

Relational Ecologies: Artistic Engagement & Mentorship of Adults in Community Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Inside this article, I share insights from research and experience working as a teaching artist and mentor inside and outside traditional institutions. I investigate how relational and contemplative pedagogies promote and sustain authentic relationships of reciprocity. Narrating recent experiments with mentoring practices that emerged from the cultural landscapes of adults engaged in arts learning, the paper highlights new connections discovered through a research model borrowed from intuitive inquiry. Findings are presented as reflective stories, journal entries, or field notes gathered while mentoring graduate art education students and participating in a community of practice in the visual arts. The article demonstrates how a holistic and contemplative philosophy of mentoring supports embodied knowings and connective agencies that unfold as relational ecologies of lifelong learning.

KEY WORDS

Art mentoring, contemplative pedagogies, community, lifelong learning, transformative learning

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Introduction: Mentoring as pedagogy of nurturance

I am reading my graduate students' reflective research journals, one of their assigned weekly submissions for the online arts-based capstone course I lead. These research journals are often multimodal and the topics addressed are the students' choice. Students share reflexive observations on their artistic process, new ideas, a meaningful emotion or feeling about an artwork, notes on engaging readings. Their entry may ask for help with methodology and writing. All entries represent students' unique approach to their artistic and academic inquiry and their willingness to share. The journals may take the form of a personal letter or provide an informal report that communicates with the thesis advisor in a way that is authentic and open. At times, the journal includes process videos, photos, or audio recordings. As I write my responses, I feel my whole being engaging with students' ideas. To communicate and "meet" them in spirit, I must be willing to allow myself into the emotional and intellectual spaces their entries open for me, and very closely, journey with them through the written, audio, or video entries. It is both a work of attentive listening to and watching for what is offered and what is inferred, as well as to what might be unconsciously implied. My work as a mentor includes catching glimpses of meaning in students' writing that were perhaps unintended, but that I feel worthy of being brought to the fore, for the student to ponder and perhaps re-discover. Responding to the weekly journal entries is both privileged access to a student's spirit and an intense process of sustained presence.

The mentoring philosophies I explore in this article are woven with my understanding of intuitive inquiry, an approach to research developed through the field of transpersonal psychology and articulated by Anderson & Braud (2004, 2011). In addition to this holistic approach to honoring the wholeness of human experience, Beard and Wilson's (2013) principles of experiential learning offer practical and essential guidance, while approaches to contemplative practices in research (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015) provide the grounding for my mentoring work. The integration of these concepts complements the holistic perspective on inner knowledge required to guide others. In reflecting on the different approaches and ethical stances to mentoring that may present themselves spontaneously or require an attentive self-awareness, one moves back and forth between the identities of the lifelong learning artist self and the mentor's sharing of expertise. The sense of being a learner is never far from that of the mentor; the roles are cyclical and each return retrieves new manifestations and knowings that deepen one's appreciation of mentoring as a living practice. In this reflective piece—perhaps more accurately termed in-flective—I refer to the different approaches and qualities of being a mentor as relational ecologies. The term points to the time necessary for one's connection with a mentee to evolve, and to the changing contexts in which that relationship develops and grows. As well, relational ecologies suggest that transformational learning (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2006; Cranton, 2009;

Brookfield 2009; Hansman, 2020) through mentoring is dependent on an engagement of body, mind, emotion, and spirit with diverse environments where we form and are formed by relationships.

Accordingly, the process of mentoring that I also call pedagogy of nurturance and becoming adopts different tones and positionalities that are constantly readjusted according to the situation. Through a pedagogy of nurturance, mentors provide guidance to young art and art education students as they develop new skills, support graduate students engaged in capstone arts research projects, or accompany adult women's artistic endeavors in a community of practice. While values of trust, empowerment, agency, interconnectedness and negotiated exchanges are felt in all contexts of artistic mentoring, their articulation is expressed differently. Approaches to working with graduate students typically attend to individualized goals but require a background of peer support, which manifests in a community of practice, where one is both separate and together, with the mentoring shifting between presence and effacement.

It has often been said that unless explicitly brought to consider different pedagogical methods, one teaches the way one has been taught. I experienced this transference firsthand in my early years as a studio instructor. Later, having furthered my studies of art and art education, I realized that once an educator begins to reflect on the meaning of a learner/mentor relationship, and how learning and transformation are shaped through mentorship, it is no longer possible to reenact a pedagogy without questioning its relational qualities and becoming aware of one's deeper values.

With these different and recursive experiences with mentoring, I weave a narrative that offers strategies for adapting one's pedagogy to the context, its participants, or students. More specifically, I reflect on the challenges and highlights of guiding graduate students through their research, explore the meaningfulness of working as a community artist and allow my meanderings to circle back to a realization that mentors and mentees are at times interchangeable, inhabit an ecology kept in balance by a diversity of ephemeral or lifelong relationships connected by values of support and sharing.

To set the stage for these realizations, I begin by summarizing the various principles that guide my interpretation of mentoring's potential and provide a clearer view of their shared or contiguous values. In working to develop and articulate the meaning of mentoring in these various communities of artistic practice and learners, I contextualize these approaches to praxis as my investigative framework.

Mentoring

As the term is generally used in contemporary parlance and adult continuing education literature, mentoring refers to a supportive relationship between a seasoned and a new employee during their induction period, or to the guidance of adults engaged in continuing education (Hansman, 2016; Daloz, 2012). Beyond procedural and technical support, mentoring is concerned with the development of "collaborative, judgmental, reflective and integrative capabilities" (Hansman, 2016, p. 31). In most contexts, mentoring involves psychosocial development, and social construction of knowledge (Crow, 2012), which is "knowledge that is co-constructed through the social and political negotiation process of relationship" (Crow, 2012, p. 231). Brookfield (2009) whose research focuses on transformative adult education adds the dimension of co-constructed peer learning which develops students' ability to critically reflect on their own knowledge and assumptions. Peer learning provides a mirror that reflects... "images of how their practice looks to others" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 133). As mentoring is focused on the development of the whole person, "a central element... becomes the provision of care" (Daloz, 2012, p. xv), and "a good mentor... has the capacity to provide emotional support when it is needed" (Brookfield, 1990, cited in Daloz, 2012, p. 34).

In my practice, in both formal higher education and informal community context, mentoring is modulated by the demands of different roles arising from the relational needs and positionality of the mentees. Power structures exist within all types of mentoring relationships (Hansman, 2016) and it is "through honest and open dialogue [that] mentoring relationships have the potential to transform into a more balanced liaison, with mentors and mentees sharing power... where learning is reciprocal" (Hansman, 2016, p. 36). The ability to listen and to be fully present with the mentee is fundamental (Beard & Wilson, 2013; Mälkki & Green, 2014; Misawa & McClain, 2019), and so is the need to be authentic. "Making the mentorship relational and reciprocal allows the adult educator and adult learner to build rapport, share stories, develop understanding with each other's life situation" (Misawa & McClain, 2019, p. 58). Although power structures cannot be negated in institutional settings between mentors and students, it is possible to engage in a sensitive and trusting relationship that acknowledges the reciprocity of learning (Staikidis, 2020). Similarly, in community arts, a relational approach to mentoring where qualities of trust and authenticity are cultivated often eases into a community of practice, with a focus on collaborative learning.

Intuitive inquiry and arts-based research

Intuitive Inquiry brings intuitive knowing and insights directly into the research process. Intuition is defined as an ability to understand something without the use of conscious reasoning (Psychology Today, n.d.). The Inquiry method was articulated

by Rosemarie Anderson and William Braud (2011) who sought for their graduate students a more holistic form of inquiry, one that would expand beyond the structures of scientific social science research methods that anchored their field of transpersonal psychology. In working with and through principles of the method, researchers engaging in intuitive inquiry are guided towards the selection of a topic for which they have an abiding interest and that in some way has touched their lives, through experience past or present (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Students in the graduate course in arts research I refer to in this paper unknowingly followed much of the insights provided by the method and through exploration, I later discovered that this intuitive approach to research, and in our case, to arts research or arts-based research lent itself very well to its tenets. In the process of researching the literature and existing artworks whose forms substantiate, contextualize, and allow arts researchers to theorize their chosen area of investigation, the engagement with life stories often "prompt changes in the ways they feel and think about the topic, themselves, others, and the world" (Anderson & Braud, p. 1). It is as if research often began from an external question of interest, but soon is brought in connection with inner experiences and to what Anderson and Braud (2011) describe as "an expansion of the empirical", as these findings and explorations reach down into "private and unobservable" dimensions (p. 3). In intuitive inquiry,

What matters to the researcher may be an ordinary experience latent with symbolic meaning. A transformative or peak experience, or a communal or interpersonal phenomenon that invites inquiry for reasons that only she may apprehend, albeit vaguely, at the start. Intuitive inquiry cultivates the ways of the heart in human science research. (Anderson & Braud, 2011, p. 16)

The research process of Intuitive Inquiry invites an inventive expansion of ways of collecting, working with and presenting one's findings. This openness to creative methods and processes is particularly well suited to arts research, where art making provides the reflective method of data interpretation, echoing Marina Basu's (2021) suggestion that "aesthetic writing is the inquiry" (p. 333) [emphasis in the text]. While the narration of this paper testifies to its significant meaning for students' research, I recognize that it is also a path I follow to explore the depth of mentoring as relational ecology.

Experiential Learning and Wu-Wei

Mentoring often involves a long-term relationship where the goals, aspirations and processes are determined by the learner. The mentor acts as a resource, a presence, while the learner controls the process (Beard & Wilson, 2013). The authors of this seminal work on experiential learning observe that qualities of good mentorship include the ability to detach oneself, accessibility, good listening skills and a genuine interest in the participant or student endeavors as well as an attentiveness to their process. They write about the importance of trust building

and meeting the whole person, of being vulnerable and open " to areas of inner pain, chaos, confusion, and lack of skill; being open to our personal presence and power; affirming confidentiality" (p. 75). However, they also warn against trying to save and rescue everyone, avoiding being a savior or a guru, "not to push the river upstream" (p. 77), by which they mean not to do more than is needed, to be attentive to the flow; "to learn to wait until the mud settles, " (p. 77), or wait and watch and listen with full awareness.

In many ways this description of best practice in mentoring echoes the Daoist principles of natural action of wu-wei and ziran. These two principles represent two aspects of the same "spontaneous motion" idea. Encyclopedia Britannica explains wu-wei as "the practice of taking no action that is not in accord with the natural course of the universe" (Stefon, n.d, para 1). Ziran points to this spontaneity in nature and the cosmos, while wu-wei applies the principle to humans, how they should act in accordance with nature's ebb and flow, a concept that appears in opposition to many ideas of what is considered innate in the Western paradigms of competition and struggle. Daoism is spontaneous in the way that nature "allows things to grow, nurtures them, brings them to maturity, and protects them... without trying to control" (Bruya, 2020, p. xv). Lafargue (1992) translates the Daoist idea of doing by non-doing by describing the approach of one who can forgo the desire for remarkable achievements and who turns instead to the task demanding her presence " including especially subtle sensitivity and painstaking attention to its most significant details" (p. 155). A natural harmony, continues Lafargue (1992), is the result of this ideal state of things made possible by a careful work of not working. In this context, a wise mentor must know when to support and when to be silent and self-effaced. In guiding research students, it matters very much to be attentive to their state of mind, their resilience and sense of self-confidence, all of which are changing as their research progresses. One often calls for students to accept that they might momentarily feel lost; to let go of a need to grasp and control, so revelations can arise (Daloz, 2012, p. 27). One calls for balance between rigor, effort, and allowing. "Not to push the river upstream" and "to let the mud settle" both call for a shared commitment to trusting the ebb and flow of research and of the mentoring process (Beard & Wilson, 2013, p. 77).

Contemplative Practices in Mentoring and Research

In a shared practice that authors Susan Walsh, Barbara Bickel, and Carl Leggo (2014) describe as a dialogical, collaborative, and individual endeavor where art, spirituality, research, and teaching form an interrelated web of "being, knowing and not knowing" (p. 1), contemplative practices and arts-based practices resonate with all as aspects of their work. The goals of contemplative practices in education and mentoring are that of presence to possibilities and potentialities that manifest where the artistic and contemplative meet, affecting one's pedagogy and acting as

a catalyst for transformation. In their introduction to the topic, the authors espouse Matthew Fox's (1979) declaration that "creativity is close to compassion because both processes are about making connections"(cited in Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2014, p. 3). Their collective embraces the word "practice" to emphasize an embodied, active, and continued quality of contemplative engagement that serves their community of scholars, artists, teachers, mentors, and students. Through various shared and personal practices and rituals the authors seek to create a collaborative pedagogy that is sustainable, ethical, and whole.

This concern for wholeness and authenticity is espoused by critics such as Aislinn O'Donnell (2015) who points to the growing popularity of mindfulness practices as psycho-technologies that, "being uprooted from rich wisdom traditions and thus having lost sight of its ethical orientation" (p. 188) simply become a profitable self-help industry that "engages solely with symptoms rather than causes of suffering" (p.188). Contemplative practices in mentoring are not outcome-driven, they are not a consumer product. Rather they highlight a way of being that calmly sees what is, providing a sense of grounding and equanimity to the mentoring work, a vital presence that mediates and imbues communications with openness. In an authentic relationship between mentor and learners or participants, the contemplative practice is embodied, holistic, philosophical, and ethical, rather than simply an evidenced-based tool or technique.

Negotiated relationships and exchange: Mentoring graduate students

I have been teaching an online graduate arts-research capstone/thesis course for a few years now. While it cannot be said that all mentoring relationships with students reach the same quality of exchange, every year brings a gift of vibrancy with some students that feel like inter-mentoring and multidirectional learning. Working with graduate students often fosters a sense of expansion that is shared by both parties. Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to this kind of engagement as "reciprocal activities" (cited in Hamilton, et al (2006), p.728). Transcending the teaching role, becoming supporters and companions (Hamilton et al., 2006), we relate as scholars and artists, from the depth of our engagement and the meeting of interests, as creative equals. I do not mean to deny the obvious presence of a hierarchy, as I remain the mentor while the student understands her position as the emerging expert. I stay responsible for grades and guidance as she engages in completing requirements and achieving expectations. However, influences in these relationships are not unidirectional. Additionally, "the equality of the partnership... depends upon the more experienced person doing what they can to neutralise any power imbalance" (Brewer, 2012, p.197), embodying the researcher's vulnerability, which means that we include and embody difficult thoughts and emotions (Rice, 2018). Once this positionality is accepted, however, the work of mentoring opens to a relationship of like-minded artists/scholars/teachers, delighting in conversation and discoveries about practice. If one is fortunate, the meeting of minds is deeply

transformational. At times, despite our geographical distance, we imagine that we are sitting together in a studio. We allow the moments of mentoring to gather the warmth suggested by the intimacy of the virtual space we mentally and emotionally stepped into. Mentoring does not persuade or coerce but encourages and challenges. It supports self-reflection and a commitment to change (Brewer, 2012). Staikidis (2020) writes of these relationships as spaces of meaningful encounters.

Relationships may be likened to a meeting ground that holds understanding. It might be visualized as a space created between intersecting entities with a door for entry and exit forming a common area. Trust within the relationship becomes the invisible yet powerful force which is hand-built by repeated actions such as showing up, responding predictably, telling the truth, being present, and finally, embracing. (p. 288)

Mentoring as place-making: Community at the open studio

First day. I was expecting the presence of an intern, but she/he did not materialize, nor did Sara. I decided to do my thing, just set up and see if someone will come. L., a new guest came first; she studies art at a Community College and she was delighted to find a place with art supplies and space where she could complete her homework. She had to paint a color wheel with primary and secondary colors. L. has malformed hands, and the right one is missing fingers, but she is very agile with her hands.

As she was beginning to work, my now good old friend Ms. F. appeared. I was sincerely happy to see her. She was relaxed. I set her up and we sat across from each other at the table. Only these two were present today, and the conversation flowed.

I realized that my speaking to them about aspects of my life allowed them to feel free to talk about theirs. I think in the past I refrained from talking about me because I wanted it to be about the women and not me, but the response to one's stories is one of trusting the process of storytelling. They responded with their stories. (Personal fieldwork journal-Community Arts, September 20, 2019).

In her work on artistic mentoring with Indigenous Mayan artists, Staikidis (2020) wrote about the transformations that she experienced as a researcher as she was being mentored by her teachers, as a painting student. Staikidis remarked that in the relational exchange, the traditional power structures were deconstructed, and she contrasted learning in formal art classrooms with the relational, heart, and community connections necessary for the type of artistic learning that the Indigenous artists offered her. "Mentoring as a process within community becomes

an informed, loving, cultural and spiritual act as well as a bridge of friendship” (Staikidis, 2020, p. 277)

My experience with mentoring as a community artist began in New York Community Centers for Seniors to later, find a fuller expression at a shelter for homeless and impoverished women in Boston’s South End. This practice has taken the form of a weekly *open art studio*. Over time, I devised what I call a “pedagogy of presence,” which borrows from adult education theory, Daoist and Buddhist principles, and Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, with the specific needs of a peripatetic population in mind. In the early years of this practice, as I searched for community-focused relational pedagogies, I visited GRACE (Grass Roots Arts and Community Efforts) in Hardwick, Vermont¹⁴. I was greatly inspired by the philosophy of its mission, which proposes a pedagogy infused with attentive openness, presence, and non-teaching. Non-teaching is also referred to as a detached presence. Wolf (2010) who practiced this type of mentoring approach in teaching art in community explained,

Contrary to the notion that detachment is to withdraw from becoming involved in the world of things, it is actually to be completely willing to become involved with everything. The self that projects is simply dissolved into emptiness and so no longer resists, allowing us to be more attuned to what is actually happening as we are less distorted by the entrenched patterns of conditioning. (p. 36)

While working at the shelter, I kept a fieldwork journal where I reflected on the nature of my relationships with participants, defined and reconceptualized the ethical dimensions of this work, articulating in the process, an approach to the studio that imbues a pedagogy as mentorship with a Daoist view of the action in non-action where there is no teaching but a space-making that allows simple *beingness*, itself the source of creative energy. It cannot be seen in the usual ways that we look but a pedagogy of presence is a way of mentoring that involves a knowing that is non-grasping, or non-knowing.

Such a receptive eye cuts through convincing and seductive intellectualism to access the pulse that is our inter-relatedness. . . . Beyond the illusions of designation, we recognize that any particular identity of ourselves as this or that is therefore not who we ultimately are, and that reality is something other than an idea we can compare to other ideas in our mind. (Wolf, 2010, p. 6)

My approach to mentorship in community context is to be available as a discreet facilitator, fully present and responding when a need is expressed. A pedagogy of presence (Bourgault, 2020) allows participants to experience for themselves how

¹⁴Grass Roots Art and Community Effort. Retrieved from <https://graceart.org/about-us/>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25889/62es-g797>

small gestures and a creative impulse can generate a spark of felt sense of agency that prevails at our living core. The likelihood of personal self-advocacy and social activism manifests from that innermost sense of agency. One does not need to come up with a big idea for social change, but the work we do to shift small actions can have an impact. Inner awareness fosters the recognition of interconnections. Social justice starts within (Lundahl & Keating, 2020). In its ideal, a pedagogy of presence does not impose a particular way of being or working on others, transcending itself as an agent of conditioning to function as a space for the possible to unfold (Wolf, 2010).

Some arts & health researchers have linked aspects of this approach to art therapy. Drawn to the importance of context for the calming qualities and the feeling of self-efficacy that have been associated with art making as act of self-expression and self-care, in their project report, Kaimal & Ray (2017) introduced the role of the art therapist as the facilitator who is “holding the space by being fully present both to their own art-making as well as that of the participants in the space” (p.155). In their view, the facilitator becomes responsible for creating a safe environment where non-judgmental self-expressive activities can blossom. However, given the clinical setting of the research, the individual sessions followed by “posttest” questionnaires, and the limited time devoted to artmaking, the presence and place-making negated the possibility of transformative relationship building that is the anchor of artistic mentorship. Art therapy practitioners such as Allen (2008) realized that stepping outside the clinical approach and “eschewing the role of the therapist in favor of the role of artist in residence” (p. 11), allowed for a relationship of relaxed awareness where “the healing aspects of art making arise from the making and doing, the trying and failing, the experimenting and succeeding alongside others” (p. 11).

I mentioned before (author, in press) that when someone finds oneself at a shelter, it is usually because of a life emergency or great need. A sense of injustice, social shame, anger, and failure may accompany the person as she moves to a shelter. A quiet time in the art studio begins by providing space for slowing down, the possibility for an inner “gathering of the pieces”, without any conversation or need for explaining anything. “Never evidence of a fixed condition, art is an inquiry where the self is lost and found and lost again, over and over, and meaning is renewed in the process” (Allen, 2008, p. 11). For this reason, there is no need to fix, change or interpret. We are just there. Self-compassion, in this context, appears as an inner place-making, perhaps also peace-making, where no one needs to perform, defend, fear, or fight.

Similarly, in a community theater practice, one instructor anchored his mentoring philosophy by explaining that, if one came with an awareness of being a victim or a disadvantaged person,

We are not going to exacerbate that perception (or even self-perception) by taking it as our starting point. Come into the room and dream. Dream of a different world – maybe a better one. . . . The fact is that the issues will inevitably follow you into the room in due course anyway. But why let them lead when they can just as easily follow? What I mean is this. The issues of class, race, gender, ability, and so on are part of the political backdrop which— dare I say it— defines us because it dictates to us. Politics is part of life. We inherit our labels, we absorb them, we resist them, we embrace them. They are as real as the trees and the houses. So, we cannot lock them out of the creative, imaginative process any more than we could lock them out of life itself. But we do not start with them. As artists, surely, we can see more in the criminal than his or her criminality; more in the victim than his or her victimhood. (White, 2020, p. 161)

While mentoring women engaged in art projects, the studio space allows that same possibility of distance. There is no need to bring up our politics and intersectional realities unless the impulse to express them through visual means facilitates the emergence of a voice, the realization of a stance that demands our consideration. Similarly, spontaneous conversations and yarn connect participants with the invisible depths of community building, how it moves, what happens to the mind, and the inner workings of "quiet activism". Its political force resides in its critically resistant and transgressive ways that are like how nature works its ways in a quiet, insistent manner. It is creative and will not be undone, with a sure presence. One can think of water, of green growth in any crack of asphalt, the continued persistent ability to bring change. If we are going to go against the grain of our current situation, a neo-liberal pragmatic and productivity-bent uncritical behavior, quiet activism can awaken ethical values and a sense that things are possible because the community place-making and being-with embody that possibility.

The Mentor is also a Mentee

Learning is lifelong, grounded in community and relationships, and widely informal. It need not be practical in the sense of economic and professional development but offers a continuing holistic and mindful quest for growth, and self-knowledge. Blended with a contemplative pedagogy, the approach to a lifelong process of learning and transformation is not separated from other life activities (Merriam & Sek Kim, 2008). Its goals include inner equilibrium and attunement with the interconnectedness of all things, what Zen calls inter-being, as around us everything changes.

The theory of education that underlies contemplative pedagogy is one that presumes that the capacities of sustained voluntary attention, emotional

balance, insight, and compassion are able to be developed through practice. (Zajonc, 2013, p. 89)

A mentor is also a mentee, and this awareness makes the learning and contemplative pedagogies more vibrant and deliberate. In my meditation practice, my mentor does not speak or offer personalized advice, unless I ask a question, but his availability is equanimous and tangible. As I communicate with my writing partner, her stories about her day's work are received with a mentee's mind. In her notes about writing practice and research outcomes for the day, I glean insights that assist in highlighting my next day's work, as ideas are set to percolate. Even my efforts in cooking foods for our meals are supported by an online mentor, whose suggestions I seek regularly for ideas in combining textures and flavors, details about proportions, and cooking time. As I become aware of how I learn through every experience, I see mentorship in most experiences where the learning is continuous and open.

Given that learning is embedded in the context of everyday experience, active participation in everyday activities and the rites and rituals of a community are seen as conduits to learning. Learning occurs through observation of others and through practicing what is being learned. (Merriam & Sek Kim, 2008, p.77).

Conclusion: Self-transformation, agency, and quiet activism

The perspective of being-with and of the vulnerable researcher eliminates the need to position oneself as the authority subject looking at the participant objects. Beyond the daily reality of privilege differences and issues of power, which I do not ignore, I think it is possible to relate at a level that is not focused on civic and social differences but on a deeper, existential interconnectedness of spirit, something "not local, not contained in separate vessels/bodies, but like air and water, energy and matter" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 155). Is it unrealistic to uphold the sense that "in unison, this work to come into deep awareness of our interconnections can help us to imagine, embody, and enact a world based on collective well-being—a future where everyone can be whole? (Lundahl & Keating, 2020, p.32)

Carl Leggo (1999) described research as finding cracks where light can find release and it was his work to align himself with such wisdom - a sense of the connective ground in which all forms of life emerge from and return to. This state of openness is not only the key to creativity but to morality insofar as "ethics start when you don't know what to do, when there is this gap between knowledge and action, and you have to take responsibility for inventing the new rule which doesn't exist" (Derrida, 2003 cited in Wolf, 2010, p. 36).

Empowerment begins with naming our own reality. We must define it in our own terms. This is the only way we come to understand how to transform ourselves (Cajete, 2015).

Another day with energy. This morning, Ms. F brought a woman whom she thought would enjoy being with us at the art studio. Her name is S. S looks like she is going through a hard time, her face has the color and texture of hard drinking. She was tired and vulnerable and did not want to do anything. That was fine. I said: Just sit and be with us. No obligations here and no expectations. She was sad, she looked shaken, but did not say what the cause might have been. She showed me the photo of her grandson, (she said “the son of my son”) a just born baby. Then she added that he is about three months old now. She showed me the knitting she started, saying she was making a ghost costume for the baby. A few minutes later, she was crying. I held her gently, stroking her arms. She said that she missed her family so much.

Ms. F. was silent. She works, she paints with fluidity. As she works, she must be processing things and thoughts, but she is very discreet, never really says anything unless one addresses her directly.

Two other women came. They seemed energized. Once I introduced the concept of the open studio, they asked for acrylic paint and jumped right in. M was very explorative, playing with paint, scraping, overlaying, etc. G did some of that too but was more introverted. She was interested in embroidery. I was trying to get something started today on my studio project, to begin transposing the bird on the silk I had brought. Susan came over to watch. We had meditation music on, and the women loved it. We were all adults and on that side of youth. We related. Quiet, we talked little, and when we did, it was about art making. (Personal fieldwork journal-Community arts, September 27, 2019)

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