Ritual

IN THIS ISSUE:

Journal Theme: Ritual

Pearl and Murray Greenburg Award Lectures

Intergenerational Implications of Ritual in Art Education

A Growing Ritual of Animal Rock Painting

The Ritual of Therapeutic Artmaking in Long-Term Care

Art Nights: Reimagining Professional Development as a Ritual

Food for Thought: Rituals in Place Based Learning

Men’s Sheds: An Outlet for Engaging in Creative Activities

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# Table of Contents

**Editorial:**
Journal Theme: Ritual

*Linda Helmick*

**Pearl and Murray Greenburg Award Lectures**

*Susan Whiteland*

*Eli Burke*

**Intergenerational Implications of Ritual in Art Education**

*Angela M. La Porte*

*Peg Speirs*

*Camilla McComb*

**A Growing Ritual of Animal Rock Painting**

*Mary L. Stokrocki*

**The Ritual of Therapeutic Artmaking in Long-Term Care**

*Melinda Heinz*

*Elissa Wenthe*

*Alexis Schramel*

**Art Nights: Reimagining Professional Development as a Ritual**

*Libba Willcox*

**Food For Thought: Rituals in Place Based Learning**

*Natalia C. Pilato*

**Men’s Sheds: An Outlet for Engaging in Creative Activities**

*Melinda Heinz*

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Journal Theme: Ritual

“No single point of view can describe the unlimited variety of what we call ritual.”

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This issue of the International Journal of Lifelong Learning in Art Education is inspired by the theme of ritual. There are many ways we might define ritual, and these definitions vary extensively contingent upon its’ focus. Rituals are usually identified by a specific set of features many of which are defined as rigid, formal, repetitive, and symbolic in nature. However, there is no single point of view to describe the unlimited variety of what we call ritual. Some view ritual as a safe container; one with a clear beginning and end. For instance, a meal, a greeting, a meditation practice, a dance, a curriculum, or the many layered processes of artmaking could look like a ritual. Ellen Dissanayake (1979) further “suggest[s] that the incorporation of aesthetic elements into ritual ceremony was an important feature in its adoption as a social practice, an adoption that mutually strengthened both activities, ritual and art” (p. 30). In this issue, we will learn about the yearly ritual of the Pearl and Murry Greenburg awards that recognize exceptional contributions to the field of art education and are made possible by the generosity of the Greenburg family. Then we will dive into the many ways our authors considered the role ritual has played regarding art and lifelong learning.

Reference

Dr. Susan Whiteland writes that her inspiration lies in the high bar of achievement set for her by colleagues and former Greenburg award winners. In her acceptance speech, she quotes former award winners, Angela LaPorte and Pamela Lawton, whose research informed her master’s thesis and continue to inspire her research of ways older and younger generations can make connections through artmaking. Dr. Whiteland has been teaching and providing service opportunities for future art educators at Arkansas State University for the last 11 years.

Eli Burke, Senior Program Manager, Designing Projects in Student Engagement and Career Development, a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona, received the Murray Greenberg Award for Emerging Scholar in Lifelong Learning. Eli explores ways art education might offer a more holistic approach to our arts communities and works to provide space for connection, cultural production, and shared histories across generations within queer communities.

Angela La Porte, Peg Speirs, and Camilla McComb introduce us to ritual and explore the role it has played across generations and through time. In this article, the authors strive to understand the transformative possibilities of bringing ritual as pedagogy to art education curriculum design and ways it could promote intergenerational conversations with participants from diverse backgrounds and ages.

In a beautiful visual essay, Mary Stokrocki explores a form of memorial rock painting as ritual that she and her neighbors came together to create during the COVID19 pandemic.

Melinda Heinz, Elissa Wenthe, and Alexis Schramels’ project offered therapeutic artmaking rituals for residents living in three levels of care, assisted living, memory care, and nursing homes. The residents worked with a variety of mediums including paint, clay, fiber, and wood, designed to fit the needs of individual ability levels. In addition, an art exhibition of resident work was created to showcase the creative abilities of these older adults.

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Libba Willcox looks at ways alternative professional development as content focused rituals for art teachers can provide learning opportunities that traditional professional development programs cannot. She finds that these rituals might provide aesthetic transformative experiences, that can empower teachers to fight against burnout, support renewal, and enable them to recover their joy of teaching.

Natalia Pilato explores the way her Sicilian mother’s generations of rituals in the kitchen shaped this author’s identity and served as a foundation for artistic expression and community engagement. Natalia invites us to have a seat at the table as we engage in a powerful narrative of shared stories and memories, that connect us to her mother’s kitchen through time, place, and making connections to a collaborative ritual of artmaking within a community.

Melinda Heinz shares stories, work, and exhibitions of members of the Men’s Shed Movement that originated in Australia in the 1990’s and has spread to Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, U.K., U.S., and South Africa. She shares that engaging in the creative activities of Men’s Sheds, has given men, and now women, who are retired, and isolated new purpose in their lives.

By engaging in the social practice of ritual or ritualistic artmaking, these authors lead us through the role ritual has played in strengthening intergenerational relationships, opening new understandings of peace and flow in creative artmaking processes, and the healing that can occur when we are engaged in personal or collaborative community ritualistic practices.
Pearl and Murray Greenberg Award Lectures

“...we must approach each other as people, not as ages and stages.”

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The Pearl and Murray Greenberg Awards were established through a generous gift from Ken Greenberg and his wife, Clara Gerdes, to the National Art Education Association’s Committee on Lifelong Learning. The recipients of these awards’ focus on their contributions to the field of art education for post-secondary learners across the lifespan, including creative aging, community-based art education, and/or intergenerational arts learning. The Murray Greenberg Award specifically supports an emerging scholar (zero to four years beyond the completion of their graduate degree program thesis or dissertation) with $1000. The Pearl Greenberg Award for Teaching and Research recognizes an artist/educator/researcher at the national level who has made distinguished contributions with $2,500. This article includes excerpts from the 2023 acceptance speeches given during the Committee on Lifelong Learning Awards’ Ceremony at the 2023 San Antonio Texas National Art Education Association Convention.

Pearl and Murray Greenberg Award Recipient
Susan Whiteland

Thank you award committee for the opportunity to carry on the legacy implied by this award that Pearl Greenberg, and her husband, Murray have made possible through their generous gifts. The award recognizes one who advances art experiences for older adults, research on the benefits of art for the aging, and/or intergenerational arts learning programs. My predecessors for receiving this award, Pam Lawton and Angela La Porte have set the bar high in their commitment to promote quality art education that includes programming for learners of all ages—womb to tomb.

I am reminded of the first time I encountered the word, intergenerational. I was talking with my advisor at North Texas State University early in my master’s program. I shared with her my desire to develop a research agenda that was related to children and older adults doing art together. She said, oh you mean a focus on art that is intergenerational. I had witnessed firsthand the close bond that can be established between a child and a great-grandparent. I have a mental picture of my mother at 82 sitting on her bed with my granddaughter. They were making collages from stamps she had received in the mail and coloring pictures together. They displayed their

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handiwork on her bedroom door using scotch tape—a definite no-no when I was growing up to tape anything to my painted bedroom door. I carried the desire forward to see trust and understanding built between the generations that I first saw exemplified through the visual art experiences between my mom and her great-granddaughter.

**Figure 1**

*Grandmother and Great-Granddaughter*

I wrote my master’s thesis in 2009 entitled Examination of Learning Relationships between Intergenerational Students in an After School Art Program. It was a qualitative case study of older active adults and elementary students who were involved in visual art experiences that provided a contextual learning environment that had the potential to foster lifelong learning and address the interpersonal issues of an aging society. I quoted the then president of LifeLong Learning, Angela LaPorte, in my thesis as I wrote that societal changes in the 20th century promoted negative stereotypes, mistrust, and fear of those outside one’s age group. Angela said loneliness and a decline in self-esteem was becoming prevalent among older adults, children were less awareness of their cultural and historical background, and ageing was becoming a fearful subject. I also quoted from an article that our fellow colleague, Pam Layton wrote talking about her study, Artstories. At the conclusion of Layton’s study, she said the teens and seniors who were involved in a collaborative art project obtained a feeling of empowerment because they had connected with someone different from themself and had created artifacts with personal and social significance.

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In the case study designed for my thesis, I invited six older adult volunteers to team with nine students ages 6-9 who were part of an after-school extended day program. I facilitated art experiences for the group that involved creating memory books for reflections of our time together as well as the creation of a tile mosaic that would be hung at the elementary school. Later I published an article about the study, Making friends and making art: An intergenerational learning experience (2012). *Journal of Art for Life* 3(1) 4-19. The study suggested that the art experience was instrumental in building positive relationships among the participants.
I graduated with my doctoral degree from University of North Texas in December of 2012. My dissertation examined visual art experiences for shared site locations. I became acquainted with the idea of a shared site where a preschool or childcare center was integrated with an assisted living facility under the same roof after spending a six-week residency at St. Vincent’s on the Mount in Seattle, Washington. It was there that I facilitated art lessons for the older residents and children separately as well as intergenerational group art lessons. One of our projects was a story quilt that was later hung in the childcare center. That practice based research where I saw art as the catalyst for fostering a sense of community and acceptance among generations influenced my dissertation and my future trajectory in art education.

I have been teaching future art educators for the last 11 years at Arkansas State University. In my students’ coursework I strive to provide opportunities for service-learning experiences so that they may be able to apply the art skills, and pedagogical approaches they are learning in school to real world situations seeing that art is a lifelong learning endeavor that spans beyond the K-12 classroom. Among these experiences I try to include opportunities to work with various ages in a variety of contexts. Some of the places we have been include assisted living facilities, nursing homes, therapeutic day care centers, senior centers, after school programs, elementary classes, and rehabilitation centers. We have used traditional media and processes such as printmaking, drawing, painting, fiber arts, and clay work as well as digital media, puppetry, STEAM and Maker Space tools.

Figure 4
*Student and Healthy Agers construct Mugs*
The first picture in this series is of one of my students in a special topics class I am offering this semester. It has a service-learning component that involves working with a group of older adults that are enrolled in a Healthy Agers program. My student is showing two older adults how to hand build a clay mug. The goal of this class is to explore if using clay has therapeutic potential for reducing stress. The second picture was taken in an after-school program where volunteering older adults were involved in co-learning with elementary students on how to create a stop frame clay animation or Claymation movie.

Figure 6
Students and a Nursing Home Resident printmaking
The third image is of university students at a nursing home teaching a print-making lesson. The fourth image is of a student helping an older adult in an adult day-care memory unit.

**Figure 7**
*Preparing the Surface for Making a Print*

These photos attest to how older and younger generations can connect through art making. I enjoy being a contributor to the process. As I continue to guide future art educators in their quest for becoming licensed professionals, I will look for opportunities to pursue intergenerational art experiences. Receiving this Greenberg Award from the Lifelong Learning in Art Education Interest Group conveys to me that we share a mutual desire to further our research and our practice in art education for all ages and stages of life; thereby, paving the way for cultivating a more compassionate society that values the contributions that we each can make.

**Pearl and Murray Greenberg Award for Emerging Scholar Award Recipient**
**Eli Burke**

Like many others, I was raised in an environment that was not created for queer, trans, or creative people like me to thrive. As a young person with little support around how to navigate my future, I knew it would be a challenge for me to survive, let alone thrive in a fast-paced environment focused on financial success. I especially had a very difficult time adapting within the classroom where my undiagnosed ADHD had me frequently sitting alone on the floor in the back of the classroom and my tomboyish ways left me feeling isolated, ashamed, and lonely. Spending the bulk of my education (and childhood) preoccupied with how to manage each day in

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a body that did not fit in the spaces I occupied made it difficult to prioritize my education, and I floundered until graduation, which included several trips to the psychiatric hospital in my junior year of high school, skipping prom, and no college admission I could proudly display on the wall along with my peers. How would I make it through college when I could barely manage high school?

After years of working and struggling financially I did pursue my education, earning an associate degree at the age of 27 from Pima Community College, where I found the confidence and support, I needed to pursue a degree in the arts. I transferred to the Art Institute of Chicago where I earned my BFA and continued to receive my MFA. Much of my undergraduate work was an exploration of my experiences, which were often centered around trauma. When I entered the Art and Visual Culture Education PhD program at the University of Arizona I took an Arts-based Research course. I was set on not addressing LGBTQ+ identities in my research. I felt like I needed to prove myself within the field without leaning on my identity. It was there that I decided to revisit my path as an artist and write about work I had made at the beginning of my education as an artist, and it was there I discovered I could not separate who I was from how I engaged with the world. The following is what emerged from this research.

Figure 1

Begins

Figure 1 Begins is a reflection on my time spent in psychiatric institutions during high school, where I dealt with extreme anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. It also became a symbolic representation of my realization that art is not simply an act of making, but a way of looking at the world. This was the beginning.
In revisiting *Self-evaluation* (Figure 2) I recognized the reflection of self through the eyes of those I loved. The handwritten collaged elements were taken from letters I received while in treatment. The piece was made prior to my transition, and I began to see my own history through a new lens.
As I moved deeper into the foundations of how I perceived myself and my body among others I began to examine the spaces I occupied as a child, which were largely educational spaces. Harm is often done in unmediated spaces at school and was often echoed by teachers and administration. It was simply a system not created for the body I occupied, the person I was within that body, or who I would become. I followed the thread through my artwork to finally recognize that nature is the only place where I don’t feel judged. But aren’t we all a part of nature (Figure 3)?

**Figure 3**
Paradox Part I: To the Waters and the Wild, 2007, installation

This brought me to recognize the body as the site for all learning, interpretation, and cultural production. I entered the program determined to succeed without leaning on my identity, however through this ABR project I realized that this was impossible. I revisited prior work that centered the body and began to see how I could never really separate myself from my body or my identity and that I had been stuck living within a binary worldview (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**
Anyone but You, 2006, video stills

I analyzed how I felt in my own body as I began transitioning in 2014 (Figure 5). Art became a tool to express what was hard to say in words and helped me sift through the complicated and painful feelings of shame. I began to examine my relationships to other bodies. How did I respond and react? Why?
Figure 5
Dress Pattern, 2014, video Stills

Figure 6

I made representations of my body as both a shelter and a visible object (Figure 6).
I began creating spaces for others to experience, both a reflection of my own body and an invitation to others to walk through the experience of transition.
And finally, an acceptance of the body and an acknowledgement of its deep interdependence with nature (Figure 7).

I began to abstract the body, exploring ambiguity and attempting to reconcile who I am within a world not created for bodies like mine (Figure 8).

Figure 8
End of Summer, 2018, Acrylic and ink on manila pattern paper, 4’ x 5’
I asked myself: What does it mean to be in a space, in a body with other bodies? I realized through the process of responding to my own work across time that empathy and vulnerability are central to this work. It allowed me to acknowledge and address my own discomfort as an educator and with my own body in public spaces. I needed it to bridge the gap between that discomfort and students. It highlighted the need for me connect with myself and my community on a deeper, more holistic level. This process was necessary to understand the role my body played in the classroom, allowing me to be a “better” educator. The work in ABR would open the door for what was to come.

Figure 9

That same year I was in a course taught by Dr. Carissa DiCindio. What came out of that class was the creation of Stay Gold, an intergenerational LGBTQ+ arts program, which would likely not been created had I continued my misguided path to prove myself rather than authentically engage with the world through who I was. The name Stay Gold comes from the Robert Frost poem, Nothing Gold Can Stay and the book and subsequent film, The Outsiders.

The program was inspired by previous work I had done with youth and elder LGBTQIA+ communities. One of these programs was Mapping Q, a youth program developed by Chelsea Farrar that invites queer youth into the University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA) to interrogate institutional spaces and map the ways queerness shows up. This iteration of Mapping Q became a collaboration with Tucson Museum of Art, University of Arizona Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson, where I was the Education Director. We used video and the concept of fragments to create portraits of queer life/spaces.

In addition to my experience working with queer youth in Mapping Q I also facilitated studio session with The Latona Project, an elder arts program that was created by Becky Black and David Romero. “The Latona Project is a student-initiated collaborative community outreach project developed to examine the issues of changing LGBTQI senior identity within art

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museums” (Black, 2016 page #?). Through my experiences with these two programs, I became acutely aware of the need for a program that invites LGBTQIA+ communities to come together across generations. In addition, I was able to recognize that we embody many different versions of ourselves, often simultaneously and contradictory. Words like queer can act as a symbol of freedom or a symbol of oppression. Many LGBTQIA+ people had to imagine futures before they could even name the difference they embody. The invisibility of queerness as children, both around and within us, causes us to imagine in isolation and often within the framework of what already exists. I turned toward the term “queer imaginary” to define this space, a term deeply inspired by Afrofuturism.

Stay Gold was created to bring queer bodies together across generations to explore who and how we are through acts of making/creating and dialogue. It is social and educational. Participants facilitate sessions, create space agreements, and act as experts of their own experience within the museum, rather than the museum dictating what community goals and needs are. The program is now in its seventh year at MOCA Tucson. Art has the power to foster empathy between bodies. Questions that emerged from this process:

- What do bodies say?
- What do bodies teach those who both occupy them and those who encounter other bodies?
- What is heard or learned by institutions?
- How do individuals/groups/institutions respond/react to bodies?
- How does this affect how and what we learn?

These questions led me question how we might create a new model of art education that encompasses all cultural production and connects the body and the environment to what and how we learn. Through my current role at the University of Arizona where I teach life-centered design, I recognized the power this creative problem-solving methodology could offer art education. After all, isn’t artmaking a problem we create for ourselves? Life-centered design is interdisciplinary, used to solve problems or challenges, uses empathy as the foundation, encourages us to slow down and look at a problem from all angles before jumping to possible solutions. My goal is to create a space that acknowledge the unique knowledge system and histories our bodies hold. The disconnection across generations within the queer community is due to a lack of spaces (church, family, etc.) where we can connect. I ask:

- Can we center the body in art education as both a pedagogy and the foundation from which we scaffold what is taught, learned, and how?
- Can we create a space where cultural production is central to inquiry and the body is the site of and from which all inquiry emerges and is explored?
- Can we ground our work in healing?
- Can we search for knowledge at the intersections, where new knowledge is born?
- Can we connect and learn across generations to mitigate the inadvertent exchange of trauma that often silently occurs?
- Can we locate lost histories in service to the future?

How might art education offer a more holistic approach to education? How might we use our uniqueness and embodied knowledge as tools to both teach and learn from and with one another? I recognized that bodies are politicized, and therefore so is art. How might we undo this through our shared experiences, healing, and acknowledgement that all experiences and bodies carry unique knowledge and deserve to exist, learn, and thrive?

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Intergenerational Implications of Ritual in Art Education

“This community-based ritual collaboration brought people from all ages and backgrounds together for a culturally significant educational and artistic performance, which reinterpreted forms of historical and cultural ritualistic practice.”

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Camilla McComb, PhD
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Abstract
This article introduces the concept of ritual and the role it can play in art education across generations from PK-12 schools to community collaborations. Three authors elaborate on research, personal experiences, and applications of ritual in their art education practice. The first introduces ritual within personal, historical, cultural, psychological, and sociological contexts. Then, relates these to art education curriculum and an intergenerational community collaboration. Author 2 shares experience with ritual-based artists using performance, body adornment and modification to communicate creative sacred/secular expression. Author 3 describes her hesitancy and eventual success in engaging preadolescents in ritual-based discussions. All these perspectives hope to inspire readers’ ritual research and practice across generations.

Keywords
Intergenerational, ritual, art, curriculum

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We, the authors, have been friends and art education colleagues for nearly 30 years. From the time we met in graduate school to this current collaboration, one shared interest that continues to bring us together is the topic of ritual. Our perspectives of ritual have evolved over time, but art, art making, and material culture as components of ritual have remained common and continuous elements throughout our discussions.

What is ritual? What role can ritual play in art education across generations from PK-12 schools to community collaborations? These questions are elaborated on by each of us, based on our research, personal experiences, and applications to art education practice. La Porte introduces ritual within personal, historical, cultural, psychological, and sociological contexts. Then, she relates these to art education curriculum and a community collaboration. Speirs shares experience with ritual-based artists using performance art, body adornment, and body modification to communicate creative sacred/secular expression. McComb describes her hesitancy and eventual success in engaging preadolescents in ritual-based discussions culminating in the creation of personal shrines. We introduce our perspectives with hopes that they may inspire readers’ research and practice across generations.

Ritual Across Cultures, Places, and Generations

*Ritual* has long reflected meaningful human experiences across cultures, places, and generations. Some of the earliest ritual studies focused on exotic practices, performed by people in isolated places of the world (Brown, 1980; Durkheim, 1912), and often included various art forms and material culture as essential components of ceremonial practices (Dissanayake, 1988). Anthropologists continue to speculate about some of the earliest evidence of ritualistic behaviors in rock art from Northwestern and Central Australia (Michaelsen et al., 2000; Ross & Davidson, 2006) and 17,000-year-old sites in South Africa (Thackeray, 2005). The images illustrated on rocks depict rituals related to hunting, healing, and other unidentifiable practices that varied across cultures, places, and time periods. Dewey (1934) suggested that these early art forms were “an extension of the power of rites and ceremonies to unite [people], through a shared celebration” (p. 271). These historical representations of ritual in art have been mystical, religious, or secular, changing over time and reflecting aspects of the cultures from which they emerged (Brown, 1980, Dissanayake, 1988; Durkheim, 1912). Despite the passage of time, rituals persist and seem to historically parallel human productions of art and material culture (Dissanayake, 1988).

Defining ritual is complex, yet ritual often manifests itself through intergenerational practices. Whitaker (1980) asserted that ritual “must be symbolic, repetitive, stereotypical, and a complexly patterned event” (p. 316), while Brown (2005) suggested that it becomes “segments of our patterns of behavior which we have inherited and practice and pass on to our descendants” (p. 127). As scholars attempt to define ritual, intergenerational or not, there is no universal understanding. Relative to philosophical implications for art proposed by Grimes (1990) and others, a tangible definition for ritual is a religious or secular act, performed repeatedly or reactivated by a person or group that involves the body and/or the senses, sound, language, a level of meaning, and often includes material culture.
Although a ritual can be enacted by a single person in isolation, such as preparing a cup of coffee each morning, we focus on ritual and its implications as a concept for meaningful, artistic/creative intergenerational, and transformative art education curriculum. Rituals can be meaningful, since they are able to promote a sense of belongingness, reduce our anxiety, and bring a sense of cohesiveness to group participants. They are creative in the sense that we can draw on rituals for inspiration. They are transformative, as we can reflect on our own rituals and how they have changed us throughout history. We have grown to better understand the value of ritual in the transfer of historical knowledge and wisdom through generations, and now we strive to bring this rich content to art curriculum design.

**Ritual as It Relates to Art Curriculum Across Generations**

We explore the potential of ritual in art curriculum within and across generations, suggesting the potential value of ritual as a practice that provides humans with some sense of belongingness and reduction of anxiety (Xygalatas, 2022). Ritual as a theme for curriculum offers a potential to connect people across generations and backgrounds, as traditional rituals bring people together from the same community. As ageism continues to be one of the most prevalent biases according to Charlesworth and Banaji (2019), intergenerational approaches offer some potential to reduce age-related stereotypes (La Porte, 2011) and inspire one’s own creative practices.

**Ritual: Reflecting on the Personal as Inspiration for Art and Curriculum (La Porte)**

The theme of ritual has been prevalent in my own life, artmaking, and art curriculum. My personal experience with ritual is rooted in my family history as a second-generation grandchild of Italian immigrants, becoming Roman Catholic, practicing gardening, canning fruits and vegetables, and celebrating with special foods. These experiences connect me to my grandparents and their heritage and persistently enter my curriculum and artmaking.

Ritual first emerged in my art curriculum when working with teenagers and older adults during my dissertation research in New York City’s lower East Harlem using artworks that prompted questions, stories, and dialogue between generations. Older participants could easily connect with Horace Pippin’s paintings “Saturday Night Bath” and “Christmas Morning Breakfast” as well as Palmer Hayden’s “Midsummer Night in Harlem.” These artworks prompted stories from the older adults about the rituals of bathing, special foods eaten on Christmas morning, and socializing outdoors during midsummer nights in Harlem while teens listened carefully and compared the past to their current day rituals. Although the program focused on oral history, intergenerational conversations, and art making, elements of ritual inspired dialogue, stories, and artworks (La Porte, 2011).

Years later, ritual manifestations evolved in my art installation titled *Mother, Mary*, which was part of the traveling exhibition titled, *In Response to Healing* (Speirs & Speirs, 2005-7). This installation took the form of an altar in response to my mother’s battle with brain cancer and its potential link to aspartame consumption. I arranged artifacts (e.g., braided garlic, canning jars, shredded journal pages, MRI film, a radiation mask, and a can of diet caffeine free Coke cut into small pieces) in contemplative juxtapositions on an altar-like display connected to a motion

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sensor that lit up an MRI scan embedded into a medicine cabinet door at the altar’s center (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Mother Mary*

![Figure 1](https://example.com/image1)

A more recent artwork, *Acustica di Italia* (Figure 2), also connected to ritualistic practice, was created for a faculty exhibition. That installation included a 44” x 62” digital photo on paper of an archaeological site at the top of a hill in Mirabello Sannitico, Italy, featuring the church of Santa Maria di Monteverdi and the Benedictine abbey monastery. This was an ancient Samnite site near my grandparents’ village, which has been repeatedly rebuilt due to earthquakes in the area. The limestone in the crumbling building and in the distant mountains repeated in the actual limestones in front of the photo on the gallery floor. Buried beneath the stones were a series of Gregorian chant recordings that my friends and I performed while on location in Italy, repeated from an iPod with speakers, reflecting the variety of architectural acoustic variations. Chant, prevalent in Catholic ritual, continues to be appropriated in my own practices performing with

**Figure 2**  
*Acustica di Italia*

![Figure 2](https://example.com/image2)

[https://doi.org/10.25889/144w-v104](https://doi.org/10.25889/144w-v104)
friends of multiple ages and backgrounds at sites such as James Turrell’s *Way of Color*, located at Crystal Bridges American Art Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas.

As ritual continued to evolve in my artmaking, it also emerged in my curriculum. Aspects of ritual were noticed while teaching art at a lower-income residential facility for adults, in my courses for university pre-service students, and within a mixed ability community arts program for adults with cognitive, developmental, and physical disabilities. A conference presentation I delivered prompted a high school art teacher to engage her own students meaningfully through the theme of ritual (La Porte, 2016), as high school students reflected on teenage rituals, such as Quinceañera and other family traditions. Teens also connected ritual to the simple act of putting on make-up every morning. My preservice art education students taught a unit on ritual to 4th graders at an Italian school in Rome, Italy. Each rendition of the curriculum began with a sharing of ritual examples based on student interests, community, or background of the teachers’ secular rituals (e.g., camping & special food preparation). Curriculum included artists inspired by ritual (e.g., Lee Mingwei, Carmen Lopez Garza, Romare Bearden) and engaged children with questions about the artists’ work, the contexts, and relationship to ritual. Students of all ages connected with ritualistic objects, places, and stories, whether religious or secular.

One of my most unique experiences with ritual occurred within a community collaboration at our university art gallery. The *Fundred Dollar Bill Project*, initiated by artist Mel Chin, was a collaborative artwork that started as a nationwide call for teachers to involve their students in the Fundred Dollar Bill curriculum. The primary goal of the project was to educate the public about lead pollution in the New Orleans soil, which had been causing devastating health issues, particularly in young children. In response, students were invited to design a $100 bill. The aim was to create and deliver 3 million $100 dollar bills to the U.S. Congress with a proposal from scientists to resolve the soil contamination in New Orleans. My effort in this endeavor started with organizing [state] teachers to participate (La Porte, 2010) and culminated in a ritualistic gallery installation at my university.

Faculty, students, and community participants were invited to draw a Fundred Dollar Bill to support the effort. The final collection provided a ritualized educational experience as we formed a New Orleans-style funeral procession to take the collected Fundred drawings from the gallery’s bank safe installation guarded by students dressed in armored truck driver apparel to an awaiting armored truck that took the drawings to their final resting place in Washington, DC.

A closing reception included traditional New Orleans food and a chant written for the occasion by my friend, Ethel Simpson, including jazz music performed by university faculty and students. As the project concluded, we sang Ethel’s original chant while students loaded the drawings onto a golden carrier. Then, students carried the Fundred drawings in a funeral-like procession, led by student musicians playing New Orleans-style music, followed by community supporters to the armored truck (see Figures 3 and 4).

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This community-based ritual collaboration brought people from all ages and backgrounds together for a culturally significant educational and artistic performance, which reinterpreted forms of historical and cultural ritualistic practice. Similarly, Peg Speirs connects her own research and implications for art education in the next section, introducing performance art, body adornment, and body modification as ritual and its cross generational implications.

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Ritual: Reflecting on the Body as Inspiration for Art and Curriculum (Speirs)

I participated in ritual growing up in Catholicism but did not recognize the experience or process as a concept until I learned about ritual. When something is named or labeled, it signifies limiting, defining parameters that separate it from other experiences. Once I understood the parameters of ritual, they flexed and broadened to include practices beyond my immediate experience.

Two distinct associations with ritual transpired in my professional life and directly shaped my current perspective: an introduction to the work of performance artists while in graduate school and my current projects researching cultural practices of body adornment and modification. At first seemingly unrelated, the associations became stronger and more deeply intertwined the more I researched. Layered with my interest in the body as medium and subject matter in art, ritual became a framework to better understand the body as a means of sacred, creative cultural expression and transformation.

Ritual performance art came into my sphere of influence as subject matter for the art curriculum from the writings of art critic/theorist Suzi Gablik (1991) and feminist performance artist/author Suzanne Lacy (1994). Gablik argued for art as social practice and ecological awakenings. She proposed the artworld shift focus from consumerism to a more spiritual realm, citing artists’ examples of performing rituals in collaboration with or on behalf of the earth. Lacy pioneered socially engaged public art performances, tackling issues missing from public discourse, such as sexual violence, poverty, incarceration, labor, and aging. I researched the work of ritual performance artists dominique mazeaud, Fern Shaffer, and Othello Anderson as examples of how art can serve as a means of transformation. Following the guiding principles of intention and attention, these artists performed ritual acts as gestures of healing through artistic interventions stemming from concerns for the ecological present and future of the planet and its inhabitants. mazeaud (2006) explained these two main ingredients of ritual:

> Intention and attention are what unites all rituals, in every ancient and contemporary culture that follows, in one form or another, a ceremonial path. I believe that art derives from ritual, or maybe what we call art was simply ritual before ritual-based cultures went into a more materialistic stance. (p. 1)

These integral parts of ritual imply the concept of stretching by following a purpose (attention) and thoughtful progression moving forward (intention).

From 1987-1993, mazeaud performed a monthly ritual of picking up trash along the Santa Fe River, a tributary of the Rio Grande, in response to the ecological crisis she witnessed (Figure 5).
mazeaud (2021) reflected, “With art, all components are important and if your work has anything to do with ritual, time is primordial” (p. 50). mazeaud selected a date that established the intention of time and set the ritual in motion. She admitted initially hoping her action would create a benefit before understanding “the river as her teacher” (p. 51). Over time, mazeaud recognized that ritual can invoke possibility. Transformation emerged from awareness that she was not separate from the river (Wilbur, 2006). Art educator Kate Wurtzel (2022) explained that releasing intentions of ritual performative acts can free us from predetermined outcomes to discovering fluid ways of responding and being. Walking along the river as a pilgrimage, *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande* became the precursor of ritual performances mazeaud would complete over the next 30 years around the world, participating with adults and children, in-person or invoked through representation, making art for the earth. For *The Most Precious Jewel*, mazeaud sat on the public square in Santa Fe the same day each month, silently beading a fabric globe while wearing a mask of anonymity. When curious children and adults gravitated toward her, mazeaud asked them to stitch a bead marking their favorite place on Earth. Children most often picked where their grandparents lived (See Figure 6).
In another example of intergenerational learning, mazeaud collaborated with undergraduate students in a ritual performance for an audience of art education conference participants. Each student represented a threatened, endangered, or extinct animal by wearing a handmade animal mask (see Figure 7) and expressing concerns about the ways in which human behaviors harmed animals and the environment. mazeaud served as an elder, incanting messages of healing human relationships with animals as the audience repeated her words, chanting in unison. The performance ended with the students (as animals) presenting natural objects to audience members as symbolic gestures of gratitude for listening to their concerns. These gestures represented the animals asking for help. Many walked away deeply moved by the experience.

Figure 7
Mask
Fern Shaffer and Othello Anderson (personal communication, September 27, 2005) identified healing as the primary concept behind their rituals, which serve as spiritual and ecological interventions. Shaffer designed and performed shamanic rituals while Anderson photographed single ritual performances and longer ritual cycles on mountain tops, islands, in the ocean, forests, wetlands, vacant lots, rubbish heaps, and river headwaters with the intention of restoring the sites by drawing attention to them. The artists collaborated on constructing costumes worn by Shaffer during the performances, which reflected the issue and location, not the person performing. Costumes were constructed from raffia, shredded canvas, or industrial materials typically found in an art studio including bubble wrap. Completely covered, the costume hid her identity while allowing free movement of the body (see Figure 8).

Figure 8
Nine Year Ritual

The Nine-Year Ritual series took place in the U.S. and Canada once a year from January 9, 1995 to September 9, 2003. This cycle called attention to concerns about ecological issues threatening the planet, including the preservation of old-growth forests and wetlands, protection of land and minerals from mining, and our ability to grow food and access water.

Studying material culture involving the human body reveals a rich, diverse history of traditional practices and contemporary interpretations ripe for unpacking in the art curriculum. Learning how and why humans adorn and modify their bodies over time and across cultures broadens student awareness about the ways in which these forms of expression are culturally determined; rooted in tradition, ceremony, and ritual; and deeply meaningful within the communities from which they emerge.

Researching body adornment and modification practices inspired me to create a unit of instruction, titled Body Talk, as an exemplar for teaching art to adolescents. I designed a first-year seminar course, titled Body Adornment and Modification, and created a film titled, A Narrative of Women and Tattoo (currently in production). I reference parts of all three in this article.

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I introduced the first lesson in *Body Talk* to college freshmen in the first-year seminar course. Through this activity, students learned to identify and describe the differences between body adornment and modification and better understood each other. Discussions about rituals ensued, provoked by prompts and questions, such as: Why do humans wear head coverings, such as a hijab, crown, habit, kippah, war bonnet, turban, and wedding veil? Students discussed images of full-body wearables, including a wedding gown, a clergy robe or cassock, sports uniforms, and ceremonial clothing worn by indigenous groups. The images promoted storytelling to share experiences, memories, and associations. Images of body modification included examples of tattooing, scarification, lip plate piercing, tooth extraction and sharpening, gauges, foot binding, and infant skull reshaping. These images stimulated discussions about ritual, sacred practices, and cultural definitions of beauty. Students described concepts of permanence (modification) and impermanence (adornment), each requiring degrees of difficulty to remove or change, as identifying features. I recently facilitated this activity with in-service art teachers and student teachers, noting deeper conversations from different experiences/worldviews from a mixed generation audience.

The *Body Talk* curriculum has evolved over time, with a notable conversational difference occurring when I added the reading *Tattoos and Teenagers* (Blair, 2007). Student participation escalated as they discussed and shared personal stories of tattooing. These tattoo narratives (DeMello, 2000) led to discussing scenarios of teachers with tattoos in professional settings and the possibility of students and parents having tattoos, providing opportunities for growth through thoughtful questions and reflection.

Humans have modified their bodies with tattoos as a visual language to communicate identity and aspects of a person’s life, passing down traditions and associated rituals for generations, and have been tattooed for a variety of reasons (e.g., rites of passage, achievements/status, ancestry, protection, in remembrance, as therapy, punishment, enhancement, in love/war).

For more than two decades, tattoo anthropologist Lars Krutak (2015) has researched indigenous tattooing practices around the globe and explained general perceptions:

> Tribal peoples rarely describe tattooing as an artistic or aesthetic practice because there are no terms for ‘art’ or ‘artist’ in the majority of indigenous languages. Instead, tattooing is integrated into the social fabric of community and religious life, and typically speaking, it is a cultural, clan, or family-mandated ritual that anchors societal values on the skin for all to see. (p. 1)

Tattooing nearly disappeared in cultures around the world as the result of colonialism and forced acculturation that stripped away identities visible on the skin. Prevented from tattooing for generations has disconnected many indigenous people from their histories, spiritual practices, identities, power, and sense of place.

Krutak (2017) identified recent revivals of tribal tattoo traditions in the Philippines, native North America, and among the Arctic Inuit. In the Philippines, the custom of tattooing is nearly extinct, existing only in remote regions, despite the long history of heavily tattooed people. Generations of tattooed elders have passed, but 106-year-old Whang-Od, the oldest *Kalinga mambabatok*
(tattoo artist) from the village of Buscalan, is training her great-niece and other women from the community to be the next generation of artists to carry on the tradition (Krutak, 2010).

In the next section, Camilla McComb shares her perspectives on ritual in relation to standards-based teaching and the sixth-grade art curriculum. Analyzing sacred and secular rituals served as groundwork for studio explorations leading to intergenerational engagement.

**Pre-Adolescents, Ritual, and Intergenerational Conversation (McComb)**

I understood that when considering ritual as a rich and potentially transformative act, it is essential to include children in the conversation. Children develop an understanding of ritual at an early age. Graduating from diapers, eating with utensils instead of their hands, and taking responsibility for brushing their own teeth are significant rites of passage, which serve to “incorporate” the child into a life of the family (Van Gennep, 1960). Yet, it had not occurred to me to teach the topic of ritual in an art class until it became a requirement in the state revised visual arts standards. The grade-six responding/reflecting standard, number three, stated: “Explore and discuss how aspects of culture influence ritual and social artwork” (Ohio Department of Education, 2012, n.p.). I was intrigued by the new standard but wondered: How am I going to teach about ritual without violating the separation of church and state? Doing so required me to:

- step back to analyze my own assumptions around ritual.
- reach out to colleagues teaching social studies for support.
- design a learning progression (Popham, 2008) to engage students in talking about ritual without asking them to perform ritual in class.

Growing up Presbyterian, I was surrounded by ritual in the form of infant baptism, the taking of holy communion, and even the ritualistic cadence found in the order and sequence of a church service. Each part of the service followed a protocol. As part of the church community, I recited the Nicene Creed along with the Protestant version of the Lord’s Prayer. Citing this ancient prayer and affirmation made me feel connected to generations of worshippers. It felt sacred.

In stepping back to think about ritual I realized that another aspect of my life had also felt sacred. As a teen, I was active in 4-H, a youth empowerment program designed and supported by over 100 universities across the United States (4-H, 2023). As an active member in the Tumbleweeds 4-H Club, I was honored to represent the club by riding my horse, Charmer, in the community Fourth of July Parade Honor Guard. As one of four young women riding our horses down the street, people stood to honor the flags we carried. At 15, I had come to understand the power of civic pride. As an art educator reflecting back, I also realized that ritual was not only found in sacred religious practice but also in our civic and secular lives as well.

Understanding that ritual was both sacred and secular was a start, but I was still feeling uncomfortable with the idea of introducing discussions that included sacred practice in class. Fortunately, I found support in the school social studies curriculum. I learned that grade six students were already studying world religions, which meant that my efforts to spark discussion about ritual in a sacred context would not be new and unexpected; rather, it would support
learning happening in other parts of the curriculum. With renewed confidence, I implemented the ritual-focused learning progression with grade six students.

Children began by analyzing the routines of their lives. It became immediately evident that preadolescents understood routine as they reflected upon the cultural practices they participated in and then analyzed the purposes of those routines. Once students came to understand the purpose of routine, they were ready to be introduced to the idea of ritual.

Children understand ritual as sacred or secular routines that are so culturally significant that they require special treatment (Bell, 1992). For instance, in Christian faith, Baptism is a fundamental routine, albeit sacred practice. Families having their children baptized often purchase special clothing for the day and host a family meal after the ceremony. Most denominations recite prescriptive text and have specific protocols for handling baptismal water. Adolescents may also be confirmed, celebrate bar and bat mitzvah, and fast during Ramadan. By example and participation, children learn from their elders to understand directly, or indirectly, the cultural value of sacred ritual.

After analyzing sacred ritual, children were ready to examine secular rituals: cultural events or rites of passage deemed more special than the routine (Nelson, 2007). A Presidential inauguration, the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, and high school graduation are ritualistic. Students also made associations to the ritualistic ways families watch football games.

After discussing the sacred and secular aspect of ritual, children examined the concept of the shrine. Students observed differences between sacred shrines and artist-appropriated shrines, realizing that they too could make art to elevate, or make special, an aspect of their lives. We spent class time discussing ways to create a focal point, along with ways to use artifacts to create visual support of a theme. We wondered: How will a viewer know the purpose of the shrine? What might make the shrine look special, even sacred?

Using ritual as a lens to observe distinctions between the sacred and secular, students each designed a personal shrine relating to one of three themes (see Figure 9). To activate student thinking, I created an envisioning activity that centered on three reasons a person might create a shrine: as an act of remembrance, to pay tribute, or to express an intention. Once students considered the full range of possibilities, I asked them to focus on one area that captured their attention; one area they could not stop thinking about.
Figure 1
Envisioning Activity

Student ___________________________ class code ________________________

Developing Concept

Remembrance
Name three people whom you often try to remember

________________________ Relationship to you __________________________

________________________ Relationship to you __________________________

________________________ Relationship to you __________________________

________________________ Relationship to you __________________________

Tribute
There are people in the world who impress us either through their accomplishments or their service. List three people (or groups) who you would like to thank for their accomplishments.

Person (or group) __________________________________________: Explain why you are impressed

________________________

Person (or group) __________________________________________: Explain why you are impressed

________________________

Person (or group) __________________________________________: Explain why you are impressed

________________________

Intention
We often have goals for our future. As you think about your life, 1, 2, 5, 10 years from now...What do you wish for yourself?

1. ___________________________________________________________

2. ___________________________________________________________

3. ___________________________________________________________

My Choice
What category would you add?

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Students remembered deceased parents, grandparents, and pets. Students paid tribute to their cultural heritage, favorite authors, family serving in the military or police force, and family members who had survived cancer. In thinking about the future, pre-adolescents saw themselves as athletes, musicians, working professionals, college students, and even as parents one day having their own families. Here, I have highlighted three student-created shrines.

One student was an active competitive gymnast (see Figure 10). A coach in the area was known for having trained Olympic gymnasts, so it was not unrealistic to see her express the intention of one day competing in the Olympic games. Her shrine was filled with trophies, photographs, and clothing encased in plexiglass to commemorate her achievements and to signal the intention of her dream.

Figure 10
Gymnastic Goals and Dreams

This lesson sparked the attention of a quiet and shy Asian American student who, during the previous summer, had visited relatives in Japan for the first time (see Figure 11). He brought in a huge box and worked non-stop researching and planning imagery for all sides with an opening that revealed the collection of imagery and artifacts collected on his family pilgrimage. The shrine enabled him to reflect upon his experience, considering how the time spent with ancestors would best be honored, represented, and remembered.

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Figure 11
Japanese Culture

A most endearing shrine was created by a young man who wanted to pay tribute to his grandfather who had served in the military. I say endearing because he stood outside the door to my classroom one morning with his mother. His excitement was palpable as I approached. Before I could finish saying “good morning,” he began telling me about how he and his mom had combed through their family photos; how they had spent time talking with relatives and collecting stories about his grandfather. He continued to explain how each aspect of his shrine had been carefully considered, from the camouflage-patterned duct-taped exterior, to the plastic barbed-wire facsimile that obscured the military action taking place inside the shrine (see Figure 12). As he talked, his mother smiled with pride.

Figure 12
Military Heritage

In wanting to create a unit that was meaningful to pre-adolescents, I inadvertently created a pathway for them to meaningfully connect to multiple generations. Some of the intergenerational conversations occurred among like-minded individuals with similar goals, while many took place among generations of family members who took time to better understand their culture, heritage, and service.

Conclusion

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In this article, we, the authors, presented ritual from three different personal/pedagogical perspectives. La Porte discussed the evidence of ritual across human history and geographical locations with its diverse, yet similar, manifestations among cultural groups. She then explored linkages between her life experiences/artwork with curriculum developed in the community and university settings, and how these inspired art educators and her students in their own K-12 teaching scenarios. In all cases, participants from diverse backgrounds and/or ages connected with their interests and with each other at a personal level. Regardless of the individual manifestations of ritual or how it has been defined, the concept traverses time, place, and people, provides meaningfulness to our life experiences, and offers endless connections to art making and art education curriculum. Speirs described ritual in relation to the body through performance art, the concepts of modification and adornment, and tattooing as frameworks through which to address ecological and social issues relevant to life and the art curriculum. Adorned and marked, the body serves as a ritual site to communicate values, ideas, or beliefs of individuals and society, connecting humans across time and cultures. Finally, McComb’s work with preadolescents demonstrated that creating artwork around the topic of ritual is appealing and meaningful to young people as it promotes intergenerational conversation and cultural understanding. As anthropologist and cognitive scientist Xygalatas (2022) stated in his recent book, ritual is a “part of human nature . . . that helps us connect, find meaning, and discover who we are” (p. 268).

Incorporating ritual into these holistic approaches to art education (Campbell, 2011) afforded learners the opportunity to make personal meaning of the people, places, and objects they held sacred in their lives. Our hope is that in analyzing routine, and in better understanding ritual, that pre-adolescents, teens, and adults will develop a curiosity for understanding rituals new to them, thus becoming more compassionate in how they interact with practices and generations of people perceived differently from themselves.

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A Growing Ritual of Animal Rock Painting

“Therefore, rock painting, with its long history, can be viewed as a ritual that becomes deeply spiritual when it heightens emotions and repeats movements.”

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Abstract
This visual essay explores a growing art form that blossomed into a community demand for memorial images. Such curiosities draw people’s attention to look closer, spot details, and become closer to nature. To understand the intense attraction, a neighborhood community formulated more demand, interest, and references to spirituality that reflect life’s rituals.

Keywords
Ritual, spiritual, nature, petroglyph.

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During Covid trials 2020-2021, my four neighbors from a local retirement community (Mountain Brook Village) and I walked daily to the coffee shop and back and started noticing all the greenery and objects along the way. Some of the objects were odd rocks of different colors and shapes, and some were even small hand painted ones. We noticed this local trend of painting rocks, then our quest began searching for these treasures (Stokrocki, in press). After this adventure, I started painting on rocks, as my neighbors encouraged me into a ritual of rock painting.

Ritual

The painted rocks can be regarded as a ritual that exists in many cultures around the world. “Ritual can be defined as a religious or secular action that is repetitively performed or reactivated by a person or group that involves a conscious or unconscious act using the body and/or the senses, sound, language, and/or material culture” (LaPorte, 2016, p. 2). Rock painting, the act of rituality, started with the early petroglyphs around 7,000 to 9,000 years ago and its symbolism has a long history of being used to depict animals, land formations and spiritual concerns (Layton, 1992). Manning (2016) suggests “What rituality does is activate. It does so outside of systems of value imposed on it from elsewhere: rituality is considered a practice precisely because it is capable of inventing forms of value emergent from the ritual itself” (p. 45).

Art education has its own present day ritual history and I have explored this phenomenon in some studies I have conducted over many years. These studies ranged from what led teens to share insights about their shopping mall habits and meetings (Stokrocki, 2001), to lower-income inner-city teens obsessive dance attractions (Stokrocki, 2009). These teen activities become ritualistic as teens repeatedly meet weekly to share delights as favorite clothing, food, greetings, and movements. A more serious example was my stepping into an educational sweat lodge with teens after four years of research studying and spiritual writing with Navajo teachers (Stokrocki & Jim, 1999). Sharing emotions, movements, prayers, and water for four hours is an intense spiritual ritual. Another term for spiritual is that which is deeply meaningful and closer to nature. London (2003) found the spiritual missing of ultimate concern in aesthetic education. Therefore, rock painting, with its long history, can be viewed as a ritual that becomes deeply spiritual when it heightens emotions and repeats movements.

How Did This Rock Painting Become a Ritual?

During the Covid Epidemic, my neighbors and I discovered painted rocks all over our neighborhood with messages and symbols. I have painted many subjects over the years, but never painted on rocks. My friends eventually dragged me into the ritual, and now I have become a rock painter because of the need for animal blessings for older adults. My group of friends and I would regularly sit outside the coffee shop and share everyday stories, especially animal routines such as actions, care, and food.

Rock Art Examples

My neighbor Diana asked me to paint a picture of their loveable dog, Lacie. Her husband Chuck chose a rock and gave me a photograph. Painting the dog’s “black on black” features was not easy. I put a picture in the computer and changed its brilliance to bring out the light/dark contrasts to see https://doi.org/10.25889/j5rz-9d46
its three dimensions better. Lo and behold! Lacie’s jolly portrait unfolded. Chuck placed the rock at their doorstep (Figure 1). Neighbors loved to meet this greeter when they visited their home.

**Figure 1**
*Lacie on Rock, acrylic paint, acrylic spray.*

The next year Greg gave me a photo of his lovable puppy Cooper that he would walk over to the coffee shop and greet people every morning. Visitors would pass by and pet him. For Greg’s birthday, Greg found a special rock and again I put the photo on the computer and adjusted its vividness. In a year, beloved Cooper – died, so it became his spiritual memorial (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**
*Rock Painting of Cooper, acrylic paint, acrylic spray*

Then Greg’s neighbor’s doggie Bucky died, so Greg again found a rock for its memorial (Figure 3). After I captured/painted its “likeness,” his neighbor cried!! One of my neighbors put these portraits in our local association newspaper. People were amazed at the facial expressions.

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Finally, I “started painting cats.” My dear friend Toni’s birthday came, and I captured her pussy cat named Missy from a photo, lounging on the living room rug. Missy’s marking is more challenging because of all its “striking” patterns. Again, I put the cat’s picture on the computer, tried carbon paper transfer, and marked its trajectory components. The hardest thing this time was painting whiskers. I had to buy a special acrylic white paint pen (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Missy the cat, acrylic paint, and spray.
What is the Future Ritual of My Rock Painting?

Suddenly, my rock painting ritual expanded. My neighbor who walks dogs [doggie care], wanted a rock outside her house to attract business. My coffee mate found a small stone for me to paint a dog and put it on his car’s dashboard to promote conversation during his taxi business. I even started painting my two cats on a large rock outside my house to invite people to come by and talk with me and my kitties. It resembled a petroglyph because its surface was rough and darker than most rocks that I had painted (Figure 5). A petroglyph is an image created by adjusting part of a rock surface by incising, picking, carving, or other descriptions of the technique to refer to such images. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petroglyph

Figure 5
Mary’s kittens, painted with acrylic on natural red rock.

Rock Painting Ritual Future

The rock paintings bring people closer to nature (London, 2003), in this case animals. The beloved pet images attract people, their sad eyebrows lure closer looks, the rock bumpy surfaces attract touch, the striking color and the patterns activate more careful study. Such practice emerges inventing new art forms of a neighborhood community value (Manning, 2016, p. 45). Art educators can encourage their students to use rock painting to deal with loss and grief and create memorials for people and pets they may have lost. The rock images reflect life’s ritual routines, naming rights, and even stress reduction.1

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The Ritual of Therapeutic Artmaking in Long-Term Care

“Organized therapeutic artmaking rituals also have the capacity to enhance social connections with other residents.”

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Abstract
The transition to long-term care settings can be difficult for residents and feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety are not uncommon in these environments. However, participating in therapeutic artmaking rituals creates opportunities for residents to process their feelings, experience states of flow and mindfulness, engage with others, and focus on their own psychological growth. In long-term care, the physical needs of residents are often prioritized, but psychosocial needs also require attention. For this project, therapeutic artmaking rituals were created at a long-term care facility in three levels of care over 12 months. Older adults engaged with clay, paint, raw fiber, and wood. Reflections and recommendations for artists interested in creating similar programming are discussed. Suggestions for future research on therapeutic artmaking rituals are also included, such as the consideration of artist in residence programs within long-term care settings and assessing how the ritual of engaging in therapeutic artmaking could improve person-centered care and resident and staff dynamics.

Keywords
Therapeutic artmaking, long-term care, gerotranscendence.

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In the U.S., most individuals will live in a long-term care facility at some point in their lives (Favreault & Dey, 2016). These settings are defined as environments that provide services such as medical and personal care for people unable to complete these tasks independently (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In long-term care, physical needs are often prioritized, but the unmet emotional needs and wholistic wellbeing of residents also deserves adequate attention (Woywod & Davenport, 2013). In addition, older adults continue to remain interested in harnessing their creative energy throughout the lifespan, which positively contributes to psychological well-being (Swindells et al., 2013).

Although on site enrichment activities are common in long-term care, activity directors who design and implement them are not required to have formal arts education training (Grabinski, 2014). Consequently, they may be unaware of how to structure therapeutic artmaking rituals and how to appropriately facilitate them. Therapeutic artmaking is provided by trained artists (but not necessarily art therapists) who create and facilitate artmaking opportunities for their therapeutic potential for others (Reynolds et al., 2008). In contrast, art therapy is offered by trained professionals who work with individuals and groups using creativity and artmaking to enhance the wellbeing of others by improving self-esteem and self-understanding, which assist them in coping with emotions and changes (American Art Therapy Association). For this project, we focused on creating and facilitating therapeutic artmaking rituals for residents in a long-term care community with three levels of care (e.g., nursing home, assisted living, and memory care).

**Benefits of Therapeutic Artmaking Rituals**

While living in long-term care, older adults may be managing changes in their abilities and participating in the ritual of artmaking can provide an outlet for processing their feelings and emotions when coping with these transitions (Curtis et al., 2018) and changes within the self (Ching-Teng et al., 2019). Therapeutic artmaking rituals also promote a state of mindfulness, defined as focused awareness of emotions and thoughts on the present state (American Psychological Association, 2022). Encouraging older adults to focus on their present circumstances may be protective and help promote wellbeing (Mahlo & Windsor, 2021) in long-term care. Therapeutic artmaking also promotes a state of flow, a period of sustained focus and engagement that has been linked to higher levels of well-being (Chilton, 2013). And for individuals living with dementia, engaging in therapeutic artmaking has the potential to decrease agitated behaviors (Hsiao et al., 2020).

Organized therapeutic artmaking rituals also have the capacity to enhance social connections with other residents. For example, older adults who participated in an artmaking program gained social support from other participants who faced similar adjustments or changes in their lives, such as declining health (Chapin Stephenson, 2013). These are important benefits, particularly as individuals residing in long-term care are more likely to suffer from loneliness compared to individuals residing in other environments (Brimelow & Wollin, 2017).

**Theoretical Framework**

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The Gerotranscendence theory is a relatively modern theory that expanded on Erikson’s Psychosocial theory, suggesting that a ninth stage of development existed and occurred towards the end of life where older adults shifted their thinking to more cosmic orientations and meditative states (Tornstam, 1989). Tornstam (1989) explained that as older adults see themselves less as an individual and more connected with the wider world, they become more interested in meaningful activities that promote harmony. Older adults who reach the gerotranscendence stage have declining interest in frivolous conversation and material things and are less self-centered (Tornstam, 1989). In some instances, they may withdraw from previously held roles or activities that are no longer aligned with the desire to seek and maintain a state of gerotranscendence. This inward shift could be perceived with concern, however Tornstam (1989) explained it as a natural process when individuals transition to this ninth stage. During this time, older individuals are more internally reflective and contemplative than at other points in the life course (Tornstam, 1989).

The environment and society can also influence the ability of individuals to achieve gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1989). For individuals residing in long-term care settings, this consideration raises several important questions. To what extent do the offered rituals and opportunities for engagement continue to promote development and a path towards achieving a state of gerotranscendence? Do they encourage deep self-reflection? Creating intentional opportunities for older adults to engage in meaningful ways and continue their own development are needed. We agree with Chapin Stephenson (2013) who explained that therapeutic artmaking offers ample opportunities for individuals to participate in contemplation and reflection as they consider their connection to the larger world, demonstrating meaningful engagement, and promoting gerotranscendence. The purpose of this project was to create therapeutic artmaking rituals for residents in a long-term care community, reflect on the experiences offered, and make recommendations for artists hoping to create opportunities for older adults in long-term care communities.

Methods

Older adults in a continuing care retirement community were given opportunities to participate in therapeutic artmaking rituals over a 12-month time-period. Programming was facilitated by a professor of art at a university in the Midwest and an undergraduate student worked under her guidance to complete an internship. The artists will be referred to as art facilitators throughout this paper. Prior to facilitating the program, the professor conducted extensive research on best practices for implementing art with older adults, including special populations, such as individuals living with dementia. Although the community-based program from the Chapin Stephenson (2013) article was not offered in a long-term care facility, it provided helpful suggestions when designing artmaking rituals for individuals living with dementia. Similarly, Chapin Stephenson (2013) also celebrated the work older adults created with an exhibition. In addition, Richmond-Cullen (2018) described how multiple artists in residence programs created artmaking opportunities at senior centers that helped to reduce feelings of loneliness. The article explained organizations that were partnered with (e.g., arts councils and museums) to help financially facilitate these opportunities. This is especially helpful for artists who may need more financial support in leveraging a program. Finally, Johnson and Sullivan-Marx (2006) offered several specific suggestions on specific types of artmaking and mediums that were useful when...
working with older adults in community-based programs. They also explained what mediums could pose potential frustrations with older adults and which mediums allowed room for the most flexibility with creative expression.

**Procedure**

Participants living in three different living environments in a long-term care community (e.g., assisted living, memory care, and the nursing home) were invited to participate in a series of artmaking rituals. Each therapeutic artmaking experience was designed and tailored to meet the needs of individuals residing in different levels of care. On average, the therapeutic artmaking rituals lasted about 90 minutes per session. At the end of the 12-month period, an art exhibition of resident work was organized at a gallery and residents, staff, and the public were encouraged to see resident work on display.

**Results**

Residents were invited to participate in therapeutic artmaking rituals where they worked with a variety of mediums including clay, paint, and raw fiber. At times, some residents were hesitant to participate as they perceived artmaking to be like the traditional craft activities offered at the long-term care facility and described themselves as “not crafty.” However, after further discussion on how therapeutic artmaking rituals and crafts differed (e.g., holiday themed craft projects such as painting an Easter bunny versus utilizing memory of place and emotional use of color to paint a landscape), interest in participating in the artmaking rituals increased.

In addition, many of the men perceived that neither the previously offered crafts at the long-term care facility nor therapeutic artmaking rituals were activities suited for them. However, over time many of the men quickly realized that instead of doing holiday themed “craft projects” they were able to utilize skills such as painting, stamping, and molding clay during the therapeutic artmaking rituals that reminded them of prior work experiences. These reflections and memories were often shared with the larger group and promoted connection among the residents. For example, many of the men were retired farmers and spoke about painting and working with different soil types during their farming careers. Although residents in each level of care in the long-term care facility used similar mediums, the specific therapeutic artmaking rituals created for residents differed to be mindful of differences in abilities. Each opportunity is described in more detail below.

**Assisted Living**

In Assisted Living, residents participated in four different therapeutic artmaking rituals including The Dot Project using acrylic paint, canvas painting, clay, and raw fiber (Table 1).
Table 1
Artmaking in Assisted Living

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Materials Used</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canvas Painting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Canvas, acrylics, paintbrushes</td>
<td>Using a tool to apply paint to a surface, creating something from imagination or from an image.</td>
<td>Confidence with unfamiliar material, challenge to work with new materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Clay, tools</td>
<td>Dexterity, manipulating soft material.</td>
<td>New experience with material, fragileness of material, confidence in trying something new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Fiber</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Colored raw wool, needle punch, canvas</td>
<td>Dexterity/ seeing something abstract become recognizable.</td>
<td>Seeing something abstract and finding ways to the end piece.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dot Project</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Aluminum foil, acrylic, paper</td>
<td>Understanding abstraction and creating something just for fun without end goal.</td>
<td>Understanding abstraction and creating something just for fun without end goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Dot Project was based on a story written by Peter H. Reynolds that encouraged students to make their mark on the world by trusting in their creative potential without comparing themselves to others around them (thedotcentral.com). The origin of the Dot Project was explained to residents and the universal theme from the story was discussed. Older adults were encouraged to make their own dot on canvas by using acrylic paint and then continue engaging and imagining their own ideas for the canvas, trusting in their vision and individual creative possibilities. At times, the abstract nature of the project was difficult for residents to grasp and “finishing” the project was a challenge as the end goal was more ambiguous than other organized artmaking rituals (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Canvas painting in Assisted Living

In addition, rituals involving clay were also created for residents. Residents were encouraged to shape and mold the clay as well as use tools to imprint designs on the clay. Working with the clay also provided participants with opportunities to practice the dexterity of their hand muscles.

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Some residents were also surprised at the fragileness of the clay when using it to create an object. Lastly, residents also used raw fiber on canvas to create art. Residents enjoyed seeing something abstract become recognizable when the fibers worked together to form an image. For some residents, “ending” their piece was also a challenge. After residents in Assisted Living became more experienced in using fiber as a medium, they wanted to continue using it to engage in artmaking rituals (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**
*Raw Fiber Images Displayed at the Exhibition*

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**Memory Care**

Residents in Memory Care also used paint to participate in The Dot Project, canvas painting, clay, and wood during their therapeutic art rituals (Table 2).

**Table 2**
*Artmaking in Memory Care*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Materials Used</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canvas Painting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Canvas, Acrylics/Paintbrushes</td>
<td>Bright colors, variety of tools used to create artwork.</td>
<td>One on one or one on two assistance is needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay (made into ceramic title display)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Clay/ tools</td>
<td>Texture of material, malleability of material.</td>
<td>Remind clients not to consume clay. Clay after overuse became dry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Fiber</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Colored raw wool, needle punch, canvas</td>
<td>Texture of material, bright colors.</td>
<td>One on one help is needed due to dexterity needed in needle punch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dot Project</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aluminum foil, acrylic, paper</td>
<td>Playfulness of material, immediate results, bring colors, active engaged movements.</td>
<td>Materials are very messy; food safe materials are best.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[https://doi.org/10.25889/2d2f-sy11](https://doi.org/10.25889/2d2f-sy11)
Engaging in the therapeutic artmaking rituals was popular and residents in this level of care participated in more artmaking opportunities than residents living in assisted living or the nursing home.

Conducting the Dot Project in Memory Care was messy at times and some residents wanted to taste the paint. Therefore, it is recommended that the “paint” is food safe. Relatedly, residents often needed more one-on-one help to reach different paints or mix colors. Overall, residents in Memory Care seemed to be especially interested in using clay during their therapeutic artmaking rituals. The art facilitator showed them various modeling techniques and the residents continued engaging with the medium by pinching, squeezing, and molding it into a variety of different textures. Although the residents enjoyed working the clay in their hands, it did become dry due to overuse. In addition, some residents tried to consume the clay and needed to be reminded not to eat it. Artists may want to consider using other food safe materials for residents who have dementia (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**
The Dot Painting and Wooden Sculptures Displayed at the Exhibition

The art facilitator also created and assembled a ceramic tile composition using the clay creations that residents made that was hung in the Memory Care unit. The residents enjoyed the tactile experience of exploring the many nooks and crannies of the tiles by rubbing their hands over the smoothed glazed surfaces they helped to create. The installation of the tactile wall also facilitated continued opportunities for residents to engage in tactile rituals with art (Figure 4).
Figure 4

*Ceramic Tiles and Acrylic Painting on Canvas Displayed at the Exhibition*

Raw wool fiber was also a medium used for therapeutic artmaking rituals in Memory Care. The medium requires that the loose pieces of wool fiber are placed on top of the canvas, and then a barbed needle is used to affix the fiber to the canvas. Residents enjoyed working with the bright colors but lacked the dexterity needed to needle punch the fiber through the canvas. With fiber art and canvas, art facilitators interested in replicating this project may need to offer residents one-on-one help. Residents in Memory Care also took part in creating wooden sculptures. Participants designed the sculptures demonstrating their ability to create abstract sculpture and the art facilitators used hot glue to hold the pieces in place. One-on-one assistance was also needed to safely participate in that artmaking project.

**Nursing Home**

Residents in the nursing home used paint to participate in The Dot Project and canvas painting as well as clay during therapeutic artmaking rituals (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Artrmaking in the Nursing Home*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Materials Used</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canvas Painting</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Canvas, Acrylics/ Paintbrushes</td>
<td>Bright colors, variety of tools used to create artwork.</td>
<td>Bring in multiple sources of materials for residents to be inspired by.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Clay/ tools</td>
<td>Texture of material, malleability of material.</td>
<td>None noted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dot Project</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Aluminum foil, acrylic, paper</td>
<td>Playfulness of material, immediate results, bring colors, active engaged movements.</td>
<td>None noted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[https://doi.org/10.25889/2d2f-sy11](https://doi.org/10.25889/2d2f-sy11)
Raw fiber artmaking was not conducted in this level of care as many residents lacked the arm strength needed to punch the fiber through the canvas. It is possible that other art facilitators could organize this therapeutic artmaking ritual if enough one-on-one help was available. Alternatively, art facilitators could consider offering wet felting instead. This technique does not require needles or sharp objects. Instead, wet felting is done by adding mild soap and warm water to felt fibers and continuously rubbing them together until the fibers stick together.

Individuals in the nursing home enjoyed The Dot Project, particularly the playfulness and fun of using their movement to create design, move the paint, and create color. Of all the levels of care, residents in the nursing home seemed to enjoy this project the most. Residents were less concerned about their final product when they participated in The Dot Project. When participating in canvas painting, residents benefited from art facilitators providing multiple materials and imagery to use for inspiration. Providing residents with familiar imagery for inspiration was used to elicit memories and experiences from the past that might aid in therapeutic artmaking. The art facilitators brought in items that had been referenced in prior conversations. For example, several residents discussed farming and images of tractors, fields, and crops served as inspiration. Images of birds were also used as several residents explained that they enjoyed watching birds and had several bird feeders outside of their rooms.

Clay and tools to mark the clay were also used in the nursing home. Residents enjoyed the texture of the clay and appreciated when it became more malleable after use. Overall, residents seemed to find it therapeutic to work it in their hands and enjoyed engaging with this medium.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this project was to create therapeutic artmaking rituals for residents in a long-term care community, reflect on the experiences offered, and make recommendations for artists hoping to create similar experiences for older adults. After implementing the therapeutic artmaking program, the art facilitators reflected on lessons learned. Their reflections and recommendations are noted below.

### Reflections and Recommendations

Overall, the abstract nature of some of the projects and art mediums used were challenging for some residents. We noted that some residents preferred projects to be prescriptive rather than completely abstract. However, similar to Chapin Stephensen (2013), the art facilitators were cautious about making the artmaking too regulated or focused on the final outcome or “product” in case residents experienced frustration if their art did not look similar to the provided template. Continual support and encouragement of residents and their abilities is essential during the early stages of therapeutic artmaking rituals. In addition, offering more one-on-one help can also be beneficial, particularly for residents in higher levels of care or who have dementia. Like Ching-Teng et al. (2019), the art facilitators noted that residents were impressed with what they were able to create once they stopped focusing on the final result of the art piece.

The art facilitators also noted that although residents enjoyed working with the clay, some residents needed to be reminded not to eat it. Interestingly, some art programs have focused on

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only using food in their therapeutic artmaking with individuals who have cognitive impairment (Lee et al., 2022). Therefore, using food safe items is an important consideration when working with some populations. In addition, at times the clay became dry due to overuse. It is possible that oil-based clay would have worked better.

Choosing which therapeutic artmaking rituals to offer can also be a challenge. It is important to be flexible with offerings and consider adding additional rituals based on resident needs. For example, the wooden sculpture program was offered in Memory Care because several of the men had prior woodwork experience and demonstrated less reluctance for working with this medium compared to other art forms. The hesitancy for participating in therapeutic artmaking rituals from several men in long-term care was somewhat surprising. We did not expect that individuals would carry such strong perceptions of “gender appropriate” activities. However, prior research has also captured these findings. Ruxton (2006) reported that men often perceive both art and craft to be “women’s activities.” It may be beneficial for artists to create therapeutic artmaking rituals that include materials that may be more familiar to men (e.g., clay, wood, metals, etc.). However, the way in which the therapeutic artmaking ritual is presented may also play a role in how it is perceived. For example, the art facilitator noted that men were more engaged when she would print out and show examples of historical art pieces and how they were created, encouraging stimulating conversation and reflection.

There may also be benefit in future art facilitators creating groups in long-term care communities based on interests. Residents interested in similar things (e.g., birds, plants, etc.) could be grouped together so that artmaking rituals could be more tailored to their interests. It would also increase the likelihood that residents remained engaged and interested in the artmaking rituals. In addition, offering artmaking in multiple environments is an additional consideration. Creating opportunities for residents to sit outdoors and take inspiration from the natural world around them could facilitate additional creativity and self-exploration.

**Person-Centered Care, Gerotranscendence, and Psychological Growth**

Typically, person-centered care focuses on making changes to the physical environment, decreasing staff to resident ratios, scheduling staff to work with the same residents during their shift, and creating opportunities for residents to interact and engage with one another (Brownie & Nancarrow, 2013). However, no research that we are aware of has focused on how therapeutic artmaking rituals can enhance person-centered care and promote psychological growth.

Artmaking encourages a state of flow and likewise promotes psychological growth (Chilton, 2013) and mindfulness (Schwenk, 2021) and should therefore be considered in long-term care settings. Facilitators of therapeutic artmaking can help residents engage in important rituals that encourage residents to feel capable and facilitate their own continued development. In addition, therapeutic artmaking is easily tailored to meet individual needs. This is particularly important for long-term care environments where staff members may struggle to offer meaningful enrichment opportunities for residents who have a wide variety of abilities (Rocha et al., 2013).

We are also curious to what extent therapeutic artmaking could improve resident and staff dynamics. Providing time for residents to focus their creative energy on artmaking creates
positive outlets and demonstrates what residents are still capable of. In addition, in our project, we felt it was important to organize an art exhibition where residents could be seen as more than just their illness, disability, disease and instead focus on what they were able to create. This was particularly powerful for the residents, their families, and the long-term care workers. Displaying the art in a gallery where it was professionally installed and hung, just as it would be for any other artist, legitimized and empowered residents.

Likewise, therapeutic artmaking provides an outlet to reflect and engage with the self and enjoy the benefits of “contemplative solitude” (Tornstam, 1997). Working with and through the different mediums allows older adults to actively reflect and contemplate as they are working with the materials and therefore help provide a pathway to reach gerotranscendence. This inner assessment and shift in cosmic flow of energy from “me” to a broader and more transcendental relationship with the universe are indicative of gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1989).

Overall, encouraging long-term care facilities to support and encourage residents to incorporate therapeutic artmaking rituals into their lives may provide a buffer against some of the psychosocial adjustments many residents encounter in long-term care, ranging from increased agitation, depression, and memory impairment (Sury et al., 2013). Relatedly, residents who were able to maintain a sense of autonomy experienced fewer challenges with adjusting to living in long-term care (Brownie et al., 2014).

Limitations

Researchers did not conduct pre- and post-assessments of residents who engaged in the therapeutic artmaking program. This would have been advantageous and provided context for how the program impacted older adults. Instead, we relied on anecdotal accounts and reflections of how we perceived older adults benefitting from therapeutic artmaking rituals.

Future Directions

Future research should continue to explore the phenomenon, benefits, and challenges of implementing therapeutic artmaking rituals in long-term care. Curtis et al.’s (2018) thorough meta-analysis of art-based programming and activities in long-term care demonstrated that several programs did not find improvements in psychological well-being or behavior symptoms from individuals with dementia. However, we are curious if there might be differences had arts-based programming been facilitated by trained artists.

Relatedly, artist in residence programs may offer solutions to offset some of the challenges associated with demonstrating improvements in therapeutic artmaking and well-being. Artists in residence could provide daily therapeutic artmaking rituals with residents and residents could watch the artist at work in their studio or through a glass partition, viewing the artist work with different mediums and demonstrate various techniques. Infusing additional arts programming into long-term care is increasingly important to consider as it is also estimated that aging Baby Boomers will desire high end and comprehensive healthcare services (Dewey Lambert et al., 2016). This presents important implications for long-term care facilities looking to cater to a significant cohort of older adults.

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Overall, this project focused on offering therapeutic artmaking rituals for residents residing in three levels of care. Older adults worked with a variety of mediums including paint, clay, fiber, and wood. Artmaking did need to be tailored to reflect the needs of individual ability levels and men were more hesitant to participate due to perceptions of it being “feminine.” In addition, creating an art exhibition of resident work was inspiring and demonstrated the creative abilities of older adults.

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Art Nights: Reimagining Professional Development as a Ritual

“Art nights became a space to engage with others who knew a similar experience, an invitation to actively explore teaching practices in relation to others, and a disruption of the mechanical routines prompted by feelings of burnout.”

Libba Willcox, PhD
Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University Indianapolis

Abstract

Art teachers’ need for connection, passion for artmaking, desire for mentoring, and quest for renewal led me to ask, what happens if we reimagine professional development as ritualized artistic practice? What would occur if our ritual was collaborative and intergenerational? How might ritualized professional development aid the quest for renewal? Pulling imagery and quotes from a larger qualitative and arts-based research study (Willcox, 2017), this visual essay shares what happened when an intergenerational group of art teachers met and engaged in artistic inquiry about their teaching practice. Specifically, it weaves together imagery and quotes to illustrate how our ritual, art nights, recognized and celebrated the everyday tasks of art teachers, connected isolated and alienated art teachers, replenished the emotionally exhausted, and privileged the practice of art making.

Keywords

ritual, professional development, renewal

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Grunting slightly, Sarah struggled to open a container of paint. Unsuccessful, she tried again; this time, two grunts were heard at the table. Over the next few seconds, all the art teachers sitting around the table (and one who joined through FaceTime) grunted in support. While it was only Sarah who physically touched the container, the bizarre, supportive community of art educators worked together to overcome the obstacle. What many administrators fail to understand is that sometimes what art educators need most is a community of like-minded people and a container of paint.

**Art Teacher Burnout, the Quest for Renewal, & Professional Development**

The core dimensions of art teacher burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced self-efficacy) are ignored by most professional development programs. Because of this, I sought to reimagine a professional development program for art teachers seeking renewal. Art teachers’ need for connection, passion for artmaking, desire for mentoring, and quest for renewal led me to ask, what happens if we reimagine professional development as ritualized artistic practice? What would occur if our ritual was collaborative and intergenerational? How might ritualized professional development aid the quest for renewal? Pulling imagery and quotes from a larger qualitative and arts-based research study (Willcox, 2017), this visual essay shares how a ritualized professional development program supported teachers in their quest for renewal.

**Ritual**

To develop an alternative professional development program for art teachers, I borrowed three interconnected ideas from Dissanayake’s (1992) conception of ritual: 1) aesthetic experiences can be used to arouse awareness; 2) artistic inquiry can be used to transition into the unknown; and 3) teacher communities can be used to socially reinforce behaviors and beliefs. Together, these ideas provide a philosophical orientation for an ongoing, content-specific form of professional development for art teachers, which we lovingly referred to as *Art Nights*.

First, aesthetic experiences can be used to arouse awareness. Borrowing from Dewey’s (1934) description of aesthetic experience, I believe that making art can interrupt habitual ways of being in the world and invite a holistic experience. Further, I adopt Greene’s (1978; 1980) connection between wide-awakeness and making art to help art teachers discover, see, and learn. A ritualized artmaking practice invites aesthetic experiences for art educators and opportunities to see what they did not see before.

Second, artistic inquiry transitions us into unknown spaces. Rituals pursue transformative experiences and therefore are capable of moving participants from mechanical routines into uncharted and exciting territories (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 70). Barone and Eisner (2012) argue that arts-based research helps us illuminate our experiences, broaden human understandings, and “extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 1). A ritual revolving around making art and re-examining new ways of being can support teacher renewal.

Third, teacher communities can bolster behaviors and beliefs. Because rituals are formalized, socially reinforced, and bracketed from everyday life (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 48), they can help participants understand their lived experiences in relation to their community. Gates (2010) argued...
that art teachers need professional development to overcome professional isolation and alienation. Similarly, Hochtritt et al. (2014) illuminated the need for ongoing and formalized professional development programs. A ritual that socially reinforces shared beliefs has the potential to remind teachers about the joys of teaching art.

A ritualized professional development program, then, can empower art teachers to see their everyday experiences as significant and special; invite teachers to be wide-awake in their own lives and classrooms; and connect with others experiencing similar struggles. Through ongoing, community-driven meetings—like Art Nights—teachers can engage in their own artistic practice, feel supported, and linger in liminal spaces of the unknown.

Our Ritual

Held monthly on Friday nights between six and eight, our ritual allowed art teachers to finish their weekly teaching duties, gather their art supplies, and meet in the quest of renewal. Our community consisted of six female art teachers with two or more years of teaching experience and me. We came from public and private schools; elementary, middle, and high schools; suburban and urban schools; and affluent and underserved schools. Attendance was encouraged but not mandatory. Each meeting, we shared a simple dinner, worked in our visual journals or on larger art projects, and discussed our lived experiences as teachers. Below, I visually and verbally share what happened when an intergenerational group of art teachers met and engaged in artistic inquiry about their teaching practice. Specifically, I weave together imagery and quotes to illustrate how our ritual, Art Nights, recognized and celebrated the everyday tasks of art teachers, connected isolated and alienated art teachers, replenished the emotionally exhausted art teachers, and privileged the practice of art making.  

Ritualized Professional Development

During our meetings, we recognized the everyday conundrums of being art teachers and organically explored curriculum inspiration and pedagogy questions. We asked for advice about classroom management, after-school commitments, and assessment practices. These conversations were not superficial like most traditional professional development programs. Teachers told stories, discussed passionately, and shared moments from their classroom in ways that illustrated vocational vitality. For example, when sharing strategies used to engage high school students, Sarah visually expressed and animatedly described one “Sketchbook Friday” in her class to the group (Figure 1). She shared,

I brought out an opaque bag and I started fiddling in the bag and doing stuff and getting stuff ready, and the kids were like, ‘What's in the bag? What's in the bag?’ [Laughter] ‘Ms. D., what's in the bag?!? Ms. D., I'm scared! Ms. D., this is cool! What's in the bag?’ [Laughter] And then all of a sudden, I started blowing bubbles out of the bag because I had an electric bubble wand. And they were like, ‘AHHHH!’ I told them to ‘Go get out colors. Any medium you want. Just get out color. You can get paint, you can get pastels, Prismacolor pencils, a pen, marker, crayons—I don't care. Get it out. You have to draw these bubbles using only color. That's your only direction. Use color.’ I was like, ‘It can be

1 Imagery includes photographs from Art Nights and visual journal entries from the learning community.

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any style. Any medium. The rules are you can't use black, you can't use white, and you have to use the medium that you picked out.’ They were like, ‘Ms. D., you're gonna be Snapchat famous!’ And they started Snapchattting me blowing bubbles in first period.

Figure 1
Curriculum and Pedagogy Share

During Art Nights, we discussed artists for inspiration, shared resources for teaching, and critiqued new art materials. We analyzed the erasable highlighter, the texture of travel watercolors, the use of coffee and tea in paintings, and the importance of a marker or pen tip. The topics of conversation often found themselves depicted in other members’ visual journals. For example, Figure 2 illustrates Li Cho exploring Sarah’s favorite markers.

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Together we connected around systemic concerns for art educators. We discussed our principals who do not understand the arts, class sizes that are larger than the rest of the school, and our nonexistent budgets. Li Cho described how the late arrival of elementary generalist teachers to pick up their classes impacted her after-school commitments. She graciously shared, “While I am sure they do not mean it to be, it comes across as very disrespectful... They [the classroom teachers] don’t think about everything we have to do.” In response to this common concern, another teacher was less polite in her visual journal (Figure 3).
Rose and Hazel debated the best strategies for teaching without a sink, an increasingly common concern for art educators. When considering the differences between teaching elementary and high school art, the group explored the overwhelm of differentiating for 1,000 students.

As time continued, the group explored how to expand art programs and revealed invaluable fundraising methods used to purchase their supplies. We shared experiences teaching public and private schools, building schedules for our programs, and organizing art shows.
Shifting our location from a school to an intimate home studio (Figure 5), we became closer physically, socially, and emotionally.

**Figure 5**  
*Home Studio*

Rose shared, “Even though it was in my house at the table where we eat every day, when y’all were here, I felt like I was escaping from my life. I felt transformed.” Our meetings often started with hugs and ended when it was time to nurse. Figure 6 shares the precious moment when baby Cora put the finishing touches on our collaborative painting.
The initial small talk turned into deeper discussions surrounding teaching and life. Conversations seamlessly transitioned from the differences between teaching middle and high school to conversations about being new to motherhood; from unpacking a suitcase to navigating the lines between student and teacher. We vented about students’ inability to use rulers and lamented being the “lonely only” art teacher in a school. These meetings became a ritual that replenished the emotionally exhausted.

Acknowledging the whole person allowed us to understand the enormity of our lived experiences as art teachers. *Art Nights* excelled when the arbitrary lines between professional and personal were blurred. We shared our lived experiences as women struggling for balance. For example, Barb confided that she was exhausted and frustrated when her principal asked for specific work to be completed over the weekend. In response, Sarah sarcastically and sassily responded, “Bitch, I gotta weekend. You don’t pay me these hours.” Then, the group discussed ways to support her (Figure 7).
We shared how we were coping with constant change in life and the educational landscape. In one meeting, Hazel shared “Change, it is a really big thing in my life. I don’t know what is about to happen, but I know things are about to happen.” She pointed to her huge baby bump and the group responded with laughter. Rose nodded enthusiastically as she just had her first baby. Hazel continued,

I am excited about it, but I am nervous and anxious about it too, and it bleeds over into my classroom sometimes…This year, there are a lot more kids in my room that are more capable and are there for the right reasons, but they make a lot more mess. I was kind of seeing the parallel between taking in the mess and appreciating it for what it is. It’s so much more fun, but it is kind of that jolt of release that you have to let go and kind of let things kind of fly.
We also shared moments in which we needed different perspectives and support. Li Cho told a story of a student who completely ignored her with the group and then completed a visual/verbal diptych about her experience.

This prompted a conversation about how lonely teaching can be, even when surrounded by 35 students.

Often our vulnerable conversations wove our professional identities with our personal lives. In one meeting, Rose stated, “I’ve been an art teacher for 11 years. It’s like if I am not an art teacher, who

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am I? It's part of my identity you know?"

**Figure 10**  
*Exploration of Teacher Identity*

At each meeting, we collaboratively worked to question—and renew—our capacity to be vital, present, and deeply connected to our students. Knowing that we were not alone and that there were alternative ways to teach reduced the emotional fatigue.

Art nights became a space to engage with others who knew a similar experience, an invitation to actively explore teaching practices in relation to others, and a disruption of the mechanical routines prompted by feelings of burnout. Perhaps most essential, art nights privileged art making, which was desperately needed for all of us. The teachers grappled with the need to make art to feel alive and the feelings of guilt when you do. Barb stated, “I have had a hard time finishing [a work of art] ... because I don’t allow myself time to sit and create if it’s not work or service orientated.”
Rose summed it up nicely saying,

I feel like the thing about our group is that everybody there, part of their identity is being an art teacher. There are probably art teachers who it’s not their identity, it's just their job. So, I feel like if you are with a group of people who part of their identity is being an art educator, they're going to make you better—because they will push you to remember to do things you aren’t doing, that you used to do, or introduce new things. [They will help] to just not be comfortable where you are, but to always be pushing and introducing new ideas.

Engaging in ritualized, content-specific, and democratic professional development enabled learning opportunities in ways that traditional professional development programs disregard.²

² I am extremely grateful to the community of art teachers celebrated in this visual essay and Dr. Samantha Goss for her support in refining this publication.
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Food for Thought: Rituals in Place Based Learning

“My Sicilian cultural heritage and the dispositions that originated in my mother's kitchen were intrinsically connected to the mural-making process and the visual outcomes.”

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Abstract
In my mother’s kitchen lasting bonds among family, friends, and newcomers are created. Using that space as a point of departure, I explore the significance of pedagogical places outside of classrooms that serve as flavorful ingredients for performative and participatory learning. This article articulates ways in which rituals associated with Sicilian cultural traditions are interwoven and complicit in establishing dispositions for socially engaged learning and teaching in the arts, showing how an ethic of care can transcend generations. With a focus on place-based learning, making art and enjoying food are investigated to show how healthy productive relationships, appreciation for beauty, sustainable practices, and an ethic of care can all be nurtured around the table, emphasizing hands-on real-world learning experiences.

Keywords:
Place-based Learning, Narrative, Kitchen pedagogy, Murals, Collaboration.

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This article invites the reader to explore how a place-based kitchen pedagogy can inform the field of community-based art. Centered around my Sicilian mother, a lifelong learner, the voyage begins in her kitchen, a place where rituals play a significant role. Through vivid anecdotes and memories, the journey continues, traveling across land and sea, unearthing generations of traditions and inviting the reader to a seat at the table. With entry points at a children’s learning garden and two community murals, the reader navigates through evocative landscapes of memory, understanding how rituals shape identity and serve as a basis for community engagement and artistic expression. I encourage the reader to understand how learning can transcend origins and foster meaningful connections that resonate across time and place.

The theoretical framing rooted in place-based learning, the importance of narrative, and an ethic of care leads readers to interpret the narratives. It provides deeper insight into the interplay of memory, place, and cultural pedagogy in the context of community-based art. As the article unfolds, readers witness how the dispositions I learned through my mother’s kitchen pedagogy evolved into the foundation of my work in art education. The article culminates with a detailed account of my latest mural that reflects the shared values of the community I had the privilege to collaborate with. My Sicilian cultural heritage and the dispositions that originated in my mother's kitchen were intrinsically connected to the mural-making process and the visual outcomes. Thus, I offer readers a pathway to explore how these dispositions can shape art education learning environments, inviting them to contemplate the significance of place in their own lives and the powerful connections between storytelling, learning, culture, and the art of living.

**The Intersection of Place and Memory**

Shared stories are a way to construct and deconstruct knowledge, activating the reader’s imagination. Narrative is a powerful tool for sharing knowledge, one that focuses on cognition and memory, both of which are reconstructed over time. Memories invoke a subjective rendering of the past relived in the present time of its telling (Polkinghorn, 1988). Narrative methods show how knowledge can emerge from stories that can be stored, retrieved, and relayed to others. Bruner (1991) explains that shaping events into coherent narratives infuses them with meaning. His functional approach focuses on the multiple roles’ narrative can serve for different individuals, especially the ways they work to construct and make sense of reality through the process of sharing. In *Method Meets Art* (2009), Patricia Leavy describes how narrative inquiry shapes personal and community identities and how story telling allows us to carry on cultural values. She asserts that stories connect humans to each other, as well as providing a means for raising social awareness.

It is important to recognize how these theories underpin the relationship between memory, place, and cultural pedagogy. Place-based pedagogies help us recognize how education and human wellbeing are inherently connected to the social and ecological places people inhabit (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007). On the surface, memory may appear personal and individualized; each person remembers some things and forgets others. On deeper reflection, we see that shared memories are socially constructed. The narratives and stories to follow will illustrate the practical application of these theoretical concepts in the ways in which my mother’s kitchen pedagogy connects to community-based art and education. It is through the sharing of memories that we welcome others to the table to delight in our rituals, enhance recipes, and bring something completely new to the celebration.
Kitchen Pedagogy
My mother’s kitchen has always served as a pedagogical space centered around love, family rituals, and perseverance. Tomatoes permeate my childhood memories. My mother grew tomatoes in a garden down the road from our home. Her farmer friends would leave bushels of slightly rotting tomatoes on our porch. My brothers threw them at cars the night before Halloween, leading to a chase and threats from a big man in a gorilla suit. My mother was furious, mostly because they had wasted good food.

One family ritual was making sauce. My mother would put a very large pot of water on the stove to boil and drop the tomatoes in for less than a minute, just until their skin cracked. She would retrieve them from the pot and place them in cold water in the sink, where it was my job to use my fingers to discard the delicate skin and place the flesh in a big bowl. Then I would gently tear the flesh of the tomatoes to remove the seeds, which could turn the sauce orange and make the taste bitter. Standing on a sturdy wooden chair over the double sink, I would place the bits of tomatoes into another large stainless-steel bowl, and I would pour the extra juice and seeds through the Foley food mill, while I turned the handle round and round until all the pulp and juice had been sieved through and only seeds remained in the mill. I would repeat this process several times until all the tomatoes were ready to be cooked into sauce.

My mother would let me slightly smash the cloves of several heads of garlic so she could finely chop them, then sauté them in the best imported olive oil from a shop in south Philly. She would add my fleshy pieces of tomatoes to the garlic and then add some juice. She would send me to the garden to pick fresh basil. I would take time to pinch each leaf at the base of the stem, just like we did for pesto. The sauce would simmer for hours, and every 15 minutes we’d stir it and add salt and pepper to taste.

Sometimes, if my mother was feeling extra industrious, we would make homemade noodles to go with the sauce. My mother had a pasta maker that was like my brother’s Play-Dough machine. We would add the flour, salt, and water, then the machine would mix and push the dough out. I loved this machine. Watching the pasta come out in long strips was magical and amazing. The pasta was cut at about one foot and hung over a laundry rack to dry. I delighted in this learning process that included all the senses with a clear set of guidelines and repetitive tasks, knowing the outcome would eventually be consumed with glee. In my early memories, I could hardly see over the edge of the large dining room table, but on tiptoes I would gaze admiringly at the splendor and the attractiveness of our bounty. My father oversaw setting the table and pairing the wine with the meal. He took his role very seriously, timing each step perfectly. My mother is always very strict when it comes to presenting her legendary cooking. She believes, as I do, that the food should not only taste good but look beautiful as well. When it was time to arrange the food on handmade platters, my mother would send me to the garden for edible flowers and herb garnishes. I was enchanted by the magnificence of these preparations. Eagerly waiting for my mother to be seated, one of us would be entrusted with saying a prayer, before we began the many courses of the feast, consuming an abundance of love.

While we cleaned the table and kitchen after the meal, I would put on Carol King’s album Tapestry. My mother and I sang together loudly, “I feel the earth move… when you’re down and troubled… you make me feel like a natural woman.” We often played this album as part of our cleaning ritual. From a very young age, I knew the words to the songs by heart. My mother is now 82 and we continue to enjoy our kitchen rituals. Now my daughters participate with the same joy.
They even sing Carol King’s songs—our songs. We all have chores. I still want to sweep the floors, in part because I enjoy the repetitive motion and because my older sister told me when I was five years old that sweeping removes bad vibes and gets rid of the evil eye. Sweeping is still my favorite household chore.

All the embodied sensory experiences I describe are deeply rooted in aesthetics. Aesthetics, in this distinct place of learning, supports making connections, recognizing patterns, and embracing new perspectives (Greene, 2001). Spectators are not tolerated; one must actively participate in this cognitive and emotional process to be awarded the right to participate in the cooking and eating rituals. Maxine Greene (2001) posits that aesthetic questioning heightens awareness of what is demanded of us as listeners and beholders: “we ought to find an honored place for the imagination—for the opening of possibilities—in our classrooms and in public spaces, wherever they exist” (p. 66). Inquiry is ever present around my mother’s table where discussions are vast and span many topics. We talk about, often simultaneously, feminism, racial equity, LGBTQ+ issues, political injustice, homelessness, foreign affairs, sexual awareness, crime, environmental hazards, child abuse, rape, cultural diversity, and other social issues. At the same time, we express joy for all this beauty life has to offer. Greene (2001) speaks to this as a way of posing questions from multiple perspectives and how questions about living in the world and creating communities and collectivities, caring for each other, making each other feel worthwhile can merge with one another in a loving manner. Nel Noddings affirms that “dialogue is such an essential part of caring that we could not model caring without engaging in it” (2005, p. 6). Furthermore, dialogic communications, as explained by Martin Buber (1937), with or between individuals, are characterized by inclusion. Through this dialogue there is an openness and a desire to understand multiple points of view. Without dialogue, there can be no authentic relationships.

Through my parents’ actions, this long-standing recipe for an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) extends beyond our family, with my parents hosting thousands of people in their home for dinners throughout the years. Noddings (2005) affirms that pedagogical spaces begin in the home and extend into the community. My mother has taught cooking classes in her kitchen and published a cookbook, offering her traditions to others. Care, in the relational sense, is not one sided but reciprocal. The person being cared for feels and acknowledges this care, while the giver is attentive and receptive to the other’s feelings and responses (Noddings, 2005). Our treatment of others can have a lasting impact, deeply affecting the way they behave in the world. It is a constant exchange, a dialogical relationship. My mother still takes great pride in growing her own food and taking it full circle, from seed to table. She advocates that a garden has the power to preserve and restore culture as well as to conserve and restore the land.

Together, as a family of seven, we have shared countless meals and tended many gardens. My Daughters have learned these traditions. When I lived close to my parents, we all would plant, harvest, and enjoy meals together, using old and new recipes. My children now make the sauce the way my mother taught me, using the same rhythms of tearing at the soft flesh of the tomatoes, removing the seeds, milling, and simmering the mix for hours. For my mother this is the ultimate reward; when the values she instilled in her children are expressed through a plate of food made by her grandchildren, passed down from her mother. Four generations benefiting from the same rituals.

Art and Life Intertwined
My mother arrived by ship to Ellis Island on February 21st, 1947, from Valguarnera Caropepe,
Sicily, when she was six years old. Accompanied by my grandfather, uncle, and aunt, she remembers coming to America with cured meats, dried tomatoes, and vegetable seeds. She and her family stored these treasures in small hand-sewn sacks made from bed sheets, stashed in their luggage. They brought a few loaves of bread for the journey, and several gold coins sewn to the inside of her and her sister’s dresses. They left their homeland and possessions but kept their culture and traditions close.

My mother has been a nurse, a potter, a sculptor, a pottery instructor for twenty-five years, a cooking instructor for twenty-three years, and a cookbook author, with her most current media being printmaking. As a lifelong learner, her creative works span over 60 years. She dedicates time to her family and her community. For as long as I can remember she has always been an imaginative person who sees beauty where it is often hidden. She is now 82 years old and still embraces life with as much gusto as when we were children. She sees art, cooking, and sharing meals as an intertwining of disciplines, and her art-making process and products reflect that connection.

My mother’s kitchen pedagogy profoundly shaped my dispositions in my early childhood but was never confined to the culinary domain. As I ventured into work with children and community members to create murals, these same dispositions began to flourish in unexpected ways, forming a link between the traditions of my Sicilian heritage and the expressive canvas of community-based art.

From Ancestry to Artistry
My life is filled with remarkable experiences involving family, community, and the arts. The ingredients in my life recipe mingle with my DNA, well-seasoned and still simmering. John Dewey’s primary requisite for a quality experience is that “it lives fruitfully and creatively in future experiences” (1938, p. 25). I am an artist, a teacher, and a community activist who has been molded into this career as others are born into their family business. When Dewey states, “The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action” (1916, p. 361), I recognize how my life experiences have generated the dispositions needed to foster social engagement and civil discourse. According to Dewey, the fusion of self and interest in learning emerges from actively engaging in the world around us.

In the summer of 2023, I traveled with my two adult daughters and elderly parents to the island of Sicily. We visited relatives in my mother’s region, sharing bountiful meals and joyous festivities. We found the graves of ancestors and stood at the door of my mother’s childhood home. We ate cassatelle, a delicious, deep-fried pastry, shaped like half-moons and prepared with thin sheets of sweet dough and a ricotta filling. As an expression of true love, my mother says we will make them this Christmas. My father is still in charge of setting the table and my daughters honor the traditions of food preparation and participate in the kitchen rituals with joy and enthusiasm. Both my daughters have careers as educators, and they have undoubtably embodied the trusted and true kitchen pedagogy into their own lives.

As we continue through life we build on our experience in new places with new ideas. However, we can rely on recipes that have endured and continue to be shared and reconstructed as circumstances change. Whether it be the kitchen table or the classroom, places are merely spaces until people infuse them with meaning, based in experience and narratives (Cresswell, 2004).
The allure of a place is established through the subjective and emotional attachment of people who actively engage within these spaces of learning. This engagement becomes a way of meaning-making and understanding in a complex world. Places and experiences become inseparable. What occurs at or in a specific place impacts our memory, helps shape our identity, and creates how we interact with our surroundings (Cresswell, 2004). In the process of becoming who I am today, my lived experience and world view are directly connected to the pedagogical place of my mother’s kitchen, which is tied to her garden—the source of many ingredients, to her table—where family and thousands of others have gathered to partake and enjoy her miraculous food, and to her place of origin—Sicily.

Academics have undoubtedly assisted in shaping my world view. My formal education has provided me with opportunities to build upon my prior knowledge and use the dispositions I developed in my mother’s kitchen to foster community engagement in the arts with larger communities. Maxine Green (1995) speaks of this as “expanding the scope of awareness, enhancing consciousness, and participating in moments of wonder and joy” (p. 77).

**The Children are the Seeds of the Future**

Early in my career, I was the director of an arts and education program in an urban community center. My identity was rooted in being an artist; teaching was new to me. I pulled from my mother’s kitchen pedagogy to create programming that would bring joy to children and youth. I was able to secure a large garden space. Community volunteers tilled the soil so we could host a seed-to-mouth program. The learning garden was an innovative teaching tool that provided a dynamic environment through which children and adults joined together to discover, experiment, nurture, and learn. The lifelong learners engaged in the same rituals of planting food that my mother had taught me. Turn the soil, enrich the soil, plant the seeds, water, weed, repeat. Through these unassuming garden rituals, a vibrant place of learning evolved. An appreciation of food origins and nutrition, an understanding of ecosystems, knowledge of plant and animal life cycles, and practical horticultural skills were fostered.

Come harvest time we were able to provide cooking and nutritional education courses to families in the center’s large kitchen and garden space. Once a week for a few months, my mother would drive two hours to teach cooking classes to children and youth enrolled in our afterschool program. Everything I learned during my progressive upbringing related to creating community through shared meals and digging in the dirt had a profound effect on my pedagogical practice. These classes challenged youth and adults to reconsider food preferences and habits, fostered family relationships, and increased parent involvement. Families brought their own knowledge of rituals and recipes, unique to their lived experience. They shared stories about gardening and food preparation passed down through generations. Our garden became the subject of new narratives that continue to be shared, as well as a source of pride.

The expressions of wonder when the first tomato grew and the delight from the children when we pulled that huge carrot out of the ground validated my purpose to continue my life’s work as an educator. I saw first-hand, beyond my mother’s table, that learning rooted in place and infused with an ethic of care is at the core of community engaged artistic practice. We reaped the harvest of our labor of love. We shared delicious meals around tables while simultaneously engaging in dialogue that created happiness and laughter. Looking back, it was and still is the simple sharing of smiles that has kept me on my lifelong journey as an art educator.
The following year the children from the afterschool program created a mural rooted in the themes and values learned through the community garden process. *The Children are the Seeds of the Future* (Pilato, 2009) mural (Figure 1) visualizes a specific time and place of learning, on the side of the community center, in the neighborhood where some of my students who participated still live and are raising their own families.

**Figure 1**

The mural was based on a collage of images and text from the children’s artwork, photography, and discussions. By projecting the design and making most parts paint by number, community members had a chance to join the process. Again, we gathered around tables with communities, sometimes there was food and always there were snacks. We passed around cups of paint, from a palette of handmade mixed colors, each with their own color mixing recipe. I have gone on to facilitate numerous large scale public murals; the contexts and concepts always vary, but the rituals of gathering around tables, sharing stories, and building community through active and engaged participation never waver.

**Finding my Way: Little Italy**
I have had the pleasure of creating community-based murals in diverse settings, both nationally and internationally, over the past fifteen years. Each mural is a unique journey, an exploration of the stories, values, and aspirations that define the communities I work with. Creating community-based murals is a process involving rituals deeply rooted in collaboration: engaging with
community members, listening to their stories, and using their input to conceptualize a work of art that reflects their collective vision.

My last mural I organized was in an Italian neighborhood in the summer of 2022 (Figure 2). It featured a departed local icon, while representing “Little Italy” and the immigrant population. Little Italy in Erie, PA, and the building the mural was designed for, are central to the mural’s theme. Odessa’s Place serves Little Italy by providing school supplies, clothing, food, and other necessities to those in need. Odessa was the mother of the woman who owns and runs the establishment; she was also a community activist and artist. How serendipitous that I, a Sicilian American daughter of an immigrant artist, was chosen to create this community mural to honor a woman, mother, and community activist, in a place that feeds community members, in an Italian neighborhood with a focus on the larger immigrant population. And even more fitting that during my first trip to meet my Italian relatives in Italy, I was working through the ideas for the Little Italy Way Finding Mural and hosting ZOOM sessions with several stakeholders and community members to generate ideas for the content.

Figure 2
Detail of the Little Italy Wayfinding Mural, Erie, PA. N. Pilato, 2022
Brainstorming with community members is part of my socially engaged art practice. The process allows several entry points for ideas to be generated from participants who will engage with mural, long after I have left the community. I start with a tried-and-true ritual of asking five questions. For this steering committee: Who is this mural for? What do you think is most important to represent and why? What happens in the building and neighborhood of the mural site? And what are the assets of your community? I proceed to listen, ask more questions, and repeat. My process is to then create a concept map of their responses and provide the group with a basic outline of possible visual content. This also leaves the main artistic and conceptual choices on my stovetop and provides the opportunity for community members to give feedback. The main ingredients included: representing Odessa, showing acts of service, highlighting the local immigrant population, and adding a wayfinding feature that would lead viewers to other significant community gathering places throughout the city.

I engaged with the community, listening to their stories and experiences, which further enriched the mural's depth and meaning. The mural became a shared project, a collaborative work of art that embodied the unity and strength of the community it represented. Through personal communication with Odessa’s daughter and family members, I decided to represent Odessa as a guardian angel overlooking the visual elements embedded in the mural design and the neighborhood. The family and friends who knew Odessa shared stories that helped to shape the mural's themes and imagery. The angel and other elements became a symbol of the communities’ collective values.

**Symbols and Imagery: A Shared Narrative**
The design begins with a hand watering a growing ear of corn to represent the native Erie people, several connected tribes who were Iroquoian both linguistically and culturally and who were the original inhabitants of the lands south of Lake Erie. Their agricultural practices included growing corn. I was fortunate that a member from the historical society was part of the steering committee and even more fortunate that she became a friend to me throughout my residency, assisting in many a late-night painting session. She was able to help me identify many elements to make sure I was representing an inclusive narrative. She also informed me that the tracks from the cargo train that used to run through the neighborhood were near the mural site. She procured an image of the train, and another serendipitous moment occurred; the train image was of the Norfolk line, which used to bring items from the port of Norfolk, VA, all the way to Erie. My current home is in Norfolk and one of my evening rituals includes riding my bike to the closest edge of the bay to watch the sunset, see the trains offload and load shipping containers to and from the port. I was the conductor of this artistic endeavor and my own lived experience mixed in the communal pot of ideas to create the flavor profile.
I incorporated the train as a reminder of the collective determination of immigrants who had forged new paths and associations to this place (Figure 3). The train’s boxcars were decorated with flags, representing different immigrant populations, showing the diverse cultural backgrounds of the current inhabitants of Little Italy. The words "hope" and "resilience" emblazoned on the front of the train served as a powerful message, a beacon of inspiration for both newcomers and longtime residents. "Hope" spoke to the aspirations and dreams that lead people to embark on difficult journeys in search of a better future. "Resilience" acknowledged the challenges and obstacles faced along the way and celebrated the indomitable spirit that keeps us moving forward, even in the face of adversity.

Above the train a pair of hands are extended as a communal gesture, offering ripe cherry tomatoes. Representing the tradition of sharing food and hospitality rooted in Italian customs. Giant marigolds were added as a mark of protection, as marigolds are traditionally planted alongside tomatoes to ward off pests. This was a metaphorical gesture, signifying the role that the community played in looking out for one another, and the protection I required while working in the open community studio.

Prominently featured was a giant keyhole gleaming like a beacon of light, an intriguing wayfinding element and a call to action. The keyhole acted as a portal to the rich history of Erie. Within the keyhole was a QR code that, when scanned, led to a map highlighting all the community gathering places throughout the city. On the corner of the mural, an image of a large skeleton key I purchased...
in Palermo aimed directly at the keyhole. This key was symbolic of access, belonging, and the fundamental role each community member played in unlocking their own potential and the potential of the community.

Service was represented through an image of a hand holding a soup-filled ladle extended toward another hand holding an empty bowl. This element portrayed the timeless tradition of sharing meals with family, friends, and neighbors. It was also a reminder that the simple act of offering sustenance could foster bonds and bring comfort to those in need. The design I created was more than just a blueprint of community ideas; it also symbolized the values and traditions of my own family and was a carefully crafted invitation to the community to join me at the table in the creative process.

**Rituals of Collaboration**

As the painting began, contributions from participants who provided input and came to paint in our donated studio space were ever present. The process was akin to preparing and sharing meals derived from a cherished family recipe. Some came so frequently they adapted our studio rituals: scooping their own paint from my hand-mixed array of over one hundred colors, finding a spot at the table, adding brush strokes, washing brushes, and helping to complete each panel with intention. Just as families gathered daily around tables to share meals, stories, and laughter, I witnessed how our studio became a place for a similar engagement. I knew there would be many future moments that would unfold and that the mural site would be a source of pride and a backdrop for countless conversations. The creation of this mural was not a solitary endeavor but a shared ritual. Together, community members and I gathered around tables, paintbrushes in hand, sharing stories and bridging generational gaps, as we worked side by side on this labor of love.

When the mural was finally installed and unveiled, it became a symbol of the values of the people involved, where the past and the present residents of Little Italy coexisted harmoniously. Participants shared food, songs, and stories in a celebration of unity, service, and an ethic of care that has defined Italian traditions for generations.

The day I was leaving Erie, a Syrian refugee family, whose children participated in the painting process, invited me to share a traditional meal around their table. For a young child to summon me to join him for dinner with his family was the ultimate reward. Their invitation was akin to the hospitality, generosity, and graciousness that has blessed my family for generations. were the secret ingredients that make the work worthwhile.

If we mix all the dispositions generated through rituals of community-based art making and the preparing and sharing of meals in one communal pot, it will all boil down to a kitchen pedagogy. Like a well-loved family recipe, the ingredients will continue to nourish our spirits. Together, through the many courses of life, we will delight in our memories and bring forth, with abundance, moments of wonder and joy.

I have delved into the intricate interplay of place, memory, and cultural pedagogy, exploring how a place-based kitchen pedagogy can enhance the field of community-based art. The journey, which provided a window into Sicilian heritage and the rituals of lifelong learners, has traversed vivid landscapes of memory, unveiling generations of traditions and inviting the reader to partake in a timeless feast of shared experiences. Through story telling we are reminded that the bonds between learning, heritage, and art are not confined by borders, but instead, serve as bridges connecting us
across time and space, creating a tapestry of shared experiences and enduring traditions.

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References
Men’s Sheds: An Outlet for Engaging in Creative Activities

“In society, older adults are sometimes a forgotten group. But they have so much creativity to share and need an outlet for it.”

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ABSTRACT

This research highlights the purpose behind creating an art exhibition featuring work made by Men’s Shed members, many of whom are older adults. Publicly displaying their creative works demonstrates the creative capacities of these older men and counteracts the negative narrative that older adulthood is a time when individuals experience declining abilities. The exhibition also inspires older adults to consider what they can create, experiment with learning new mediums, and provides opportunities to connect with others who may share similar interests.

Keywords

Exhibition, Men’s Sheds, Older Adults

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Men’s Sheds

Men’s Sheds originated in Australia during the 1990’s and have since grown all over the world (Foley & Golding, 2021). The Men’s Shed Movement was started by Australia’s health board to address significant levels of social isolation they noted among men due to retirement, unemployment, illness, or disability (Men’s Sheds CYMRU, 2023). Men’s Sheds now appear in Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, U.K., U.S., and South Africa (Australian Men’s Shed Association, 2023). At present, Ireland has the most Men’s Sheds per capita with approximately 450 dispersed throughout the country (Irish Men’s Shed Association, 2019). Both rural and urban areas contain Men’s Sheds and they are not limited to any specific geographic region (Irish Men’s Sheds Association, 2019).

Although Men’s Sheds may look different depending on the country they reside, in Ireland, Men’s Sheds are generally places were only men attend (Golding, 2021a). The Men’s Shed Movement was designed to provide a safe space for men to meet informally to talk with one another and engage in hands-on activities such as woodcraft, gardening, painting, or any other activities that the men have decided to participate in (Golding, 2021b). Men talk better shoulder to shoulder rather than face-to-face and while participating in the activities mentioned above, men may also open to one another, share concerns, and gain support from one another (Golding, 2021b). Relatedly, men may feel more comfortable disclosing health related fears with other men as compared to women (McGrath et al., 2022).

Some Sheds in other countries like Australia also include women as members and are sometimes referred to as Community Sheds rather than Men’s Sheds (Golding, 2021b). More recently, Women’s Sheds have also started to appear in Australia, Ireland, and the U.K. (Golding & Carragher, 2021). Similarly, Women’s Sheds also feature hands-on activities, often featuring crafts for members to participate in (Golding & Carragher, 2021).

Attendees of Men’s Sheds are often retired older men, but membership is open to all adults (Golding, 2015). Older men report that they enjoy how Men’s Sheds help them connect with others (Nurmi et al., 2018) and like offering advice to other members based on experiences that they have lived through (Cox et al., 2019). Men’s Sheds create environments where men feel welcome and as though they are still capable of contributing something valuable to society (Ormsby et al., 2010). This is particularly important as feelings of worth and purpose may decline among men during retirement (Anstiss et al., 2018). In addition, Men’s Sheds have the potential to reduce rates of loneliness and isolation that can plague older men, and instead create spaces that facilitate social connections and friendships (Nurmi et al., 2018).

Background

I learned about the art made at Irish Men’s Sheds when I interviewed older members to understand more about how Men’s Sheds add purpose and meaning to the lives. While visiting the sheds, many of the men showed me the art that they had made and were eager to explain the creative activities they were engaged in (Figure 1). Woodcraft was the creative medium of choice among many of the men. Some Men’s Sheds brought in skilled artists to them techniques.
whereas other Men’s Shed members learned from other members of the shed or taught themselves.

**Figure 1**
A Men’s Shed member holds up an owl clock made at the Mulcair Men’s Shed in County Limerick

I was fascinated by the level of skill and craftsmanship on display at the Men’s Sheds and after returning to the U.S., I talked with several colleagues who are also practicing artists about what I had seen at the Men’s Sheds. They suggested creating a public exhibition for others to appreciate the art and learn more about Men’s Sheds.

**Inspiration**

I applied for and received a Fulbright Alumni grant to help support the exhibition. In the spring of 2023 in partnership with the Irish Men’s Shed Association, Men’s Sheds in counties Clare, Limerick, and Tipperary were contacted about an opportunity to submit art that they created at their Men’s Sheds to appear in an exhibition at the Limerick School of Art and Design - TUS in Limerick City, Ireland.

The purpose of the project was to create an event where the public could see how creative the Men’s Shed members were (many of whom were older adults), and to experience the level of craftsmanship that older adults possessed and to understand that they are still creative and learning new skills. Counteracting aging stereotypes is important given their prevalence and that they have become increasingly negative over time (Ng et al., 2015). Interestingly, Weiss et al. (2013) demonstrated that older adults can self-differentiate themselves from negative aging stereotypes and as a result, are less affected by them. Relatedly, when older adults have opportunities to create more positive self-images through creative outlets, feelings of

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empowerment may arise (Sabeti, 2015). I hoped that creating an exhibition demonstrating the creativity of Men’s Shed members might be a way to highlight what older adults are still capable of and reduce negative stereotypes.

**Process**

When submitting their art for the exhibition, Irish Men’s Sheds members included an image and brief paragraph discussing their piece and how it was made. The submissions were anonymized and then the images and descriptions of the art were assembled for reviewers. Two artists from the United States and one from Ireland reviewed the submissions and gave their recommendations for which items to select for the exhibition as well as first, second, and third place awards.

**Men’s Shed Exhibition**

In May 2023, the exhibition was set up at the Limerick School of Art and Design - TUS. The building that the exhibition was in was ideal as it had large windows that allowed the artwork to be visible to the public passing by. Each art piece had a corresponding description card in front of it that allowed individuals to learn more about the artists and their pieces (Figure 2). In addition to the public coming to view the art on display, students attending the Limerick School of Art and Design – TUS were able to see the work in the building where they took classes and had their own studio spaces. I spoke with several students who explained that they had “No idea this went on at Men’s Sheds” or that “These men were capable of making this!”

**Figure 2**
A view from the large windows that allowed the public to look in from the street and see the art.
Creating Connections around Art

The exhibition helped to facilitate connection in several interesting ways. First, it helped to build stronger connections among Men’s Shed members. One Ukrainian war refugee was living in Ireland and housed near a Men’s Shed and became acquainted with a fellow Men’s Shed member. He began visiting the Men’s Shed regularly and sculpting his experiences from war. His sculpture of Ukrainian war refugees (Figure 3) won first place at the exhibition and during the opening reception, he was able to talk with the public about his inspiration for the sculpture and explain what it is like living as a refugee in Ireland.

Figure 3
A sculpture depicting Ukrainian war refugees.

Individuals who attended the opening reception of the exhibition were mostly men. Men are less likely to attend artistic events compared to women (Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2016), and creating an exhibition based on work created by men seemed to increase the number of men who attended the event. Men also tend to have more difficulty with social relationships, especially in older adulthood and are at greater risk for loneliness and social isolation (Barreto et al., 2021; Crabtree et al., 2018). However, connecting with others can help to offset some of these mental health challenges. Discussing how to create the art and inspiration for it helps to facilitate conversations and connections among men, which may be particularly protective to them in older adulthood (Figure 4).
Figure 4
Two Men’s Sheds members discuss the art at the exhibition.

Reflections

In society, older adults are sometimes a forgotten group. But they have so much creativity to share and need an outlet for it. Additional environments are needed to encourage and display their creative works (Lee et al., 2023). Not only would it demonstrate how capable older adults are, but it might inspire other older adults to search for their own creativity, try something new, or learn a new artistic medium. As one example, a 77-year-old Men’s Shed member learned how to carve during retirement and demonstrated his resourcefulness with his submission of a bird (Figure 5). He explained that the bird was “Made from a piece of Mahogany taken from a broken chest of drawers and mounted on a piece of Bog Oak.” Overall, the exhibition was a reminder of the creative capacity older adults possess and events like these challenge deficit models of aging which focus on loss and decline (Mitnitski & Rockwood, 2015). Concentrating on loss and decline may perpetuate aging stereotypes. However, creating additional events and opportunities like this exhibition may help to counteract negative perspectives of older adulthood.

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Figure 5
Bird carved out of pieces of a broken chest and mounted on Bog Oak

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