

## **Artist Statement**

Barbara Bickel and R. Michael Fisher

### ***Spiritus Praxis***

5.5 x 8 inches

mixed media drawing on watercolor paper

Sept. 11, 2011

*[S]pirit is a relationship that contains numerous aspects of human existence such that to speak of human spirit means a commitment to a philosophy of becoming, in which the self can become Other to itself, and from that position either remain alienated or transcend itself. (Ryoo, et al., 2009, p. 135)*

*In the movement to regain our humanity through education, we can draw upon [Thich Nhat] Hahn's words that stress the importance of love over force, and love over fear. (Ryoo, et al., 2009, p. 141)*

*Spiritus Praxis* is the result of a collaborative co-encounter on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11th. The process began by reading a collaboratively written article entitled "Critical Spiritual Pedagogy: Reclaiming Humanity Through a Pedagogy of Integrity, Community, and Love" by Ryoo, Crawford, Moreno, and McLaren.

Instead of discussing this thought-provoking article which overtly brings together a combination of pedagogies and contexts that rarely mix well, that is, critical pedagogy and spirituality

(although Freire and hooks have forged various pathways to bridging these domains), we engaged a dialogical arts-based inquiry with one foundational agreement: let the art lead.

We come to this collaboration as pedagogues, researchers and artists having journeyed together in a 21 year life-partnership, with distinct aesthetic preferences, and content-specialties. We knew this collaboration would be simultaneously enriching and challenging. Indeed it was quite chaotic overall.

Prior to meeting in the shared studio space, we individually read the article, made notes and sketched. Once in the studio, which we recognize as a creative and legitimate site of critical inquiry, we worked on our own spontaneous responses to the article with wet and dry art materials. Although working independently at this point, we were aware and affected by each other's energies and material use. After exhausting our individual explorations, we brought our work together and responded to their co-encounter. This provoked us to let go of our own ideas and subjectivity as "celibate artists" to working as "something more," capable to resolve aesthetic problems and unify a comprehensive idea and design.

We cut, tore, and made holes, juxtaposed and over-laid various elements, but disagreed on how the art piece was unfolding. We decided to start anew, this time working on the same paper simultaneously. This was followed by two more failures before one of us suggested that we change our attitude, format and medium. We agreed to use a smaller paper size and a

dry pastel medium that was more conducive to physically blending marks, shapes and colors. The result was a resolve from the more aggressive and individualistic mark making. A transient equanimity emerged.

One of us drew a free-hand frame, which gave us a manageable space to work within. This was followed by a decision to create a dividing line using masking tape, one side became cool colors and the other warm. But we felt there was no “critical” or challenging element to reflect Ryoo *et al.*’s paper. We sensed we were facing another failure.

In that moment of tension, an accident occurred in the studio, requiring a concerted cleanup effort. While one cleaned, the other continued working in an attempt to salvage the art. A single length of string was laid over the surface using a spiral movement, and became the mediator differentiating individual loops. The loops were then inscribed onto the paper by drawing on either side of the string. The tracings, left random lines and shapes producing a coherent design, which had various parts competing for attention.

We shifted our mark making then to an ordered and simple contemplative process of coloring in the negative spaces. This process reflected a more nurturing life-force. The aesthetic impact created a three-dimensional depth and sense of mystery. This was very satisfying. Yet, we both agreed more criticality was needed to embody the negative darker-side of the article.

At this point, one of us returned to the failed art pieces, and cut one strong piercing line out from each. The three lines were glued onto the surface, irreverently cutting across the image of swirling round shapes, integrating the aspects of the negative (fear) and positive (love) that were binaries in the article. We achieved the primary aesthetic conflict we were looking for. However, secondarily we fore-grounded our failures and thus our vulnerabilities in these remainders.

In contrast to the criticality achieved, one of us saw a “divine-like” shrouded figure in the upper right. It was both made of the strings, and at the same time emanating those strings to extend into the world as connectivity, and ultimately symbolized a source of unconditional love—a Platonic One-and-the-Many.

Through working with the unknown, the becoming, the tension, and sometimes overt conflict, we practiced our best pedagogical theories of liberation, acting as individual agents confronted with a plentitude of choices. We needed to negotiate a philosophical, analytical and yet an aesthetic-ethical agreement. One of us was intent to represent the chaotic darker-side of the article and the other, the integrity, and lighter-side. To manage the complexity, and to come to a place of transcendence without rejection required a full grounding within the *spiritus* of the artist as researcher in free association. As individuals, with egos and preferences, and our real moods at any moment, we were more rigid and judgmental. We observed this latter trait frequently and talked through it, which allowed us to return to letting the art lead.

At this moment we do not fully understand this art piece, as it has become Other to itself. We know the process, we reflect and make meanings about it. Yet, ultimately, it is for all of us to find meaning within it. Rather than taking our words too preciously we invite you to dwell within the art and the central paradox of language “that communication itself avoids communication.... We have so many ways of not saying what we are saying that it takes a particular kind of listening to hear the void” (Britzman, 2003, p. 31).

## References

- Britzman, Deborah. P. (2003). Five excursions into free association, or just take the A train. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 1(1), 25-37.
- Ryoo, Jean, J., Crawford, Jennifer, Moreno, Dianna, and McLaren, Peter. (2009).
- Critical spiritual pedagogy: Reclaiming humanity through a pedagogy of integrity, community, and love. *Power and Education*, 1(1), 132-46.

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