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## **Inquiry and Imagination: Transformation and Healing in the Process of A Doctoral Dissertation**

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### **Abstract**

The author explores the revelatory nature of imagery and its role as the agent of healing and transformation in students' experiences during their doctoral dissertation process. The author discusses the contribution of imagination and creativity to personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal development in the context of academic pursuit, with emphasis on honoring the learner's imaginal world and multiple ways of knowing of both internal processes and observable data. Examples from students' responses to imagery-based exercises serve to illustrate how imaginal processes contribute to meaningful research as well as to students' understanding of the relationship between academic inquiry and its lifelong implications.

**Keywords:** Research; Imagination; Transpersonal; Transformative-Education; Healing; Creativity

*Images are the currency of our minds*

- Antonio Damasio

### **Introduction**

Imagining is the capturing of an original intuition or unmediated knowing, the seed of creativity and transformation. As Henry Corbin (1969/1998) noted, the effect of the act of imagining is so powerful that it forms and transforms the visionary into the shape he or she has imagined.

Throughout the ages, philosophers and scientists alike have shown that the imagination precedes cognitive perception, while acting as an integrative function—unifying sensations, feelings, thought and intuition: the conscious and the unconscious (Netzer, 2008). Many educators and researchers of acquired knowledge and behavior have known this for a long time: conscious and unconscious thoughts, sensations, and actions (including reflexes and involuntary nervous system functions) are shaped by prior imagining—the perception of possibilities as actualities through multi sensorial, visceral and felt images (e.g., Damasio 1999; Dewey, 1929; Sartre, 1940/2004; Vrana & Lang, 1990).

One of the best articulated observations I have encountered regarding the efficacy of imagery as a healing modality was outlined by Anees Sheikh (1983), a scholar of the imagination and editor of the series *Imagery and Human Development*. Sheikh observed that mental imagery facilitates:

1. A mirror relationship between creative imagination and cognitive perception, both neurologically and experientially;
2. An immediacy, compared with the linear progression of verbal logic;
3. A greater range of emotional communication than is possible through verbal descriptions;
4. Changes in physiology (e.g., heart rate; blood pressure, flow, and chemistry; sexual response; as well as ocular and electrodermal activity);
5. The ability to tap into a repository of pre-verbal and post-traumatic memories; and
6. The opportunity to overcome emotional defenses, resistance, judgment, self-censoring, and impasses in therapy.

My experiences as student and educator of transpersonal psychology have led me to value process-oriented, imagery-based learning and its inspirations of authentic discovery, self-integration, and transformational action (e.g., Netzer, 2009, 2013a; Netzer & Rowe, 2010; Rowe & Netzer, 2012). The focus of this article is on intentional activation of imagination as an agent of healing and transformation in the process of academic inquiry. This requires conscious attention to our capacity to see, sense and *feel through* experiences rather than only *think them through* or figure them out as a means toward logical ends.

The process of scientific research in the social sciences cannot be separated from life itself. In fact, questions about human experiences are already infused with *tacit knowing*—unrecognized knowledge that has existed all along (Polanyi, 1962). Most research in psychology focuses on the subjects' cognitive, factual thought content and observations of behaviors in laboratory-contrived situations. By loosening the conventional approach of sterilized, tightly controlled design and by meeting participants in their natural environments, researchers go beyond quantitative examination of their 'subjects' and toward a qualitative, shared journey of discovery. By approaching inquiry as more fully human, researchers may include in their data the deep truths embedded in tacit knowing and devise questions with the intention to uncover unconscious processes, subjective perceptions, dreams, intuition and creative expression (e.g., Anderson & Braud, 2011; Braud, 1998).

Activating the imagination may be the first step in intentional cultivation of skills and practices that aim to loosen, shift, and altogether change *how* researchers approach understanding of lived experiences—their own and others'—and how they thus transform through and beyond the topical focus of their scholarly pursuits in ways that bridge formal research and lifelong inquiry (Netzer, 2013a).

## Looking back

My doctoral education at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) was nothing short of life saving. Dedicated faculty provided the supportive container and wise guidance with heart-centered curriculum that was both intellectually rigorous and filled with opportunities for creative expression (e.g., Braud, 2006). The school has since changed its name, mission, faculty, and curriculum, so it no longer exists in the form described herein, but former faculty and alumni continue to apply these principles in their current practices.

I had been a practicing art therapist for nearly a decade prior to enrolling in the ITP Global PhD program. The American Art Therapy Association (AATA website, 2013) describes art therapy as follows:

Art therapy is a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal wellbeing. Art therapists have knowledge of visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms) and the creative process, as well as of human development, psychological, and counseling theories and techniques.

With interest in holistic application of mental imagery and creative expression, I was looking to deepen my practice with transpersonal approaches to psychotherapy. Transpersonal therapists explore with their clients the personal, interpersonal and sociocultural issues in everyday experiences along with developmental challenges and traumas. They also expand the focus of the therapy beyond ordinary consciousness by engaging clients' multiple states of consciousness, such as contemplative and meditative states, hypnosis, dreams and creative flow. Exceptional human experiences are included in transpersonal psychology research, for example, peak and mystical experiences, near-death experience, spontaneous recovery from terminal illness, past life recall, psychic perceptions and abilities, exceptional feats, and ingenuity/creativity (e.g., Friedman & Hartelius, 2013; Palmer & Braud, 2002).

Transpersonal psychologists' holistic view of human experiences emphasizes human capacity for transformation through adversity (e.g., Hutchins, 2002). Thus life challenges may be embraced as opportunities to deepen and expand one's awareness of self-in-relationship through multiple ways of knowing, such as muscular, visceral and other forms of somatosensory awareness (aka body knowing, which may be expressed as comfort as well as discomfort).

Other examples of non-rational ways of knowing that may inform us of alternate directions and actions in times of mental, emotional, and spiritual stagnation and dis-ease include dream imagery and visions, deep connection with nature, empathic identification with others and mindfulness, as well as spontaneous insight and creative breakthroughs. Transpersonal psychotherapists, researchers, and educators are guided by modern science as well as by wisdom psychologies and spiritual traditions (Caplan, Hartelius, & Rardin, 2003; Friedman & Hartelius, 2013).

At the time I enrolled at ITP, I was in the process of cultivating creative encounters with my art therapy clients that honored the integration of body-mind-spirit through mental imaging and creative expression. Through extensive imagery and dream-work training I reclaimed trust in human innate capacity to know one's self, regain equilibrium, and heal (Epstein, 2004).

I applied to the doctoral program in transpersonal psychology in search of further knowledge about holistic care, but I had not anticipated that an academic endeavor would include my own healing of chronic inflammatory bowel disease and would result in spiritual emergence from cultural/familial isolation and inhibited selfhood (as an adult immigrant from Israel to the U.S.) to feeling interconnectedness with the world at large, locating my inner-home in my imagination, and experiencing Nature as a spiritual sanctuary—a source of peace, joy, Self-mirroring and creativity. These latter qualities became integral to my dissertation study *Mystical poetry and imagination: Inspiring transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom* (Netzer, 2008) and, ultimately, the compass for my service of others as a parent, therapist and educator.

The following reflection, written during a seminar retreat, a year into my doctoral studies, provides a glimpse into how imagery began to shift my academic experience and vision of my dissertation journey early on in my education:

Beside the small luggage, a couple of books, and a writing pad, I brought my flute and current knitting project. Like the music streaming out of the flute, note by note becoming a new whole, in which the parts are fully integrated, the scarf I have been knitting has become an analogy for the process of forming my experience as a doctoral student. My interest in knitting as a transpersonal meditation began in search of a quieting activity with the intention of embodying balance and moderation through the measured pace, consistency, and discipline intrinsic to the knitting process. Winding down from a full day of academic discussions and stimulating interpersonal dynamics, I took out the ball of yarn. It slowly unraveled, visually soothing hues of blue, green, purple, and gray. As I knitted each row, I uncovered the inherent pattern of the multicolored yarn. I chose the yarn, needles, width, length, and pattern for this evolving scarf, yet knew that there was as much unknown in its crafting, awaiting discovery.

Such, I thought, could be my experience of working toward a doctoral dissertation. We were, indeed, advised to carefully consider the breadth of the topic we chose. Not too expansive, as it might become insurmountable, yet not too narrow to allow for an extensive research appropriate for this level of academic pursuit. Further, we were reminded that we would be wise to choose a topic that would sustain our interest during the time dedicated to this research, yet we should be aware not to be so personally enmeshed with our topic, as this might hinder our role as researchers.

By analogy, I envisioned this scarf complete, and perhaps even worn by someone else. In this image, the scarf, as my dissertation, is moderate in length, interesting in pattern yet not so complex as to present a challenge I will not be skilled enough to master. I enjoy spending time with my scarf, seeing it grow, and knowing that it will become complete in due course, as long as I knit it one stitch at a time, and am willing to undo some rows when I discover my errors. Imagining my dissertation scarf (See Figure 1) in this way, I felt the loosening of concerns, as these were gradually replaced by openings for possibilities and embracing of the unknown.



**Figure 1. Dissertation Scarf**

Thus I began incorporating imagination and symbolism into my process of academic inquiry. Before long, I replaced the somewhat linear metaphor of the dissertation scarf (the scarf itself was completed and I wore it all that winter) with an image of a labyrinth (See Figure 2), which I began to embody through actual and imaginal walking meditations. In that image, the walk to the center of the labyrinth (the heart of my dissertation study) was supported by my study's method of *intuitive inquiry* (Anderson, 2000, 2011). I wrote in reflection:

The labyrinth path offers itself as a container for my intention of transformative search and research. Like the spinning of a cocoon, it has a predictable movement and progress of holding and embracing. Yet with each turn, one is closer to the possibility of change; the kind of change that necessitates leaving something behind, relinquishing control and opening to

new meaning... I set an intention to unfold a process of discovery, simultaneously active and receptive. Along the way, however, fears creep up, concerns that I had made a mistake... As I come to the center of the labyrinth I feel the weight of my concerns drop into its inner circle. I pause and intentionally relinquish the tension I brought with me, which I built within me, throughout weeks of over-concern with the outcome of my dissertation project instead of focusing on its process

I recently wrote about the embodied image of that labyrinth walk in a way that might further clarify the healing nature of this nonacademic undertaking in the midst of a doctoral dissertation:

By inviting the image of the labyrinth to inform me, I understood, more fully, the transpersonal symbolism of the labyrinth walk and linked it with what one of my professors at the time, the late William Braud, discussed in his article *The Ley and the Labyrinth* (1997). My inquiry was very much like the labyrinth—an idiographic path that had its own logic and pattern to be discovered only by walking it. As a researcher I was asked to trust in the wisdom of the labyrinth's pattern even when it seemed that it was leading me away from the center toward which I was consciously heading. The experience of walking the labyrinth was, therefore, not merely the objective experience of walking in pre-delineated circles. Rather, the symbolic intention with which I entered the labyrinth gave it subjective and particular meaning; it helped me reconnect to my topic of spiritual freedom, experience a glimpse of spiritual freedom, and realign with intuitive inquiry's emphasis on inner knowing and trust in the intuitive unfolding of the inquiry. (Netzer, 2013b)



**Figure 2. Labyrinth**

As months went by, analogies and symbols pertaining to a greater purpose of inquiry permeated all aspects of my life. I was inspired by organic processes in nature, dreams and auspicious synchronicities—those unanticipated and unexplainable 'coincidences'—that were illuminated, through feedback from outside myself on my path through life, confirming that the deeper meanings I was attributing to my experiences held profound truth, in contrast to 'conventional wisdom.' Despite being well outside the norm, these served to normalize and regulate my physical body, stimulate my mind and uplift my spirit through expansion of awareness of myself as interconnected with the broader world around me; our world, too, is forever seeking healing, equilibrium and authentic expression.

Images helped me to articulate my research purpose and understand my relationships with my study's participants, whose own diverse awareness of spiritual freedom was also inspired by taking part in the research. These images have continued to impart my own personal, interpersonal and spiritual transformation—from the distress of unexpressed feelings, inflaming the lining of my gut, to acting on intuition (gut feelings), expressing my sense of self in the world in a language that transcends culture and national identification—the language of the imaginal—and in ways that continue to shape me to this day as one leaf of many on the proverbial tree of knowledge.

## Transformative learning

The imagery-rich experience of my dissertation study had since guided me as a research faculty member. I thus encourage students, during various phases of their doctoral education, to engage in imaginative, creative, and playful exercises to enrich their “inner dissertation” with a source of wisdom that transcends linear thought. When students choose research topics of personal meaning, their inquiry is no longer merely academic. What concerns me most is their growth and development as humans, their transformative, lived experiences and how these will impact their research participants and all those who will benefit from their discoveries in the future.

This approach is not limited to doctoral inquiry, and may be applied in a variety of formal and informal learning settings (therapeutic settings included) in which the learner’s healing and transformation are paramount. Imagery-based transformative learning differs from conceptual changes, which are informed by newly acquired knowledge. More important are qualities such as the “delicate balance of embodiment, intuition, imagination, and contemplative thought, which help to open learners to multiple ways of knowing and develop in them, experientially, the capacity for reflective awareness of self in relationship to a larger scope of being in the world” (Netzer & Rowe, 2010, p. 125).

To facilitate transformation of self and others requires one to show up as a whole person: with feeling, awareness of felt senses, and attention to explicit and implicit forms of communication (including words, body language, and imagery). The language of symbolic imagery is well suited to explore whole-person experiences and describe the multidimensionality of the human spirit, a task that cannot be achieved by quantitative and, so called, objective science alone. Notably, Huston Smith observed that symbols are textured and multifaceted: “Folding and refolding in adumbration and allusion, they weave, veer, and seek out subliminal soil” (Smith, 1967/1992, p. 13). By including imagery as a way of knowing, the researcher undertakes the preparation of the inquiry soil in which the seeds of discovery are planted with sensitivity and care for a meaningful inquiry process, no matter its outcome. Similar principles apply to informal personal inquiry, in the search of personal and interpersonal healing.

To empower the imagination to reveal itself as an agent of change, we must, if only temporarily, give it precedence over our analytical mind and the “cortical bias” (Porges, 2013) that exists in academia and broadly in our society, often biasing and privileging cognitive reasoning over intuition and gut feelings. Our social conditioning, in favor of logical reasoning over intuition and imagination, has tipped the balance away from self-awareness, which results in the loss of personal authority and over-reliance on conventions and preconceived ideas.

As it pertains to inquiry in the social sciences, conventional approaches tend to restrict subjective inquiry and only give credence to tightly controlled observations, investigations and analyses, which end up oversimplifying complex human experiences, reducing them to observable behavior, and to examining them through the Procrustean, limited scope of the researcher’s hypothesis.

Conversely, when creativity in research is encouraged, qualitative nuances of experience are uncovered. Participants in such research engage in creative arts, activating their imagination and inquiring about their experiences through creative writing and qualitative interviews. The latter approach not only expands the range of discovery for the researcher, but the participants, too, are apt to transform their perceptions in the process of creative self-reflection.

Not everyone, however, is ready for such explorations. Students must possess a degree of openness to alternative ways of knowing and be willing to at least peek through new windows, if not step over the threshold into the uncharted territory of the imaginal realm. It has been shown that “students who



are comfortable with flexibility, engagement and creativity (Reisetter et al., 2003, p. 471) report that these characteristics make learning qualitative research easier than for students who reported struggling with flexibility and creativity” (in Cooper, Chenail, & Fleming, 2012, p. 8). In addition, “the use of arts-based techniques (e.g., poetry and collage) enhanced the experience of learning how to conduct qualitative research... allowing students to be ‘adventurous’... and express themselves ‘outside the lines’ (e.g., including one’s emotions, becoming more energized, developing self-awareness and reflexivity, experiencing greater appreciation, and feeling more connected and expansive) in what is otherwise quite a structured and formal learning experience” (Chatfield et al., 2014, pp. 6-8).

## Engaged imagination

Although distinct from sensations, emotions and reason, the imagination operates within all three response-modes, and has intrapersonal and interpersonal unifying capacities. The sense of unity experienced via our holistic perception of imagery has the tendency to inspire a co-creative and participatory awareness of self-in-relation. I have identified this phenomenon as *transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom*—the recognition of one’s potential to expand toward interconnectedness with all aspects of life within and beyond the self (Netzer, 2008). As such, the imagination can be developed toward becoming a channel that links self and self-transcendence through self-observation or ingathering, integration of the previously unconscious, and ultimately, transformation of psycho-spiritual energy (Assagioli 1965/2000).

Engaging the imagination in the process of inquiry allows the researcher to turn inwardly, tap into embodied knowing and one’s intuition, and gain perspective with recognition of the varied landscapes encountered during this long journey. While honoring the value of completion, it is of great importance to acknowledge how we feel along the way, when there are more questions than revelations, as well as doubts and worry about not reaching a destination. When we consider but don’t criticize our authentic feelings, there is room to release fears and overwhelm, clearing the inner obstacles that hinder meaningful progress and diminish our trust in the process. Thus formal academic research may become (in addition to its intrinsic purpose) the vehicle for whole-person inquiry, with long-lasting implications for the researcher and participants.

The importance of the researcher’s creative self-examination is poignantly expressed by a recent graduate, whose research (Meyer, 2014) explored the construct of *transcendence through artistic crisis*. Meyer, a longtime fine artist, had taken interest in artists’ dialogues with their artworks as reflective of their evolving consciousness as well as intrinsic to the nature of their artworks. She recognized that by beginning with her whole-person experience as an artist and employing creative methods to examine her own dialogue with her artwork she would be more fully present in her inquiry about other artists’ experiences (See Figure 3, Based on W. Wetmore’s story Angel of Grief, 1894). She said:

Inquiry that followed along my life of image-making offered me a chronology with an added dimension in that I was transported through time by immersion in somatic and emotional memories of the very distant past. This expanded my range of data and allowed me to make connections that reached across decades, identities, emotional and creative blocks, and physical struggles.



**Figure 3. Transition from Despair (watercolor)**

By pursuing an image-based inquiry, I gained intimacy with my medium (watercolor) and my art process, whereas analytical thought seemed to have kept me in a container with the point of view of observer. The intimacy afforded me by visual inquiry permitted passage to a place I had never been in my artist life and I gained a deep awareness of unwavering companionship with myself. For I always thought I knew all the reasons I'd become an artist, but with this inquiry I acquired the awareness and faith in a more eternal and profound persuasion to create. (Meyer, 2014)

On a transpersonal level, returning to our imagination as the vehicle for spiritual transformation requires *Presence*—not past or future orientation—a reversal of habitual processes, internal spaciousness to *be* before we *do* (Romanyshyn, 2002). In this space of being, we can look within and clarify our intentions. And when these intentions take the shape of imagery, we can begin to notice the direction in which the images lead us, and what actions organically emerge from them.

When researchers inquire about experiences that may continue to unfold during the process of inquiry (such as the recollection of memories, dynamics of current relationships, emerging creative process, awareness of emotions, unfolding spiritual development), they benefit from including imagination and creative expression as pathways to uncover participants' tacit knowing as well as their own. The researcher's presence is of utmost importance for this potentially transformative experience to occur, since it involves knowing and understanding of others through awareness of self. This concept is well discussed by Anderson and Braud (2011) in *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*:

Under certain conditions, planning, conducting, participating in, or learning about, a research project can be accompanied by increased self-awareness, enhanced psycho-spiritual growth and development, and other personal changes of great consequence to the individuals involved... a qualitative shift in one's lifeview and/or worldview... one's perspective, understanding, attitudes, ways of knowing and doing, and way of being in the world. It may be recognized by changes in one's body, feelings and emotions, ways of thinking, forms of expression, and relationships with others and with the world. (2011, pp. xvi-xvii)

### **Knowing, healing, and creative fulfillment**

The primary laws of the imaginal-spatial dimension are non-causal (events are not linked in a determined, sequential fashion), which implies a wholeness of perception, juxtaposed with the dissection and categorization of conceptual thought (Epstein, 2004). Accordingly, the mental image is a discovery that liberates the mind from the binds of habitual reactions and permits creative fulfillment (Netzer, 2008). When approaching inquiry as a transpersonal practice, students are encouraged to overcome the fear of not-knowing (Netzer & Rowe, 2010), and are more willing to open to the potential gifts embedded in uncertainty and vulnerability. To do so, one must feel free to be "disorderly, sloppy, anarchic, chaotic, vague, doubtful, uncertain, indefinite, approximate, inexact, or inaccurate" (Maslow, 1962, p. 130). In the words of one student:

I particularly find an imaginal approach to my topic to be a relief away from the analytical lens in which my topic is often viewed. My research is the exploration of the role self-compassion plays in recovery and healing from an eating disorder. Being this is a very clinical topic, I find I can often get lost in the "mind objects" regarding it, and in those moments, my writing became stuck and stagnant. When I stepped away and either dropped into an experience about it, an image, and/or a felt sense, I found I came to a new beginning, a new lens to see it through and a fresh perspective, different from what my mind "knows" about my topic. (Saffi-Biassetti, 2014)



Another student, who was nearing the completion of her dissertation proposal on the topic of “resistance during the experience of spiritual emergence” had a similar sense of liberation when encouraged to engage her whole being in the process of inquiry:

Incorporating the creative exercises was a nice way to find myself in the process and to retreat from the linear approach that I am accustomed to, which, while seemingly productive, can also sometimes restrict me. I think what I am taking from this course above all else is permission to wander, to change the focus on my lens so that the objects may become slightly blurred in order to allow for fresh, fluid perspectives. In practice, this feels like movement, dance, walking in the woods, kicking water at the edge of the sand as I gaze out into the horizon. Sunrise to sunset and back again... trusting in sleep that I will wake tomorrow, and that tomorrow's feats will create more blissful sleep. Awakening in my own time. (Burgos, 2014a).

Students often recount with intense feelings specific challenges and corresponding breakthroughs regarding their dissertation process. This demanding project can be overwhelming, sometimes to the degree of paralyzing their progress, raising feelings of inadequacy, even leading them to resort to plagiarism out of insecurity in their own capacity to generate original insight.

The following testimony from a student whose dissertation topic addressed the experience of soul-loss due to the adverse effect of childhood sexual abuse (Linder, 2014a) exemplifies the power of imagery to heal and transform through the process of formal research:

My exploration of soul loss during my doctoral dissertation was a crucifixion experience that took me into my own personal Underworld. My participants were survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), and bearing witness to their trauma narratives was, at times, a devastating experience. The psychospiritual anguish I explored within my participants was mirrored in my own personal dissolution of cherished aspects of self. I began my dissertation process feeling competent and in control, but as I moved deeper into the soul loss landscape, my understanding of self and soul began to unravel. I went from a focused, efficient writer who never missed deadlines to a paralyzed, helpless person who, some days, was barely functional. In desperation, I turned to active imagination (Von Franz, 1997) in order to try and understand what was happening to me. During that process, I was introduced to a soul-guide, aka *psychopomp* (Jung, 1974), named Gertrude who was both my protector as well as my personal nemesis. Gertrude was an enormous sea cow that was tremendously agile under water while virtually immovable on land. Each time I attempted to rush my dissertation process, I found myself trapped within her inexorable grip. In hindsight it became clear that she was there to deepen my embodied understanding of soul loss and help me relinquish outmoded aspects of identity. At the time, however, it felt like I was being crushed to death under the immense weight of her psychic presence. (Linder, 2014b)

During an exercise that emphasized attention to the body in the process of creating magazine collage (Anderson & Braud, 2011, p. 264), a student (a Human Resources administrator) whose dissertation topic is *Transpersonal Practices in the Workplace* responded in the following way:

I perceived the anxiety felt within my stomach, which was tight, gnawing and hot. I quietly acknowledged that I may be slightly intimidated by my topic, but I continued to leaf through the magazines. I was drawn to many topics, statements, and pictures. I began cutting the pages capturing words and images.... I used HR Magazine, which is published by SHRM (Society of Human Resources Management). The images and words that I transferred to paper were dualistic. There was a hand cuffing another hand like a chain, modern day slavery, management obsolete, one worker's story, communities of practice, sharing culture, going global, inclusive thinking. As I reviewed this collage it was very clear to me that it represented

how I felt about the current workplace environment, but it also offered hope of healing which is my desire through the introduction of transpersonal psychology/practices within the workplace. For me, this exercise reiterated important issues. First, I am saddened that I do not play often. Second, because it is outside of the norm, I feel nervous about introducing my findings about transpersonal psychology in the workplace. Third, I should be more observant about what my body is experiencing when in specific situations. (Cordova-Gray, 2012)

Academic endeavors can become healing opportunities, a re-membering of possibilities embedded in asking penetrating questions about matters of keen interest to the researcher. Research topics are often laden with personal meaning and a desire to contribute to meaningful life changes for those participating in the research and those exposed to its outcomes. The limited scope of a doctoral dissertation is expanded and deepened when multiple ways of knowing are honored. Thus researching complex human experiences can be facilitated, with greater sensitivity to nuances and subtle communication, when imaginal and psychic processes, sensory/embodied awareness, empathic identification, and knowing through our wounds (Anderson & Braud, 2011) are honored as valid modes of understanding.

Furthermore, students get to observe how their creative expression serves to illuminate the intention of their inquiry in unanticipated ways. A student's dissertation (subsequently published as a book) on *the transformational aspects of postpartum depression* (Karraa, 2014), has taken a healing approach to her literature review, creatively exploring how "certain ideas were present for others, long ago, and that one is often simply rediscovering what has gone before" (Braud, 2011, p. 95). She said:

In addition to the conventional comparison of past and present literature on women's postpartum depression, I have been doing photo collages of women and their children from different points in history (See Figure 4). These collages serve to ground my intention, pique my intuition, and externalize a sense of awe and gratitude for everyone touched by my topic throughout time.... Working with imaginal, visual, and intuitive listening has been of significant help. My topic is very difficult material. The interviews are not easy. And it is the imagining of what I am intuiting that serves my wellbeing as a researcher, and I believe serves the topic. Where words fail, images fulfill the essential expressive need. (Karraa, 2012)



**Figure 4. Motherhood: Compassion, Isolation, Worry, Pride**

### Healing and inquisitive play

The inclusion of creative freedom in the process of inquiry encourages the researcher to take risks, to loosen categories and preexisting classifications, to engage the raw data with a fresh attitude toward it. As Maslow (1962) put it: "to live far more in the real world of nature than in the verbalized world of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs and stereotypes that most people confuse with the real world" (p. 129).

A wonderful example of these qualities is portrayed in a student's account of an exercise in which she engaged playfully with her young daughter in the process of contemplating a personally challenging

inquiry topic, *Mindful Eating*. Connecting with her body during this intentional play session, activating all her senses, opening her heart, and subsequently practicing embodied writing (Anderson, 2001, 2011) confirmed the value of these forms of knowing for her as a researcher who hopes to inspire embodied insight in her future research participants and audience. She wrote:

My belly was tickled and I was beaming as we bounced the soft tennis ball to each other. My body shuddered in delight as we laughed and tossed.... Suddenly, she instructed me to get up and follow her for a romp around the yard. I could smell the pine trees and the decay of yellow aspen leaves in a nearby pile. I felt the cool, damp dirt and grass under my feet as she pulled me along to look at a nest in a small tree. My awareness of the softness and smallness of her hands enveloped my body, swirling around to each limb and landing gently in my heart. Love poured from the place where our hands connected. Giggling, we spun in a circle, clasp hands, connected hearts, wrapped in golden hugs from the sun. Our eyes glowed with admiration for one another. When the play session "ended" and we went inside for a snack, the experience resonated throughout my being and I felt true bliss, joy, and satisfaction within my bodymind.... I realized that by slowing down to intentionally experience play with my daughter and then writing about the body experience I had, the play session was accentuated with love beyond my ability to express in words. My whole body and being was alive with the sweetness that is my daughter. As I gather the proposed research and organize the co-researchers' information, I plan to be intentional, so that the audience has an integrative and sensorial experience. By participating in creative expression and embodied writing, the research will be enhanced for the creators as well as the audience. (Clark, 2013).

Creativity in all forms engages our imaginative, playful mind, loosens linear thinking, and inspires analogical connections among all aspects of our lives. Viewed in this way, creative expression, in the process of *doing and undergoing* (Dewey, 1980) where we actively allow our experience to take a life of its own and guide us from the inside out as to its meaning, can become an essential ingredient in our developmental nourishment. It can also be instrumental in self-care and facilitate interconnection with others (Netzer, 2013a).

The following is an example of an exercise I have presented to dissertation students, to help them address the possibilities embedded in imaging and thinking by analogy. I call it *Inquiry as a Kite*.

Imagine your inquiry as a kite. You might begin by intuitively searching for kite images online, for inspiration of shapes and colors that appeal to you, and either sketch or photocopy a kite image you resonate with as analogical to your dissertation topic and design. Imagine that your creative mind has conceived the kite-inquiry (the character of your study, its topic and purpose), and that this image represents the spirit with which you are aiming to launch your study or any other aspects of it.

Now, consider that your method and research design are inherently the string—they are the intentional-tether that can make your creative idea float, without floating away. Your plan for executing your study, your co-researchers, and your persistence of writing up your dissertation draft will be your kite runner and the flyer!

Soon you will be assured (by your advisor, committee, the Institution Review Board) that your kite design is likely to take off without too much trouble, but you'll need to make sure that the string is well attached and doesn't tangle... There will be windy days and days that are flat, with no lift, but the better your research design, the easier it would be to have your study soar even in less-than-ideal conditions. Visualizing your dissertation kite will hopefully be fun, but it can continue to be an object of meditation throughout the rest of your dissertation process and beyond (as you graduate, present your findings, and apply them to your work in the field). It

can become helpful when you experience doubt, lose faith in your method, become anxious about unfavorable conditions, etc. Imaging your kite picking up wind and lifting will, I am certain, lift your spirits and will bring you back to the process and to trusting your design and aligning with the kite runner (your co-researchers, your committee-members) and your researcher's role as the flyer. (D. Netzer, In press)

In response to imagining their inquiry as a kite, students have enjoyed searching for an image that intuitively captivated them. Some focused on the shape of the kite (simple vs. complex; geometric vs. figurative), others focused on the size of the kite or the colors (analogically evocative of the feelings they had in the present in relationship with their inquiry). Yet others noticed the dynamic movement of the kite in flight. These various qualities served as analogies of their subjective relationship with their inquiry and how they visualize the journey ahead. The following is one such response from a student who is in the process of conducting a grounded theory research about the phenomenon self-compassion in those recovered from eating disorders. She chose an image of two simple kites flying in tandem. Her reflection follows:

I liked the simplicity of the two kites together lightly intertwined, which reminded me of my research and the relationship between my participants and me, as co-researchers. We will be flying this kite together, since grounded theory (my method) is all about the construction of meaning between researcher and participant. Yet, I will have to keep check with myself and not get too intertwined, too lost in my data. Rather, where I am part of it, it will have to be enough to inform me, and not too much where I will lose sight of what emerges. Today struggling to get the proposal ready for review was like flying a kite for me. It was up, it was down, it had wind, it had none, it felt powerful, and powerless all at the same time. If my memory serves me right (it's been a long time since I've flown a kite) this is what I do recall with flying one. It requires lots of persistence, patience, and letting it fall, and getting it back up again and again. (Saffi-Biasetti, 2014)

Another student derived meaningful insight from the kite imagery about her relationship with her inquiry topic (resistance in spiritual emergence) and her current dissertation process, suspended between heaven and earth, as she was poised to launch her study but was still awaiting approval of her dissertation proposal. Working with the image of the kite she chose, it occurred to her that there were parallels between her inquiry topic and her experience of the dissertation process. She was also able to view the challenges both topic and process presented as a source of depth rather than mere obstacles. She wrote:

This kite was the very first one that came up in my search and it called out to me even after looking through many others. I think what I was attracted to about it involves its upright position, how, like an arrow, it seems to be pointing straight up to the sky, while being simultaneously balanced by its perpendicular lines. Within the image I see the pull of spiritual development, and also the string as the resistance—keeping one anchored to the earth, while also permitting one to soar. As I continued to work with the image, I noticed that the kite's shape reminded me of the outstretched wings of a bird, nose to the sky, tail feathers being propelled by the instinct to fly higher and higher into the grand, enchanting, and endless (though somewhat intimidating) sky. The fact that the image of the kite was so close up, did not allow me to see the environment well beyond the close perimeter of clouds and blue sky. Clouds, representing the insecure and turbulent, foggy parts of my dissertation journey thus far, serve to further enhance the depths of the blue sky. Perhaps this is similar to how spiritual resistance can serve to further define the process of spiritual emergence the phenomenon I'm investigating in my inquiry, as a part of the greater whole, and not just its opposing force. (Burgos, 2014b)

## **Toward wholeness**

All this and more (to be further realized) I carry forth into my work as a research faculty member and clinician: “Knowledge falters when imagination clips its wings or fears to use them. Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination” (Dewey, 1929, p. 310). In addition to learning about methodologies appropriate for their research topics and purpose, students greatly benefit from receptivity to symbolic images, sensing and fully embodying them, and recalling them in moments of tension or stress over unknown outcomes. Process-oriented creative expression further encourages the suspension of conclusions, thus maintaining an open mind and heart to multiple future possibilities (as images may continue to be shaped and developed in a revelatory manner throughout the course of inquiry and life itself).

In the context of academic and personal inquiry, healing is a movement away from fragmentation (as in states of doubt, confusion, concern for the future, unconscious shadow, and distancing oneself through mental constructs from the issues being explored). It is a movement toward wholeness (as in acceptance of the unknown, trusting in possibilities, integrity and authenticity). Wholeness is an experience of presence to the unity of all beings—a sense of timelessness, connection with a larger whole, often accompanied by joy (Dienske, 1985).

For students, the experience of wholeness as a way of knowing is a healing experience, which entails construction of personal meaning, yet is manifested in ways evident to others, as in a shift from stagnation into progress, emergence of insight, and other forms of significant discovery that had not been logically deduced in the process of inquiry.

Wholeness may also be experienced through informal self-inquiry, when individuals receive guidance and support to be present and attuned to multiple ways of knowing. Both the guide and the explorer thus embark on an imaginal journey. Questions about lived experiences arise, and we encounter their analogy in imagery as we cross the threshold into the imaginal realm. In the imagination, anything is possible and we are free to generate new possibilities. To the mind-body these possibilities are perceived and registered as actualities. Such imaginal experiences spark movement toward healing, but they require suspension (if only temporarily) of analytical interpretation. As Dienske (1985) observed, the experience of wholeness, however momentary, can have a lasting healing influence even when it is temporary and not fully integrated. “The healing influence is evoked in the experienced openness, intimacy, and rest; in transcending dualism; in a direct and enfolding meaningfulness; and in an inexpressible joy” (p. 19).

Hillman (1979) suggested that a process oriented, image-based discovery expands and enriches linear thought and analysis through integral images that need no further literal interpretation to inform feelings and insight. Such, in my experience, is the premise of a process-oriented, imagery-based inquiry. Students are excited to employ intuition and imagination where logic is insufficient and discursive thought falls short in capturing ineffable experiences—within supportive curricular, mentoring, and cohort-centered containers, aimed to provide grounded and safe environment in which to explore uncharted territories. In such playfully experiential environment, academic research unfolds from the inside out, informing and enriching students personally, interpersonally, and transpersonally. Beyond academics, students learn to connect with their authentic purposes of discovery toward meaningful social contributions that can be independently sustained long after their formal education has concluded.



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