted by God.”⁵¹

Through prayer, one is transformed so that one can see more clearly, love more dearly and follow more nearly.⁵² The power of prayer to transform is captured by C.S. Lewis quoted in the 1993 movie “Shadowlands.” He explained why he prays, “Prayer doesn’t change God - it changes me.” As transformed people, Christians are able to understand and become more aware of God’s will for their lives, and receive insight to determine the next right step.

PRAYER AS A VEHICLE OF EXPRESSION

Besides the experience of healing, freedom, an increase in self-understanding and a realization of how much God yearns for humans, prayer is a vehicle for expression – for finding one’s own voice and for claiming one’s own unique experience of God. With that comes a sense of empowerment. Acknowledging one’s own spiritual experience and expressing one’s own voice was not encouraged and was not even allowed for women at the time of the medieval mystics. Indeed, there continues to be restrictions and silencing of women in various cultures and within the Christian tradition today.⁵³ Private prayer is one place where all are able to freely express themselves to the creator without restriction or inhibition.

During the Middle Ages, as universities were beginning to flourish, the study of theology developed as an analytical subject in which men strove to gain knowledge of

⁵¹ Ruffing, “The World Transfigured,” 249.

⁵² Stephen Schwartz, “Day by Day” lyrics in *Godspell*, the musical, 1971.

⁵³ Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality,” 1.

God. The focus on the intellectual pursuit of God minimized the validity of experiential encounters of God.⁵⁴ As women were not allowed to attend universities, many learned to depend on their own internal resources and encountered God in an experiential way.⁵⁵ Due to the cultural restrictions of the day, it was dangerous for women to assert that they had received messages from God.⁵⁶ In spite of this, history provides vivid examples of women who were compelled to express what God was telling them. Women mystics, like Hildegard and Teresa, wrote “because God directed them to write.”⁵⁷ These women felt directed by God but spoke in their own voice in the same way that the authors of the Bible were inspired by God. These women were bold and confident, “profoundly convinced that their experiences came directly from God and that their fidelity to these was a prior commitment...God must be obeyed first, not men.”⁵⁸ Very few women were literate at that time so very few of their writings have been preserved. The study of imagery used by medieval women as aids to their worship is helpful in understanding their lives because their imagery helps to illuminate the limited verbal texts that they left behind.⁵⁹

Following the Protestant Reformation, using imagery for worship was prohibited in Protestant churches because it was seen as an affront to the authority of the Bible and

⁵⁴ Pitchford, *God in the Dark*, 35.

⁵⁵ Malone, *Women & Christianity*, 100.

⁵⁶ Malone, *Women & Christianity*, 111.

⁵⁷ Malone, *Women & Christianity*, 99-100. Malone relates that physical illness usually characterized the women’s resistance to writing down their visionary experiences, and that as soon as those experiences are committed to writing, the illnesses disappeared.

⁵⁸ Malone, *Women & Christianity*, 100.

⁵⁹ Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 10.

the reliance on “*sola scriptura*.”⁶⁰ During the Age of Enlightenment, when reason and science were becoming the new authority, Christianity fought to maintain *its* authority by rejecting modernity and insisting that salvation, and God, could only be found within the church. The clergy discouraged the pursuit of personal experiences of God due to the immense amount of energy it would take to verify all such experiences.⁶¹

Imagination lost credibility, having been deemed only appropriate for fantasy and play.⁶² “What was esteemed is faithfulness, not creativity. The danger of creativity is that of hubris or human pride, the glorification of humanity at the expense of the creator.”⁶³ Use of imagery, especially by women, was said to give “vent to innate corporeality and irrationality, implicitly depreciates the religious practice of women in which the visual experience, much of it molded by images played a central role.”⁶⁴ As a result, the legitimacy of imagery to support one’s spirituality had been questioned and discouraged.

Since the Second Vatican Council re-emphasized the universal call to holiness, there has been an upswing in the search for wholeness and spirituality among believers at the same time as a rediscovery of the relationship between art and spirituality.⁶⁵ The imagination has been regaining “its power to enrich spirituality.”⁶⁶ This rediscovery of

⁶⁰ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 217.

⁶¹ Pitchford, *God in the Dark*, 37.

⁶² Kathleen Fischer, “The Imagination in Spirituality,” *The Way Supplement* No. 66 (1989): 96.

⁶³ Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality” 59, quoting theologian John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

⁶⁴ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 217.

⁶⁵ Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 40.

⁶⁶ Fischer, “The Imagination in Spirituality,” 96.

the imagination arose contemporaneously with the growing acceptance of the use of art making as a self-reflective tool in the field of psychotherapy. Generally speaking, art therapy is a mental health profession that provides a non-verbal alternative to traditional talk psychotherapy with the goal to “unlock emotional expression by facilitating non-verbal communication.”⁶⁷ In art therapy, clients “use art media, and often the verbal processing of produced imagery, to help resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight.”⁶⁸ The success of this type of therapy rests on the premise that a “visual symbolic representation is far less likely to interrupt and distort than verbal translations of sensory-based experience.”⁶⁹ Art therapists started using their own techniques in their personal spiritual journeys and discovered that they had far-reaching applications beyond their professional analytical disciplines.⁷⁰ Everyone can improve spiritual wellness by using the same techniques that are used to achieve mental wellness. Art helps people rediscover that sense of something larger than themselves, something beyond what they thought possible.⁷¹ “We cannot underestimate how our present culture works against this sense of the spiritual, how hungry people are for something they can’t quite name.”⁷² Today, creativity is being recognized “as a

⁶⁷ American Art Therapy Association, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://arttherapy.org/aata-aboutus/>.

⁶⁸ American Art Therapy Association.

⁶⁹ Renate Düllmann, “Art: Containment and Language of Soul,” *The Way Supplement* No. 95 (1999): 84.

⁷⁰ Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 5.

⁷¹ Catherine Moon, “Prayer, Sacraments, Grace,” in *Spirituality and Art Therapy: Living the Connection*, ed. Mimi Farrelly-Hansen (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 36.

⁷² P. B. Allen, “Art Therapists who are Artists,” *American Journal of Art Therapy* 39, no. 4 (May 2001): 105.

divine gift that affirms life... as a vital spiritual force, the life-energy that flows through us, wherein we participate with God.”⁷³ Many are eager for a personal, meaningful connection with God. Using prayer to express one’s self to God openly and honestly helps one move toward greater intimacy with God. Using prayer to express one’s own voice, one’s feelings and one’s beliefs is also an effective way to gain understanding about one’s self and to discover insights into one’s soul. Some would claim it is urgent to “find your authentic voice.”⁷⁴ Expressing one’s voice is the first step to balancing one’s inner and outer life,⁷⁵ a balance that is essential, according to Jung, for achieving psychic equilibrium, that balance between the conscious and unconscious mind, as discussed below.

Unfortunately, sometimes one’s culture or one’s faith community sends a message that women are to be silent and obedient or that women’s gifts and opinions are not valued. “Many women experience the dissonance of belonging, yet not belonging, to a faith community that does not hear women well.”⁷⁶ In patriarchal cultures, found extensively but not exclusively in the global south, women searching for spiritual nourishment from organized religions are subjected to a masculine image of God and a male-dominated hierarchy which perpetrates sexism and oppression.⁷⁷ The images used to understand God do influence one’s relationship with God, as well as the

⁷³ Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality,” 59.

⁷⁴ Marianne Hieb, *Inner Journeying Through Art-Journaling: Learning to See and Record Your Life as a Work of Art* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), 110.

⁷⁵ Hieb, *Inner Journeying*, 110.

⁷⁶ Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality,” 63.

⁷⁷ Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality,” 63.

way one understands one's self and others.⁷⁸ Masculine images of God can negatively affect the way women view themselves.⁷⁹ "Sexist God language undermines the human equality of women made in the divine image and likeness."⁸⁰ In traditional, patriarchal church settings, women who are not able to find spiritual fulfillment through traditional avenues are still able to seek out their own personal experience and knowing of God through creative, expressive prayer. "Through their creativity, God's Spirit is encountered, listened to, expressed and set free."⁸¹ This essay will go into greater depth on creative expression through prayer below, but first, it is important to address the significance of the expression of female voices. As a woman and a member of a patriarchal religious organization, I feel it is critical for women to find their own voice and be free to express it. Such expression serves to validate women's dignity and position as beloved daughters created in God's image. Expression of women's voices also serves as prophetic voices in the world today in the same way that Hildegard saw herself as a prophet, speaking the words given to her through divine illumination. Images that represent one's understanding of, and encounters with, God allow one "to imagine differently, to make new associations of ideas... to think of [God's message] in new contexts with new possibilities of association."⁸² With new ideas and insights, women can and should be free to step into their prophetic role, imagining a better

⁷⁸ Virginia Ann Froehle, *Called into Her Presence: Praying with Feminine Images of God* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992), 19.

⁷⁹ Froehle, *Called into Her Presence*, 28.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2014), 18.

⁸¹ Buckenham, "Creativity and Spirituality," 63.

⁸² Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 133.

world, breaking through the old structures, patterns, and beliefs, and bringing forth needed healing, hope and growth.⁸³

Why is expression so important? Scholars believe that there is a basic human need to express ourselves. Once the basic survival needs have been met, “people exhibit a strong drive toward self-expression.”⁸⁴ Perhaps, this drive toward expression, be it through writing, music, fine arts or movement, is an “echo of God’s creative goodness” that has been given to everyone.⁸⁵ It is well-established that denying the innate need to express one’s self, by suppressing thoughts and feelings, can be emotionally and physically detrimental. However, expressing them can be beneficial, indeed liberating.⁸⁶ Carl Jung, one of the most influential modern psychologists, stressed that mental health and spiritual well-being were dependent on psychic equilibrium – a state of balance between the conscious and unconscious minds.⁸⁷ According to Jung, the unconscious mind holds memories, perceptions and concepts that slip out of the attention of the conscious mind but continue to affect all conscious thought and behavior.⁸⁸

Through the process of self-reflection, one can become more aware of and more comfortable with expressing thoughts, feelings and emotions hidden in the unconscious

⁸³ Buckenham, “Creativity and Spirituality,” 68.

⁸⁴ This important human need was established by psychologist Abraham Maslow, referenced in Cathy A. Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 16.

⁸⁵ Trevor Hart, “Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth,” in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, ed. J. Begbie (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2002), 2.

⁸⁶ James W. Pennebaker, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1990), 5.

⁸⁷ Brian Luke Seaward, *Managing Stress: Principles and Strategies for Health and Well-Being* (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2012), 103.

⁸⁸ Seaward, *Managing Stress*, 101.

mind, thereby resolving the tension between the conscious and unconscious and bringing them into balance. Emotions often serve as a warning of a lack of balance and a call to attention.⁸⁹ Holding back important feelings and thoughts can have negative consequences for one's health. Suppressing, or actively inhibiting, thoughts and feelings, is physiologically demanding and places stress on the body resulting in higher incidences of stress-related physical issues.⁹⁰ Suppressed feelings, emotions, opinions, and gifts "don't just go away. They are likely to fester and eat away at our worthiness."⁹¹

Studies conducted by psychologist James W. Pennebaker conclude that when one suppresses feelings and thoughts about negative or traumatic events, one generally does not feel free to talk about them. By not talking about the "inhibited event," one does not avail one's self of the opportunity to "translate the event into language. This prevents the understanding and assimilation of the event. Consequently, significant experiences that are inhibited are likely to surface in the forms of ruminations, dreams, and associated thought disturbances"⁹² which can last for years, or until such understanding and assimilation can take place. This is the basis for talk psychotherapy. The act of recognizing, naming and acknowledging feelings and thoughts helps to reduce the stress on the body, and leads to healing and moving past the formerly

⁸⁹ Barbara Ganim and Susan Fox, *Visual Journaling: Going Deeper than Words* (Wheaton IL: Quest Books, 1999), 31.

⁹⁰ Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 9.

⁹¹ Brené C. Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 2010), 53.

⁹² Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 9.

inhibited event.⁹³ Pennebaker notes that expressing oneself through prayer works the same way as talking about feelings or thoughts with a trusted friend. Prayerful communication is usually conducted in a safe place and without judgment—in private or with a trusted spiritual director or to God directly. “Prayer is a form of disclosure or confiding.”⁹⁴

When Expression Is Difficult

Having established the importance of expression, one may ask why it is sometimes difficult to express feelings or thoughts about inhibited events. Inhibition is very helpful to one’s safety and well-being as individuals and as a society. Inhibitions keep the primal urges, like sexual urges and aggression, from wreaking havoc on one’s self and on the people nearby. It is the “scotch tape of civilization.”⁹⁵ Individual experiences and cultural expectations form the basis of inhibitions, which operate out of the executive control center of the brain. This part of the brain is responsible for planning, reasoning, and conscious decision-making and acts on information, including one’s experiences and cultural expectations, some of which may be incomplete, erroneous, or biased.⁹⁶ These may include erroneous or outdated notions of who God is and how God may react if one is completely open and honest. Being afraid of how God may react is a perfectly normal response if one’s image of God is negative or judgmental. Fear is a strong inhibiting emotion that is also essential to survival, serving

⁹³ Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 10.

⁹⁴ Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 24. He also notes that expression of inhibited thoughts or feelings in a laboratory setting has the same powerful effect as disclosure in a confessional (e.g., reduced blood pressure and heart rate) both settings being construed as safe and non-judgmental, 56.

⁹⁵ Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 12.

⁹⁶ Shelly Carson, *Your Creative Brain, Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity and Innovation in Your Life* (Boston: Harvard Health Publications, 2010), 46.

as a warning of the possibility of danger. However, when inhibitions are allowed too much control they can have negative consequences: one may turn away or avoid growing closer to God, thinking that one is being protective.

There are times when the volume on the executive control center should be turned down, so that other parts of the brain, or the unconscious mind, can bring thoughts and feelings into conscious awareness for processing and expression without the imposition of overbearing restrictions and inhibitions. As noted above, using visual symbolic representations instead of verbal translations of emotions is one way to turn down the volume on the executive control center of the brain. There are times when one needs to hear and listen to the voice inside, the voice of one's soul,⁹⁷ to become aware of feelings and emotions that affect one's inner journey which most of the time may remain hidden in the unconscious. Sometimes, "it must be said."⁹⁸ One of the best ways to say it is through creative expression.

FACILITATING EXPRESSION THROUGH CREATIVITY

Creative expression is especially helpful for interior experiences that are too big or mysterious or unclear for words. Or for emotions that are too strong or too raw for words. Or for grief that is very fresh and has caused numbness that makes it impossible to translate into words. In these circumstances, emotions can be expressed, maybe "released" is more appropriate here, in a torrent of mark-making with vivid colors or ripping magazine pictures and assembling them into a story reflecting one's inner

⁹⁷ Ganim, *Visual Journaling*, 67.

⁹⁸ Buckenham, "Creativity and Spirituality," 68.

journey.⁹⁹ Using images to express emotions by portraying them as colors, shapes, or textures provide a window to those emotions that may not be accessible through words.¹⁰⁰ Images can be used to unlock the unconscious;¹⁰¹ they open a door to deeper understanding and clarity.¹⁰² Images expressed through the art materials echo the voice of one's soul;¹⁰³ this is the "voice that can help us rediscover the essence of who we really are."¹⁰⁴ This creative process is an "alternative prayer language,"¹⁰⁵ one that empowers people to recreate themselves. Art empowers people "to have a say in how we will shape and respond to the suffering and hope within us."¹⁰⁶

Creative self-expression often leads to awareness, the first step toward change.¹⁰⁷ It can lift inhibitions so that one is able to see more clearly what is going on interiorly and emotions can be named and recognized for what they are. By drawing the images in one's imagination, one's emotions become tangible¹⁰⁸ and concrete. Artwork "asks questions, offers insights, or...enlarges the parameters of our consciousness."¹⁰⁹ This unique ability of images to bring clarity and insight is due to the dichotomy between the two hemispheres of the brain. The left side of the brain processes

⁹⁹ Kay Marie Porterfield, "Keeping a Journal when Words Fail," accessed 1/7/2016, www.kporterfield.com/journal/visual_grief.html.

¹⁰⁰ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 12.

¹⁰² Janet R. Walton, "Art," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 60.

¹⁰³ Ganim, *Visual Journaling*, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Ganim, *Visual Journaling*, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Moon, "Prayer, Sacraments, Grace," 32.

¹⁰⁶ Moon, "Prayer, Sacraments, Grace," 37.

¹⁰⁷ Walton, *Dictionary*, 61.

¹⁰⁸ Walton, *Dictionary*, 61.

¹⁰⁹ Walton, *Dictionary*, 61.

information rationally, mainly words and numbers, in an analytical and linear manner and is adept at sharply-focused attention to detail. The right side of the brain is designed to process images and spatial awareness, to make associations between seemingly unrelated elements, and perceive experiences more intuitively and holistically.¹¹⁰ Thus, relying on imagery in the right hemisphere, one is likely to gain understanding through connections and find meanings about one's experiences that might evade the rational processing taking place in the left hemisphere of the brain. By creating artistic images, one can access the perception and sensory parts of the brain "in ways that verbal language does not."¹¹¹ Using words to describe experiences leads to an *interpretation* of those experiences because words tell us how one *should* feel since they are processed in the analytical, judgmental side of the brain. By contrast, images derive from the sensing, intuitive side of the brain and *reveal* emotions instead of interpreting them. It is critical to distinguish between words and images when considering one's inner journey. "Words tell us what we *think* we feel, which is not always the same as what we actually feel."¹¹² This is the distinction I would like to make for the recently-widowed woman I introduced at the beginning of this essay. The image she would draw to portray how she felt about losing her husband might be quite different from the words she was struggling with to describe how she *should* feel about her loss.

¹¹⁰ Carson, *Your Creative Brain*, 43; Mary Karita Ivancic, "Teaching Scripture through the Arts: A Model for Stimulating Biblical Imagination as a Means of Faith Development in the Adult Student" (PhD diss., St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology, 2004), 53.

¹¹¹ American Art Therapy Association.

¹¹² Ganim, *Visual Journaling*, 10.

Creativity as an aid to expression is attractive to those who have difficulty using words to convey their experience of God and the state of their souls, as well as those who find traditional God-talk off-putting or uncomfortable.¹¹³ The very act of getting the image out of one's head by portraying it onto a fixed format "effects a change from an unconscious state in the artist, to a more conscious one. As a result of this, even without verbal interpretation, a transformation begins to take place in the inner world of the artist."¹¹⁴

Once emotions have been revealed through images and have been manifested in some type of artistic rendering, then it may be useful to translate feelings and thoughts into language and name the images. As noted above, combining creative expression with spoken or written evaluation of the experience may help facilitate healing.¹¹⁵ After the drawing of images in the art journaling retreat, I recommend that the retreat participants write about the experience, at least by giving their images a title.

IMAGINATION AND IMAGERY

John Henry Cardinal Newman is credited as saying that "faith begins not in the word and the concept, but in the image and the symbol. Before faith is credible to reason, it must be credible to the imagination." There are a variety of ways to use images and the imagination to support faith journeys: by visually placing one's self in the scene of a Bible story as recommended by Ignatius or by meditating on masterpieces of religious art and deriving inspiration from them as did Henri Nouwen in his book,

¹¹³ Düllmann, "Art: Containment," 83.

¹¹⁴ Joy Schaverien, *The Revealing Image: Analytical Art Psychotherapy in Theory and Practice*, (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), 7.

¹¹⁵ Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, 101.

*The Return of the Prodigal Son.*¹¹⁶ This section of the essay will explore the making of and reflecting on images that arise in the imagination after praying about particular instances of life or times when God's presence, or absence, was experienced. Praying with images requires attentiveness to one's inner voice and to God's voice, and responsiveness to God "in the imagination's own language, at the level of image, symbol, story and ritual."¹¹⁷ In one's imagination, one can look anew at painful feelings or previous experiences, in the loving presence of God. As one invites God into one's prayer experience, one can be assured of God's healing power, words of comfort and a measure of grace to aid spiritual growth and movement toward wholeness.¹¹⁸ Besides healing and personal growth, images that arise may compel compassion and nurture hope for a reality that is not yet. Compassion, the sharing in the suffering of others, relies on emotion, not reason. Through the imagination, one can imagine what it must be like to suffer as others do and then hear God's call to respond. Likewise, hope is possible because of imagination, allowing one to envision new alternatives or possibilities in circumstances that the intellect has determined to be hopeless, or in situations where one feels trapped. As with the prophets in the Old Testament and Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom of God, it is possible to believe that there is a better way, if only it can be imagined.

¹¹⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

¹¹⁷ Fischer, *The Imagination in Spirituality*, 100.

¹¹⁸ Fischer, *The Imagination in Spirituality*, 100.

God Is Encountered in the Imagination

Christian belief and experience hold that imagination is where Christians encounter God.¹¹⁹ Imagination is “the anthropological point of contact for divine revelation.... It is simply the place where it happens.”¹²⁰ There are many ways and places to experience the grace of God externally, such as the sacraments, especially the Eucharist in Mass, and through various sacramentals. Encountering God internally is accomplished using imagination, which can be “an instrument of grace.”¹²¹ Because the attempt to reach out to the mystery of God cannot be seen or felt, the imagination gives people a way to know and to understand.¹²² “Imagination makes accessible what would otherwise be unavailable to us,” whether due to temporal or spatial constraints, or logically unavailable as in the case of God or the devil because these “are not subject to direct observation.”¹²³ The imagination is “the principal human organ for knowing and responding to disclosure of transcendent truth.”¹²⁴ Former monk and psychotherapist, Thomas Moore, suggests that using images in the imagination allow one to move “to deep places [where] the sacred is revealed.”¹²⁵

The imagination is able to draw from both the conscious mind and the unconscious mind, and is a bridge between them.¹²⁶ According to Carl Jung, all

¹¹⁹ Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 40.

¹²⁰ Green, *Imagining God*, 40.

¹²¹ Dullmann, “Art: Containment,” 86.

¹²² Fischer, *The Imagination in Spirituality*, 96.

¹²³ Green, *Imagining God*, 64-65.

¹²⁴ Ivancic, *Teaching Scripture through the Arts*, 44.

¹²⁵ Moore, *Care of the Soul*, 289.

¹²⁶ Ivancic, *Teaching Scripture through the Arts*, 16.

humans were created with a spiritual drive that is rooted within the unconscious mind. Jung theorized that there were two levels of the unconscious: personal and collective. The collective unconscious is “divine in its nature, the essence of God within all of us.”¹²⁷ Jung believed that God is a “unifying force that resides...in the depths of the unconscious mind.”¹²⁸ In the collective unconscious, to which all humans have access, common symbols can be found that everyone shares, called “archetypes,” which allow for the expression of that which transcends the ability to reason, that which is mysterious and beyond human understanding. For Jung, archetypal symbols are the way to express the unknown. Jung relied heavily on imagery in his work, believing that by recognizing images in dreams or in artwork as representations or personifications of emotions or thoughts, one could understand them better and begin to process them and heal from the experiences connected to those images.¹²⁹ By tapping into symbols or images in the collective unconscious, one can access the essence of God.

The imagination allows one to look inside one’s self. “This experiential revelation of ourselves... is the revelation of God, since we are a word bespoken by God. In getting more in touch with ourselves, we touch God. The encounter with self can thus be an encounter with God.”¹³⁰ Not all images from the imagination bring an encounter with God, some can be “merely psychic” without the grace of God’s self-disclosure.¹³¹ Returning to the definition of prayer from the Catechism, one must have

¹²⁷ Seaward, *Managing Stress*, 172.

¹²⁸ Seaward, *Managing Stress*, 173.

¹²⁹ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 9.

¹³⁰ Larkin, *St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer*, 395.

¹³¹ Larkin, *St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer*, 395.

the intention of raising one's mind and heart to God in order to be open to an encounter with God. In using images as prayer, it is required to have the intention of seeking God through imagery; the purpose is not to make art but to reach out to God."¹³²

The Power of Images

Images are powerful, bringing that which is beyond the conscious understanding into a form that is recognizable.¹³³ They are a medium of God's grace because they refer humans to the source of that grace.¹³⁴ Images can translate one's experience of the mystery of God – something that is *not* susceptible to direct observation – into colors, lines and shapes – which can be observed and understood because they derive from one's own direct experiences.¹³⁵ The imagination provides images that integrate or bring together one's inner and outer self, the conscious and the unconscious, the human and the divine.¹³⁶ These images “represent us as we are – our moods, feelings, brokenness, yearnings, freedoms and unfreedoms, sinfulness and union with God.”¹³⁷ By accessing these images, and praying with them, one is able to increase one's self-knowledge.

The external expression of self-knowledge, or the inner experience, became prominent in the professional art scene through the abstract art movement that began at the beginning of the twentieth century. Abstract imagery provided a way to recover the

¹³² Jeri Gerding, *Drawing to God: Art as Prayer, Prayer as Art* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2001), 13.

¹³³ Gerding, *Drawing to God*, 71.

¹³⁴ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 160-61.

¹³⁵ Green, *Imagining God*, 66.

¹³⁶ Larkin, *St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer*, 395.

¹³⁷ Larkin, *St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer*, 395.

spiritual dimension of human experience. For many, abstract art was “the external expression of inner meaning”¹³⁸ in a way that realistic art was not. “Painting, like music, should devote itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but to the expression of the artist’s soul.”¹³⁹ According to Wassily Kandinsky, a leader in the abstract art movement, “form and color themselves express the artist’s spiritual interior state and are capable of producing a corresponding ‘vibration’ in the viewer’s soul.”¹⁴⁰ Abstract painters felt that art’s purpose was to express one’s interiority; such artwork was “created out of unimpeded creative responses to the inner life of the artist”¹⁴¹ and was a reflection of the artist’s soul. Kandinsky wanted to portray his experience of transcendence and his spirituality “through a universal visual language of abstract forms and colors that transcended cultural and physical boundaries.”¹⁴²

Please refer to two of Kandinsky’s paintings reproduced as Figures 3 and 4 on pages 53 and 54, respectively. The first painting, entitled “Composition VII” (1913), is an early abstract painting that reflected his preoccupation with the themes of apocalypse and redemption. “Kandinsky formally tied the whirling composition of the painting to the theme of the cyclical processes of destruction and salvation. He imbued his paintings with multiple references to the Last Judgment, the Deluge, and the Garden of

¹³⁸ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 94.

¹³⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1947), 40.

¹⁴⁰ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 42.

¹⁴² “Wassily Kandinsky,” TheArtStory.org, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-kandinsky-wassily.htm>.

Eden, seemingly all at once.”¹⁴³ A later painting entitled “Several Circles” (1926), demonstrates Kandinsky’s “lifelong search for the ideal form of spiritual expression in art. He relied upon the varied possibilities of interpretation for the circle to create a sense of spiritual and emotional harmony in this work.”¹⁴⁴

Images Are the Primary Language

People first learned about the world through images, then languages, concepts and metaphors.¹⁴⁵ The ability to understand and communicate with images developed long before the ability to understand and communicate with words.¹⁴⁶ Images are the primary method of one’s inner communication; words are the primary method of communicating with others, so it makes sense that one should rely on images to express and understand one’s inner journey, one’s thoughts and one’s emotions.¹⁴⁷ God knows that the primary language for humanity is imagery so God reveals Godself to humans in a way that they can understand – through images, symbols and metaphors. God appears to God’s people in the Bible as the burning bush, the wind, and the pillar of cloud and fire, just to name a few examples. God uses images so that humanity can understand the mystery that is God.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ “Important Art by Wassily Kandinsky,” TheArtStory.org, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-kandinsky-wassily-artworks.htm>.

¹⁴⁴ “Important Art by Wassily Kandinsky,” TheArtStory.org, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-kandinsky-wassily-artworks.htm>.

¹⁴⁵ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 7.

¹⁴⁶ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 9. People thought in images before “word-dominated school clouded their mind’s eye.” Ian Robertson, *Opening the Mind’s Eye: How Images and Language Teach Us How to See* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 3.

¹⁴⁷ Ganim, *Visual Journaling*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ Gerding, *Drawing to God*, 71.

Images Help to Express the Inner Voice

While engaged in the creative act of drawing images, it is necessary to turn down the outside influences and external pronouncements in order to hear the inner wisdom. Authentic, insightful new solutions “to old ways of being, thinking, feeling, and interacting”¹⁴⁹ can be discovered. Creativity allows one to push the boundaries and reject restrictive assumptions as one opens up and tries out new possibilities. It is worth remembering that when looking for meaning in experiences, one brings one’s self, one’s upbringing and one’s culture along. “Our encounter with the self-revelation of God always has an element of *us* in the encounter”¹⁵⁰ [emphasis added]. It is important to know, however, that one is free to revise and reinterpret one’s experiences and to find new insights when making sense out of one’s experiences of God and of life.¹⁵¹

Images Can Concretize Prayer Experience

When prayer experiences are collected in a visual journal, there is a record of feelings expressed and insights gained. The journal is also the place to “enshrine moments of peak experiences of God,”¹⁵² allowing a return repeatedly to savor those experiences after memories fade. The collected prayers can “arrest life and make it available for contemplation.”¹⁵³ Even if no one else can understand the meaning of the images in the art journal, or perhaps *because* no one else will be able to interpret the artistic creations, the art journal is the place to pour out one’s soul and keep track of

¹⁴⁹ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 67.

¹⁵⁰ Gaillardetz, *By What Authority*, 9.

¹⁵¹ Gaillardetz, *By What Authority*, 9.

¹⁵² Dullmann, “Art: Containment,” 87.

¹⁵³ Moore, *Care of the Soul*, 303.

one's own voice, one's own opinions, and one's own desires. This self-awareness is an important part of one's spiritual journey.¹⁵⁴ Having a permanent record of the expression of one's prayers allows one to come back to images at a later date and reconsider them, perhaps finding new or different meanings in a way that is similar to re-reading scripture passages in different circumstances and finding fresh meanings. It may not be possible to understand the meaning behind the images immediately. Like images in dreams, they are symbolic and may need to be turned over and over in prayerful reflection before they give up their meaning.¹⁵⁵ Images may need to be followed "like a trail of bread crumbs as far as you can," before letting them go for a time.¹⁵⁶ Once the images have been committed to paper, one can return again and again to them until their meaning or message is revealed. It is also helpful to have a record of changes and growth in one's prayer life and to be able to recognize answered prayers.¹⁵⁷ The very act of capturing prayer experiences in a journal "can embody feeling responses, or thoughts, or desires, or experiences of mystery, or images of self or of God, all of which allow for discovery, insight, enlightenment and discernment."¹⁵⁸ Art journals should be considered a safe and sacred "container of the soul."¹⁵⁹

Creative Expression: Enriching the Spiritual Direction Relationship

Creative expression used in the context of spiritual reflection can enrich the quest to find God in all things, and therefore, is an excellent tool to bring depth and

¹⁵⁴ Gerding, *Drawing to God*, 15.

¹⁵⁵ C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 23.

¹⁵⁶ P.B. Allen, *Art as a Way of Knowing* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 74.

¹⁵⁷ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 15.

¹⁵⁸ Düllmann, "Art: Containment," 82.

¹⁵⁹ Düllmann, "Art: Containment," 83.

richness to the spiritual direction relationship. The process of making and praying with images that arise when listening for God's voice can result in a deeper understanding of the mystery of God's presence in one's life.¹⁶⁰ "Inner images evoked in meditative prayer, or images made in clay, or paint, or music, or movement, are like divine and transforming guests who knock on the door of our souls, seeking admittance and hospitality."¹⁶¹ As Rumi suggests in his prayer reproduced at the beginning of this essay, one should welcome and invite them in because they are sent as guides from above.

The process of committing imagery to a visual journal gives directees a "means of expressing what was surfacing for them in their reflection on their inner journey."¹⁶² It provides a way of going deeper in contemplation and spiritual direction.¹⁶³ By going deeper spiritually, a directee becomes aware of experiences and emotions that lay "below the surface of the consciously lived experience."¹⁶⁴ Ideally, directees become aware of their inner guidance that is rooted in "the divine source that ultimately influences life in its deepest and fullest sense and their responses...to that divine reality."¹⁶⁵

Creativity Is Relaxing, Meditative and Fun

Besides the benefits discussed above, the process of engaging in creativity can be very relaxing, meditative and fun. This benefit accounts for the recent explosion in

¹⁶⁰ Düllmann, "Art: Containment," 86.

¹⁶¹ Düllmann, "Art: Containment," 86.

¹⁶² Bentley, "The Development of an Art Retreat," 3.

¹⁶³ Bentley, "The Development of an Art Retreat," 16.

¹⁶⁴ Bentley, "The Development of an Art Retreat," 19.

¹⁶⁵ Bentley, "The Development of an Art Retreat," 19.

adult coloring books. While engaged in meditation, the activity in the brain changes, the parts that are triggered by imagery become more active and the executive control center in the front of the brain, which is in charge of planning and worrying, quiets down.¹⁶⁶ During meditation, hearts soften and open a compassionate space for transformation and healing,¹⁶⁷ a space to hear the voice of the divine.¹⁶⁸ One can lose one's self in creating and enjoy being in the flow of the experience without worrying about outside distractions or demands. It is good to have an activity that is just plain fun and allows for play without being concerned with grades, evaluations, or other concerns rising up from the left side of the brain.

THE ART JOURNALING RETREAT

For those willing to engage in a prayer experience of self-expression with colors, shapes and lines, and to be open to how God might use a tool of creativity and what might develop from a time of quiet prayer and reflection, there is the art journaling experience. I wanted to design an art journaling retreat that would combine creativity with spirituality – where participants could experience a new way to encounter God by tapping into images that would arise in their imagination after hearing certain prompts about God and prayer. I took into account the following elements as I designed the retreat:

Setting – Like any prayerful experience, a quiet, contemplative setting without distraction helps to get into the right frame of mind. Engaging in a ritual of moving to a

¹⁶⁶ Robertson, *Opening the Mind's Eye*, 236.

¹⁶⁷ Düllmann, "Art: Containment," 88.

¹⁶⁸ Bentley, "The Development of an Art Retreat," 24.

quiet place, lighting a candle, playing calming, instrumental music all help to bring the focus away from the busyness and distractions of everyday life and toward this special, quiet time with God. Avoiding the distraction of conversation with others during the art making activities helps to maintain an attitude of prayerful contemplation. By using an art journal, or separate pages that can be affixed into a journal later, a safe place can be created to express one's voice, to name one's emotions, and to record one's inner journeys. In addition, the owner of the art journal gets to decide who, if anyone, will see the sacred artwork.

Intention and Invitation – To begin, it is necessary to become aware of the intention to encounter God and invite God into the creative endeavors. This will help signal that this is not just creating art but an engagement in prayerful dialogue with God through the medium of art. One must trust that God is eagerly waiting for this time with God's beloved, and is lovingly gazing on the individual without criticism or judgment. It is also necessary to acknowledge that it is God who inspires the creativity and who directs the prayerful reflection on the artist's creations. Awareness of God's posture toward God's beloved is essential in order to be willing to trust and be open to the possibilities that may emerge on the paper and in the prayer. Awareness of God's uncritical, loving acceptance helps one to be uncritical and accepting of one's self in this process – of one's artwork, one's creative abilities and the images that may come into one's imagination.

Creating spontaneously and intuitively – By working quickly, playfully and without planning, the volume on the inner critic can be turned down. For some people, participating in an art-making experience may bring back bad memories of hurtful

judgments rendered by childhood art teachers. For many, their own inner critics are quick to find fault. With every color and shape that is drawn, the words of judgment are heard – words that imply that the art that is being created is not good enough. “These voices may not go away, but we can learn to not give them power.”¹⁶⁹ That inner critic is trying to protect individuals from getting hurt or embarrassed, or from “overstepping the bounds of what is acceptable.”¹⁷⁰ It is important to acknowledge the fear or hurt that is behind the voice of the inner critic and to understand that the inner critic is alerting individuals to possible danger. One can invite the inner critic to sit down beside one the journey, but it is critical not to allow the inner critic to drive. If given too much power, the inner critic “gets in the way of your innate ability to gaze at your own life with creativity and compassion.”¹⁷¹ Recognize that in this safe place, it is possible to be free to let God in and see all. It is imperative not to stop to judge or correct, but to lovingly gaze on the artwork with the same loving gaze that God looks upon humanity. Creating spontaneously, without an agenda or plan, allows one to listen attentively to one’s inner wisdom, rather than to one’s inner critic. God’s message must be heard and so it is necessary to learn to listen intuitively from the heart instead of the head, cherishing instead of judging. “Non-judgmental seeing is an ointment for the pain of the past. It is a way to move forward through healing into freedom.”¹⁷²

Making a Connection – The goal is making a connection with God. It is not about making a piece of art that will hang in a gallery or about anyone else’s opinion –

¹⁶⁹ Hieb, *Inner Journeying*, 96.

¹⁷⁰ Janet Conner, *Writing Down Your Soul: How to Activate and Listen to the Extraordinary Voice Within* (San Francisco: Conari, 2008), 94.

¹⁷¹ Hieb, *Inner Journeying*, 86.

¹⁷² Hieb, *Inner Journeying*, 86.

it is about one's journey, one's experiences, one's thoughts, one's voice. It is about making a connection with one's authentic self and one's soul and connecting with the divine within.¹⁷³ In this experience, it is more important to embrace what comes up from the inside than what comes out onto the journal page.

Doing it right – Engaging in creative expression as a way of making a connection with God is not about finding the “right” answer.¹⁷⁴ Nor is it about “doing it right.”¹⁷⁵ In allowing openness to what the creative experience might bring up and awareness that there is safety and love in God's embrace, “the information our souls seek will make itself known.”¹⁷⁶ The reason to include art making into a retreat setting is not to produce aesthetically pleasing pictures, but to facilitate the “discovery of meaning and the mystery of God in...prayer and...lived human experience.”¹⁷⁷

The Art Journaling Retreat — Unfolded

I invited graduates and current students of the Ignatian Spirituality Institute to attend a daylong retreat exploring the use of creative expression to encounter God in prayer. The invitation is attached as Exhibit A. As noted above, these retreat participants have been trained in Ignatian spirituality and therefore are very comfortable with the idea of using imagination in prayer. They are accustomed to using their senses and their imagination to place themselves within the scene of Bible stories and to become part of the action of the story. They have had repeated opportunities to “feel”

¹⁷³ Conner, *Writing Down Your Soul*, 99-101.

¹⁷⁴ Conner, *Writing Down Your Soul*, 138.

¹⁷⁵ Hieb, *Inner Journeying*, 110.

¹⁷⁶ Conner, *Writing Down Your Soul*, 138; Bentley, “The Development of an Art Retreat,” 28.

¹⁷⁷ Düllmann, “Art: Containment,” 82.

scripture passages come alive and see them become more “real” as a result of their kataphatic approach to prayer. They have engaged in exploring their inner selves and following their inner journey in order to draw closer to God themselves and with their spiritual directees. Praying with images as a way to be aware of God’s presence should be very familiar territory for this particular group of retreat participants. That is a benefit; the detriment is that they did not report much increase in their comfort in using images in their prayer by the end of the retreat. The results may have been more dramatic if the retreat participants had been less familiar with using their imaginations in prayer. The results may also have been more dramatic if an additional questionnaire was completed following the passage of a significant amount of time after the conclusion of the retreat, after the participants had had ample opportunity to get comfortable and used to the idea of using art journaling in their prayer life.

The retreat was held at John Carroll University in March, 2016 and the participants were provided with art materials and lunch. The Retreat Schedule is attached as Exhibit B. We opened with the prayer, “The Guest House,” by Rumi, which is on page one of this essay, and a “warm-up” drawing session. After reading that prayer several times, the participants were asked to draw the “guest” that came to mind as a result of hearing the opening prayer. After the opening prayer and drawing warm-up, I led the participants in a meditation in which they were to choose an object on a center table in the retreat room and consider how it was a metaphor for their soul at that moment. This meditation encouraged them to see objects as metaphors for their inner journey and their relationship with God. I anticipated that the metaphor meditation would act as a preparatory step to understanding images in their imagination as

metaphors for their inner journey. A second preparatory step, which I did not use in the March retreat, would have been a collage session where participants choose from a collection of magazine images to make a collage that represents a response to a given prompt or some aspect of their relationship with God. This exercise would enable the participants to use readily available images found in magazines and therefor made by and collected by some third party to express their inner thoughts or emotions. The benefit of the collage exercise is the removal of all concerns about the lack of artistic ability. The limitation of the collage exercise is that the participants would be restricted to the particular collected images to find one that resonates with them. By drawing one's own images, the possibilities are limited only by one's imagination.

Following the metaphor meditation, the participants engaged in two art journaling sessions. At the beginning of each of these sessions, I gave the participants an oral prompt. They were encouraged to consider images that would come into their imagination in response to the prompts, and then concretize those images, to the best of their ability, using the art materials provided to them. After they were finished drawing, I asked them to spend a few minutes lovingly gazing on their artwork and to talk to God about their artwork in order to come to an understanding or gain clarification about what the images meant, or what emotions came up for them during the process. After the participants had completed their artwork for each session, I encouraged them to title each image and journal about their insights or reactions to the process. It is important to note that during this experience, all attempts to find meaning in the art-creations were participant-directed. Anyone other than the artist who seeks to understand the meaning of the artist's work will likely impose their own meaning on the artwork because it is

natural to “project or transfer our beliefs, impressions, ideas or feelings onto the images we see.”¹⁷⁸

During the art-making and reflection portions of each session, the participants were free to move about the room in order to find a measure of privacy if desired. These sessions were conducted in silence with instrumental background music for a period of time after which we came back together as a large group to allow the opportunity to share insights or observations to the extent desired. The prompts that were used in the art journaling retreat are included in the Retreat Schedule attached as Exhibit B. Eighteen individuals attended the retreat and filled out questionnaires at the beginning and at the conclusion of the retreat. The pre-retreat and post-retreat questionnaire formats are attached as Exhibit C. In addition to the various sessions described here, another presenter led the participants in a one-hour session on praying with mandalas. The questionnaires did not evaluate the mandala session.

The Art Journaling Retreat — Results

Does praying with images help facilitate or enrich an encounter with God? It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of a particular prayer technique; indeed, it is inappropriate to talk in terms of the “effectiveness” of prayer as if God were some sort of vending machine. As discussed in an earlier section of this essay, prayer is a way to grow closer with God and to understand God’s will. Prayer frequently results in transformed lives. But none of these are susceptible to quantitative measurement, especially within the context of a one-day retreat. What this retreat did measure was 1) the comfort level of participants with respect to playing and praying with art materials,

¹⁷⁸ Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 8.

2) the likelihood of their continuing to use art journaling as an alternative way to encounter God for themselves and for their spiritual directees in the future, and 3) the likelihood that praying with images led them to a deeper awareness of the inner journey and/or a closer relationship to God.

Comfort Level with Playing with Visual Art as a Way of Prayer

On the eighteen *pre*-retreat questionnaires, eight participants reported that they were “extremely comfortable” with “playing with colors or shapes or lines as a way of prayer,” one was “comfortable,” four were “moderately comfortable” and five were “uncomfortable.” There were 15 participants who reported having used visual art or music or dance as prayer before the March retreat. Eight participants in this group reported being at the top of the comfort zone scale, and therefore, they could not report any improvement in their level of comfort. A retreat promoted as an “art journaling” retreat is likely to attract people who are comfortable with art, so the fact that almost half of the participants reported being “extremely comfortable” should be expected.

By the end of the retreat, half of the participants reported that they were “extremely comfortable,” eight were “comfortable,” one was “moderately comfortable” and no one reported being “uncomfortable.” There was significant movement in the comfort level of the three participants who arrived at the retreat without any previous experience in non-traditional forms of prayer. The fact that all of the participants left the retreat with a feeling of some degree of comfort, and an armful of art materials, leads me to believe they will likely use images in their prayer life in the future.

Likelihood of Continued Use of Art as Prayer

Ten participants reported that they are “very likely” to use this form of prayer in the future for themselves and may recommend it to their directees. Six participants reported that they are “likely” to continue praying with images and may recommend it to others, and two participants are “considering” it. No one reported that they were “unlikely” to use this form of prayer. Two participants reported being interested in using art as prayer, but were unsure about how to start (Participants 7 and 16). For them, this retreat gave them the guidance and reassurance that they needed to start the journey. One participant mentioned that this type of prayer would be useful during certain “seasons” (Participant 5) and others said they had particular directees in mind for whom this type of prayer would be helpful (Participants 2, 8, 16, and 17). These comments lead me to conclude that for some, using creative expression as prayer is suitable for certain times and in certain situations, while for others, it might become their primary mode of prayer. As one’s comfort level increases, I would expect that one would resort more frequently to art materials in order to access the richness of the imagination as a way to encounter God. However, of the two participants who reported that they were “considering” using art-journaling as prayer, one reported being “very comfortable” and the other was “moderately comfortable.”

In addition to being comfortable with artistic expression and art materials, another factor that may affect the likelihood of continued use of this type of prayer is the daunting presence of the inner critic. Several comments indicated that the judgmental voice of the inner critic was an impediment to the full embrace of the art journaling experience (Participants 9, 12 and 18). I tried to head this off at the

beginning of the retreat by setting participants free from the pressure of “doing it right” and the pressure of creating gallery-worthy art, and by encouraging them to gaze non-judgmentally at their art-work in the same manner as God gazes on them. It appears that I had limited effect with this message, which leads to my observation that silencing the inner critic may be a task that requires more encouragement than can be delivered in a one-day retreat.

Likelihood of Praying with Images Leading to a Deeper Awareness of the Inner Journey and a Closer Relationship with God

“God showed up!” I received this response to my question asking the group who showed up in their imagination or on their page after the warm-up drawing session with Rumi’s “Guest House.” That is the crux of prayer and the goal of this retreat: to encounter God. Ten of 18 participants reported that they believed it was “very likely” that this type of praying can lead to a deeper awareness of the inner journey or a closer relationship to God; six more participants reported that they believed such a result is “likely.” Two participants were “not sure” and no one believed such awareness or closeness was “unlikely.”

Two of the participants reported that they had gained some insight or clarity on questions that they had been praying about for some time, and seemed pleasantly surprised that such clarity would come so quickly with this new method of praying (Participants 6 and 16). Several of the participants indicated that they felt more freedom to explore wider horizons than they were able to with words alone (Participants 1, 4, 5, and 8) and one participant was brought to tears while working on her image, which can be a sign of God’s presence. Other comments described the experience as

“engaging, fun and mysterious” (Participant 18) and “a source of pleasure and discovery” (Participant 15). I believe these positive results and comments reported after using a new prayer method for a limited duration are indicative that praying with images is a helpful way to encounter God.

CONCLUSION

My goal for this retreat was to present a safe space and an alternative, creative modality for believers to open themselves up to an honest and authentic method of encountering God. Based on the positive results of the questionnaires and the enthusiastic reactions of the participants, this method of praying with self-created images found in one’s imagination produced a degree of clarity and insight. It facilitated access to the participants’ imagination and resulted in meaningful encounters with God. Many of the participants appreciated learning how to offer individual components of the retreat to their directees, especially in those cases where the directees may be struggling to express their feelings or experience in words. I would like to follow-up with the participants after a period of time to see if and to what extent they have incorporated praying with images into their prayer life. I think it would be interesting to offer this prayer modality to different populations, especially to non-artists, and evaluate their reactions to the process. It could be incorporated into a traditional retreat, with participants who may not be as comfortable expressing themselves through art materials. I would also like to present this process to younger participants who enjoy playing with art because they may not hear the voice of their inner critic quite so loudly.

In this essay, I explored a different pathway to the divine for directors, their directees, and anyone seeking a closer relationship with God, as well as how and why such a method would facilitate that relationship. Encountering God through the modality of creative expression gives one permission and encouragement to express to God one's innermost feelings and emotions, and gives voice to the soul. By engaging in creativity, this modality frees one 1) from the influence of culturally imposed "should" and "should not," 2) from the dominance of the left hemisphere of the brain, and 3) to express one's voice, thoughts, feelings and emotions. This freedom to be one's authentic self, the self that God intended, can lead to a more open and vibrant relationship with the creator. Using creative expression as prayer can lead to transformation and rejuvenation. With it, one can discover clarity and insight, by listening to one's inner wisdom and being attentive to the voice of God. Praying with images allows for "a dialogue with the inner self, with nature, and creation, with your life as it manifests wisdom's creative will and design, and with the mystery and surprise of the sacred."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Hieb, *Inner Journeying*, 151.



Figure 1: *Veriditas*



Figure 2: *Scivias*



Figure 3: Composition VII (1913)



Figure 4: Several Circles (1926)

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EXHIBIT A: RETREAT INVITATION BROCHURE



Mary Coffey



Sharon Seyfarth Garner



Address Service Requested



At John Carroll University

*Tenth Annual Day of
Reunion and Reflection for
Spiritual Directors (and friends)*

Praying with Images: Encountering God through Creative Expression

Presented by:
Mary Coffey (ISI '13)
and
Sharon Seyfarth Garner (ISI '14)

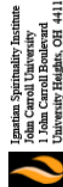
**Saturday
March 12, 2016
10 a.m. - 4 p.m.**

Mackin Room,
Grasselli Library (basement)
(Lunch and art supplies are included)



Mary Coffey was certified as a spiritual director through the ISI in 2013. Intrigued by the theology she had learned, she decided to engage in a deeper exploration of the subject by pursuing a master's degree in theology and religious studies at JCU, securing a position as a graduate assistant in the department. Mary is married with four children, the older ones fully launched and independent, the younger still in school. After graduation this summer, Mary hopes to develop and give retreats which combine elements of creativity and spirituality as well as returning to formal spiritual direction. This workshop will provide her with some of the data she needs to complete her final essay for her master's degree.

*Sharon Seyfarth Garner is an ordained United Methodist Pastor (1995) and author of *Praying with Mandalas: Contemplative Coloring for Contemporary Christians*. After being certified as a spiritual director through ISI in 2014, she founded Belly of the Whale Spiritual Direction and Retreat Ministries in hopes of making spiritual direction and retreat leadership her full-time ministry. Sharon enjoys making pottery, kayaking, coloring, singing loudly, playing "S Crowns" with her two children, and taking long walks with her husband and dog, Bear.*



PRAYING WITH IMAGES: ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Program Description:

In an aesthetic experience, in the creation or the contemplation of a work of art, the psychological conscience is able to attain some of its highest and most perfect fulfillments. Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve.

— Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*.

Using created images in prayer can allow for the expression of insights and feelings that may be difficult to express verbally. The God to whom we pray, along with our relationship with this God, is mysterious to us. Recording prayer in an art journal provides a way to come closer to this mystery of our lives. Praying with images gives our most interior insights and feelings a voice, allowing them to be expressed in a sacred space, in the presence of God.

This retreat day will offer the opportunity to create images in prayerful answer to various prompts designed to elicit the power of one's imagination using design elements of color, line, shape, and space. It will also offer some instruction and practice in the use of the ancient tradition of the mandala, and how that can enhance one's prayer. After each exercise, there will be time provided to journal about what the experience was like and a chance to share one's art and experience reflectively with other participants. No previous art knowledge or skill is necessary.

At the end of the day, participants will be asked to fill out a survey of the experience which will be used anonymously as data for Mary's final master's essay in the Theology and Religious Studies Department at John Carroll. As an added bonus, all art materials are yours to take home with you to use for your future prayer. They are included in the registration fee, along with a copy of Sharon's book, *Praying with Mandalas: Contemplative Coloring for Contemporary Christians*. Not only will you enjoy a reflective retreat day; you will be helping to advance the ministry of two ISI grads. Come join us!

By March 7, 2016

please return the registration slip
or give notification of attendance
to Dan Merhar:
216-397-1599
dmerhar@jcu.edu

(You may pay at the door, but we greatly encourage your paying in advance. It is more helpful to us. Thanks much.)

Registration Fee: \$65

(Includes lunch and abundant art supplies)

Make checks payable to
John Carroll University.

Please detach and send to:

Ignatian Spirituality Institute
John Carroll University
1 John Carroll Boulevard
University Heights, OH 44118

"Praying with Images: Encountering God through Creative Expression"

Name: _____

Address: _____

Number attending: _____

Fee Enclosed: _____

Thank you and we look forward to seeing you on March 12!

EXHIBIT B SCHEDULE OF RETREAT

Saturday, March 12, 2016, 10am to 4pm.
Mackin Room - Grasselli Library

Welcome and Opening

- Agenda and Housekeeping
- Rumi Poem/Drawing warm up

Metaphor Meditation

- Choose one object from basket on table.
- Reflective attention: touch, hold, smell, pay attention to object, allowing color, weight, sent, feel, light and shadow, to evoke emotions inside you.
- Ask yourself “How does this object express something about how you’re feeling today?”
- Share with small groups of 3-4.
- Objects as metaphors for deeper work of one’s heart and soul

Art Journaling Prompt #1 - Settle in and relax as we take a few deep breaths...

- Let’s begin by inviting God into our experience:
 - “Holy Spirit, Come... We trust that you are here with us now. We pray to be open to and trust this creative way of encountering you today. Help us to be aware that it is you who gives us the ability to be creative and inspires us as we prayerfully reflect on this prompt. Let us welcome whatever shows up on the page today as guidance sent from you.”
- After I read you the first prompt:
 - Be aware of your breathing, close your eyes and sit with the prompt for a few minutes and visualize image(s) in your imagination.
 - Chose color instinctively and mark marks on paper. Don’t worry about making sense or making it look “real” – abstract is good. Approach this in a playful way. This is between you and God. It’s more about what is comes up IN you than what comes out of you onto the journal.
 - You’ll have about 15 minutes to consider the prompt (copies on the tables) and draw your images on a fresh page in your journal.
- I will announce when it is time to finish up your drawing and move on to the second part of the process – you’ll have about 20 minutes for this next part:

- Gaze non-judgmentally and talk to God about your image, asking for understanding, clarification, meaning.
Remember that you are in the presence of God...
What do you imagine God is thinking about or listening for while you are creating this artwork?
- Give your work a title and journal a bit about what came up during the process or what the image means to you.
- When gong chimes: come back to large group for sharing.

Lunch break

Mandala Exercise: Presented by Sharon Seyfarth Garner

Art Journaling Prompt #2 - Settle in and relax as we take a few deep breaths...

- Let's begin by inviting God into our experience:
 - "Holy Spirit, Come... We trust that you are here with us now. We pray to be open to and trust this creative way of encountering you today. Help us to be aware that it is you who gives us the ability to be creative and inspires us as we prayerfully reflect on this prompt. Let us welcome whatever shows up on the page today as guidance sent from you."
- After I read you the first prompt:
 - Be aware of your breathing, close your eyes and sit with the prompt for a few minutes and visualize image(s) in your imagination.
 - Chose color instinctively and mark marks on paper.
Don't worry about making sense or making it look "real" – abstract is good. Approach this in a playful way.
This is between you and God.
It's more about what is comes up IN you than what comes out of you onto the journal.
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- I will announce when it is time to finish up your drawing and move on to the second part of the process – you'll have about 20 minutes for this next part:
 - Gaze non-judgmentally and talk to God about your image, asking for understanding, clarification, meaning.
Remember that you are in the presence of God...
What do you imagine God is thinking about or listening for while you are creating this artwork?
 - Give your work a title and journal a bit about what came up during the process or what the image means to you.
- When gong chimes: come back to large group for sharing.

Q&A

How did the experience feel? What was it like?

How do you see this working on an ongoing basis for you or with your directees?

Complete follow-up questionnaires

Dismiss

RETREAT PROMPTS

Art Journaling Prompt #1

- Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths and think of a time when you felt God's presence in your life. How did you feel when you became aware of God's presence? What image(s) comes into your mind when you dwell on your awareness of God's presence at that moment? Colors? Shapes? Lines? Textures? What does that look like? How does that feel? What emotions are stirred up inside you when you are in God's presence?
- When you are ready, when you can see that image clearly in your imagination, chose a color and make a mark that best expresses how you felt at that moment. Listen to your inner wisdom and let an image develop on your paper that represents your feelings, your relationship with God.

Art Journaling Prompt #2

- Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths and ask yourself what do you desire to hear from God today? A strong desire or recurring question that you have now, maybe something that you have been bringing up in prayer for a while, or some direction that you have been waiting for from God. What image(s) comes into your mind? What does it look like? How does it feel? What emotions are stirred up inside you as you think about it? Colors? Shapes? Lines? Textures?
- When you are ready, when you can see that image clearly in your imagination, chose a color and make a mark that best expresses how you felt at that moment. Listen to your inner wisdom and let an image develop on your paper that represents your feelings, what you are hearing from God today.

EXHIBIT C
PRE-RETREAT PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Significant Date: _____
(to match up these responses to your post-retreat questionnaire)

1. Have you ever used art as prayer, whether music, dance or visual art?
_____ yes _____ no

2. If you answered yes to question 1, describe what that experience was like for you.

3. Before you begin this retreat, how comfortable are you with playing with colors or shapes or lines as a way of prayer?

___ Extremely Comfortable ___ Comfortable

___ Moderately Comfortable ___ Not Comfortable

Please elaborate:

4. What expectations do you have for this retreat?

Enjoy the retreat!

EXHIBIT D
POST-RETREAT PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Significant Date: _____
(to match up these responses to your pre-retreat questionnaire)

Now that you have completed this retreat:

1. How comfortable are you with playing with colors or shapes or lines as a way of prayer?

____ Very Comfortable ____ Comfortable
____ Moderately Comfortable ____ Uncomfortable

Please elaborate:

2. How likely is this way of praying with art making and images to lead to a deeper awareness of your inner journey or drew you closer to God?

____ Very Likely ____ Likely ____ Not Sure ____ Unlikely

Please explain:

3. How likely are you to use this form of prayer in your own spiritual journey? Or suggest it to your directees in your spiritual direction practice?

____ Very Likely ____ Likely ____ Not Sure ____ Unlikely

Please explain:

4. Were your expectations met?

Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like me to know? Please use the reverse side for any comments or suggestions for improvements in future art journaling retreats.

If you are available for a brief interview about this retreat in the next couple of weeks, or would like me to email you a c copy of my final MA Essay, or would be interested in future art journaling retreats, please leave your email address on the sign-up sheet before leaving. Thank you for participating in this retreat and completing this questionnaire!

EXHIBIT E
IRB APPROVAL NOTICE



JOHN CARROLL UNIVERSITY
THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY IN CLEVELAND

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

Responsible Investigator: Mary Coffey
Faculty Sponsor: Sheila McGinn
Department: Theology and Religious Studies
IRB Log Number: 2016-013
Title: Praying with Images

Approval Date:	October 29, 2015
Continuing Review Notice Due:	September 28, 2016
Expiration Date:	October 28, 2016

Thank you for submitting the IRB Application for Human Subject Research. Your application has been reviewed and approved under **Expedited #7**.

Please adhere to the following IRB policies as appropriate:

- If changes are made in the method of handling human subjects, please inform the IRB Administrator immediately. Changes may not be initiated prior to receiving IRB approval.
 - Any adverse reactions/incidents should be reported immediately to your department chair/supervisor and the IRB Administrator.
 - IRB approval is given for not more than 12 months. If your project will be active for longer than one year, please submit a memo to the IRB chair requesting a continuance prior to the end of the 12 month period along with current consent forms and research instruments.
 - Consent forms should be kept for a period of three years after the end of the project.
-

You can access the IRB web site at <http://sites.jcu.edu/research/> for additional information. If you have questions, please contact:

Carole M. Krus, IRB Administrator
(216) 397-1527 or ckrus@jcu.edu

Dr. Elizabeth Swenson, IRB Chair
(216) 397-4434 or swenson@jcu.edu

NOTE: Beginning Fall 2013, all faculty researchers, faculty sponsors, and student researchers will be required to complete training in the protection of human research subjects via the web-based CITI training program. Please visit <http://sites.jcu.edu/research/pages/citi/> for more information.

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