



RE/TURNING TO HER: A CO-A/R/TOGRAPHIC RITUAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

This article reaches into the depths of a collaborative a/r/tographic ritual inquiry between two women artist-educators-priestesses. Within this we reflect on the intersections of research, art, spirituality, and education as thresholds of collaborative learning. Throughout the ritual-infused research process, we generated source material and imagery from trance, *Authentic Movement*, the labyrinth, reflective writing and co-interviews. Each of these process practices took us outside of ourselves, and attuned us to *Spirit*, offering a larger perspective on the inquiry while simultaneously bringing us closer to actualizing the performance ritual. In co-creating what became a performative ritual narrative of the loss and restoration of the *Divine feminine* in Western culture, we reclaimed a lost part of our Spiritual lineage as women through the performance ritual *Re/Turning to Her*, a teaching parable performed for the larger community.

Authors Note:

With an understanding that all writing is a co-creative process that involves multiple people, seen and unseen, we would like to acknowledge and thank those that have read iterations of this article and offered valuable feedback and editing along the way; R. Michael Fisher, Rita Irwin, William Pinar, Daniel Vokey, VCG editors Karen Keifer-Boyd and Debbie Smith-Shank, and the blind reviewers whose names we do not know. We would also like to thank Cindy Lou Griffith for video documenting the final performance ritual.

Research, Art, Spirituality, and Education: Intersecting Thresholds

In this article, we reflect on the intersections of research, art, spirituality, and education as thresholds of collaboration and learning in our *Re/Turning to Her* creation process and performance ritual. We discuss our inquiry process, which culminated in the performance ritual, and conclude the article with new understandings that emerged from our collaborative a/r/tographic research¹. Throughout the research, we utilized a sacred epistemological² approach to generate imagery from trance, dance, *Authentic Movement*, reflective writing and co-interviews. As the article unfolds, we present and describe these approaches. We believe these practices served as an entryway into deepened relational and inspired awareness, which led us closer to *Spirit* and generated deeper understandings of spirituality. Significantly as co-a/r/tographers we hold a mutual premise in that we both believe all creative acts are sacred and bring us closer to the Divine.³ In co-creating what became a performative ritual narrative of the loss and restoration of the *Divine feminine* we reclaimed a lost part of our spiritual lineage as women and created a teaching parable performed for the larger community (see Figure 1).

1. The particular practice of arts-based research that we employed was a/r/tography. A/r/tography is an emergent arts-based research practice that incorporates both art making and writing (graphy) as essential components of inquiry. It is a relational form of inquiry that draws from the contiguous identities of the artist/researcher/teacher within oneself while engaging a self-reflexive practice of making art and writing. When engaged, collaborative a/r/tography co-revises itself in/with community experiences (Irwin & DeCosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008).

2. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write that sacred epistemology stresses the values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation.

3. The repression of and gradual loss of women Spiritual leaders in Western culture that began in the twelfth century with the Inquisition has resulted in the repression and loss of a feminine face of the Divine for women (Lerner, 1993). As twenty-first century women we still feel and live the loss of this connection and identification with a feminine Divine and this a/r/tographic research brought us to that realization once again, with new understandings.



Click on the image above to see the video.

Figure 1: Bickel, Barbara. (2006). *Re/Turning to Her Performance Ritual*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School of Theology. Video stills. Click on the bottom video still to play the video documentary of the process and performance.¹

Video credits: Production-Barbara Bickel; Editing-Barbara Bickel, Camera-Barbara Bickel, Cindy Lou Griffith, R. Michael Fisher, Jennifer Peterson; Co-creators & Performers-Barbara Bickel & Tannis Hugill

We are White middle-class woman artist-educators-priestesses with a combined sixty years of art practices that have been infused by Spirit. Tannis is a dance and drama therapist and Barbara an artist educator. We met in 2002 while volunteering for an annual women's spirituality conference.⁴ Our mutual interest in art as a transformative and healing spiritual practice led us to this project, which also served as an important precursor to the group a/r/tographic dissertation study led by Barbara with women on the Women's Spirituality Celebration planning team (Bickel, 2008)⁵. As co-researchers in our a/r/tographic process, our goal was to stay connected to Spirit, which meant being willing to work with/in the unknown. To remain present to the void and to trust that the inquiry as led by Spirit was a requirement for new knowledge to surface, taking us beyond our "egoic" self-understanding as humans. We both also understand performance ritual to be the manifestation of art and Spirit through our bodies and the body serves as a "site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy" (Spry, 2001, p. 706). Gesturing, breathing, sounding bodies were the "guide" that repeatedly *Re/Turned us to Her*.

Opening to the unknown of inquiry echoes the "apophatic" spiritual path, which entails a contemplative and dialectical practice of being within "intuitive darkness" (Shannon, 1981, p. 12) as a way of "knowing by unknowing" (Shantz, 1999, p. 65). This apophatic study, which took place over an eleven-month period, focuses on the collaborative art-making experience of the co-a/r/tographers with Spirit. Our understanding of

4. The conference is called the Women's Spirituality Celebration (1991-2011). It began as an ecumenical Christian conference on the University of British Columbia (UBC) campus and in 2001 officially shifted its mandate to a multi-faith conference in response to the presence of women of diverse religious and Spiritual practices on the planning team. Since 2007, the conference has taken place in Vancouver, British Columbia at the Centre for Peace. Prior to 2007 and during this study it took place on the UBC campus at the Vancouver School of Theology. For more information on the conference see <http://www.wscelebration.com>

5. Barbara would like to acknowledge her dissertation supervisor Dr. Rita L. Irwin, as Rita in her wisdom suggested this research project be done as a pilot project for the larger study. The learning and new understandings that came from this pilot study working with one collaborator had a positive impact on the larger study where Barbara worked with thirteen collaborators.

Spirit is not confined to any one religious definition. Within this article Spirit is realized by formless ineffable energy that moves in and through the Universe as a spark, and is encountered phenomenologically in forms of expressions; moving all that is, and all that will be. According to integral philosopher Ken Wilber (1995), many traditions have acknowledged the realms of Body, Mind, Soul, and Spirit to describe worldspaces of development and experience, of which Spirit itself is the Source of all realms and co-creator with all form.

Ritual Inquiry

Ritual and a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud, 1998) with the different Other leads this inquiry into what philosopher Luce Irigaray (2002) describes as the “unthought of human becoming” (p. 99). Ritual entry into the unknown meant facing the Other as different, as the familiar stranger who turned us towards what is also below, above, between and within us. Artist and theorist Bracha Ettinger (2005) articulates this experience as *borderlinking* in the *matrixial sphere*. Borderlinking is an “aesthetical and ethical joining-in-differentiating and working-through, a spiritual knowledge of the Other and [thus] the Cosmos is born and revealed” (p. 708). As artists who do not separate art from the sacred act of creation, we co-evolve with Spirit in our art making. In this close proximity with Spirit and the Other, we come to know ourselves, and must “become open to the movement of spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history” (Alexander, 2005, p. 294).

We have found joining ritual with a/r/tography assists the shift into the transformative realm of the sacred and spiritual through setting intentions and opening to the guidance of Spirit. Anthropologist Victor Turner expanded the traditional understanding of liturgical ritual and extended the imaginary of ritual to “threshold-crossing” (cited in Grimes, 1995, p. 60). Post-colonial theorist and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha (2005), similarly crosses borders as thresholds with ritual in her films, disrupting traditional film-making norms. Her films are as much about what is not present as what is present. Her filmmaking is a relational play of all the senses in a continual rhythm of formation and reformation. Films such as “The Fourth Dimension” performs the “holes, gaps, and

the specific absences by which it takes shape”(p. 3). In a segment of her script from this film she wrote: “ingrained in modern social interaction and political performance ritual is not compatible with industrial speed to perform a ritual one must slow down” (p. 99). The study required us to slow down in order to perform the gaps and holes. Ritual gave us the means to enter a symbolic space for the shapes and non-shapes to take form.

Because of its power and transformative ability, ritual can be used destructively as well as for the good (Driver, 1997; Pryer, 2002). Ritual that is enforced through coercion or manipulation of others is destructive. Yet, when performance rituals have the intention of affirmation, borderlinking, expressing the experience of mystery, slowing down, letting go, and a re-inscribing of human experience, it can, as Minh-ha demonstrates in her films, function as a much-needed subversion of limiting cultural norms.

Within the collaborative and ritual-based a/r/tographic inquiry, we explored our spiritual/religious and artistic journeys in an effort to more deeply understand our relationship with spirituality and religion(s), informed by the making of art. The underlying educational motive behind this inquiry was to personally question our historical and current multi-faith⁶ understandings and experiences through our lived and living spiritual/religious narratives. We are both committed to expanding multi-faith awareness through performative pedagogical means in our work and art practices. We agree with some feminists (Christ, 2003; Daly, 1978; Fernandes, 2003; hooks, 2000; Irigaray, 2003), who claim that feminist transformation of society is dependent on the transformation of religious beliefs and ideologies.

6. We struggled with the term “multi-faith” as it assumes a non-critical use of the term faith. Faiths are normally understood as the main text-based religions in our society (i.e., Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic) and do not generally include the pre-textual earth-based Spiritual/religious traditions.

As practicing spiritual feminists,⁷ artists, researchers, and educators, we have come to acknowledge the impossibility of separating religion from politics; and propose that the arts offer an important bridge between the two. In contemporary and historical times, art has been both an agent for and questioner of religion. Contemporary art has the ability to shock and outrage traditional religions and consequently draw censorship to itself (e.g., Mary Beth Edelson, Martin Scorsese, Andres Serrano, Kurt Westergaard of the *Jyllands-Posten*). Our intention is not to shock or outrage those that view our art, but we have chosen to live lives as spiritual feminists who like public intellectuals,⁸ confront, from many angles, fixed notions of constructed discourses based on rationality, sameness, and fear of the Other.

This study opened what can be the dangerous ground of women's spiritual and religious lives to deeper inquiry through art. Ettinger (2005) describes inquiry through art as *copoiesis*, a co-encounter where the "artist can't not-share with an-other, she can't not witness the other" (p. 704). In this co-encounter the artist opens herself up to a vulnerability that holds the risk of exposure to others that may not understand or be tolerant of differences. With the understanding that we would be supportive witnesses for each other in this co-a/r/tographic inquiry we began by formulating interview questions together and conducting co-interviews with each other. The interviews were video recorded and re-watched and listened to as we moved through the study. The interview questions we addressed were:

7. Sociologist of religion Cynthia Eller, outlined five main characteristics of feminist Spirituality that reflect Barbara's working definition of Spiritual feminism: (a) valuing women's empowerment, (b) practicing ritual and or magic, (c) revering nature, (d) using the feminine as a chief mode of religious analysis and, (e) advocating the revisionist version of Western history (cited in Brown, 2005).

8. Writer and artist educator Carol Becker (1997), advocated for an expanded understanding of the artist in North America society to that of a "public intellectual" or in Gramsci's term the "organic intellectual." Described as fluid intellectuals, these artists are always moving, "forever inventing themselves and renegotiating their place on the [in-between] border zones between disciplines, never stuck in one discipline" (p. 18). Not bound to any one body of knowledge, they address and reframe complex problems from any and multiple disciplinary angles, serving a valuable public role in society.

1. What has your spiritual journey been and how has the journey included the exploration of religious and spiritual traditions?
2. How has your artistic path been connected to your spiritual/religious journey?

At the time we created the interview questions together, we also set intentions for our inquiry:

- to explore and open to creativity and Spirit.
- to cycle with the dark moon.
- to acknowledge we are entering the Spirit world which requires opening to the direction of Spirit, which means we cannot preplan.

In addition, as co-a/r/tographers, we wrote reflective journal notes and had email conversations which involved sharing our writings including poetic writings on the project. We video recorded our trances, engaged movement work in the studio, had dress rehearsals on the labyrinth, and developed the public performance ritual.

Co-creating with Spirit

To co-create with Spirit in our a/r/tographic ritual process we engaged multiple processes and modalities of inquiry. What follows below describes the practice of trance, Authentic Movement work in the studio, and walking the labyrinth. Each of these practices took us outside of ourselves, offering a larger perspective on the inquiry while simultaneously bringing us closer to actualizing the performance ritual.

Trance

As spiritual feminist artists⁹ familiar with entering the realm of altered reality through trance, we chose to enter trances together as a way to access Spirit guidance for the performance ritual art we were to create.

9. Other artists who bring Spirituality, feminism and art together in their practices are visual and performance artists Mary Beth Edelson and Carolee Schneemann; and poets Judy Grahn and Adrienne Rich.

We have found trance to be a powerful inquiry practice that enables one to access alternate knowledges, leading toward new understandings of life and our purpose/role within it. Trance can be described either as a form of active or process meditation and visioning, a waking-dream-state, or a practice of active imagination where one can journey to other realities through an altered state of consciousness. Within the waking-dream-state of trance, time and space become fluid, non-linear, and physical restrictions and barriers dissolve. Upon analyzing trance texts after transcription, Barbara has come to recognize trance as a “female sentence” (Cixous, 1997; Irigaray, 1997), unaided by grammar and traditional sentence structure, freed from a masculinist hegemonic discourse. Trance assisted us in finding scaffolding for aspects of the feminine principle (Artress, 2006), or the matrixial sphere (Ettinger, 2005), such as the arational, intuition and co-relationality. These qualities have been mostly devalued, repressed and forgotten within our hegemonic individualistic and rationally-based Western society.

We began the first phase of the inquiry by entering the trance process. We opened space for entering the trance by creating a ritual circle, where we sat in meditation postures and allowed the mind’s imaginary to guide us. In an awake-dream state, we spoke out loud and shared our inner observations and experiences—seen, felt, heard, sensed, and smelled—as we interacted and journeyed together. We shape-shifted and traveled through the cosmos, to other planets, and into the earth’s underworld with a blue cord attached to our waists bringing us back when we were ready to return.

In our travels in two trances we encountered symbols and qualities that would inform our emerging art. These trance-derived symbols and experiences included a deep void that repeatedly enveloped us as we shifted from form to formlessness. One of us would disappear to be found by the other, allowing a fully sensory, emotional, and spiritual penetration of the nothing/ness of the void to come into our inter-subjective existence. It also included our sitting upon large wheels that circled in space, wrapping each other in layers of blue energy, gathering stones that shone with an interior light, finding a brilliant red flower, each of us dissolving into gold liquid, and finally being draped in snakeskin cloaks. Trance gave us the visual symbolic language that we then filtered through

our bodies in the dance studio in the next phase of our inquiry.

In the Dance Studio

During the next phase of our inquiry we shifted to working in the dance studio. Here we invited the “arational”¹⁰ narratives, revealed through trance, to enter our physical bodies expressed in gesture, movement and sound (see Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5). In this layer of the inquiry we bodily entered trance states through an adapted collaborative practice of Authentic Movement,¹¹ where we followed the moving impulses of our bodies and breath. We moved and witnessed each other simultaneously in the studio sessions, then verbally shared reflections on our experience together. Moving and witnessing each other simultaneously meant that we could not completely let go into an individual altered state. The challenge of authentically moving as an individual and remaining connected to the other proved to be quite difficult at times. Our attunement to the guidance of Spirit was crucial at these times as we struggled to stay connected while expressing our individual experiences through our bodies. Despite this we were often left feeling dislocated and floundering. Initially we invited a friend to witness us and to document our movement with a digital video camera: and then, for simplicity’s sake, we chose to have a still video camera documenting us through the reflection of the studio’s large mirror.

We would at times watch these video recordings together but also very important to our process was taking the time to write and share our

10. The arational is recognized as the non-rational in a philosophical definition of mysticism but does not merit its own definition within the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Philosophy*. The *arational* (drawing from Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser (Tarbensen, 1997) and mystical traditions) is a form of knowing that includes the body, the emotions, the senses, intuition, imagination, creation making, the mystical, spiritual and the relational, alongside the rational. The arational can be found in the practices of art, meditation, psychoanalysis, the body, the senses, and so on.

11. Elsewhere Hugill (2002) wrote of the purpose of the practice of Authentic Movement: “The symbols of the Self, which for Jungian psychology is the unity of being, arise from the depths of the body, bringing material from the personal, collective and transpersonal unconscious into embodied form. This process is integrated into conscious awareness through dialogue with the witness, the one who is observing while the mover moves” (p. 2).

impressions after our sessions in the studio. These sharing times became essential as we worked to hold the thread of connectivity between us. Barbara wrote of her struggle in a post-Authentic Movement writing reflection,

Self or Other?

I or we?

how to decide where to focus attention?

Self or Other?

Fleeting glances outward

Great sadness

Let the smaller self go

If nothing else she can move her body

In addition, while we were apart, we often found ourselves reflecting on our collaboration during our individual spiritual practices and would return with small insights into our collaborative inquiry when we next met. Trusting that our inquiry would become clear when we were ready to receive it, and trusting that the other was working for the collaboration with Spirit as well, was the thread that kept us joined in our times of open non-knowingness. The study of sacred geometry reveals that formlessness moves in a coherent manner towards form in infinite patterns (Artress, 2006). Knowing the work we were doing was based in sacred inquiry together, we allowed ourselves to fully experience the sometimes-painful process of co-emerging and co-fading (Ettinger, 2005) that both the trance and movement processes took us to.



Figures 2, 3 and 4: Bickel, Barbara. (2006). Barbara and Tannis in Authentic Movement. Vancouver, BC: Forufera Studio. Video still.

The trance narratives, along with the embodied narratives that presented themselves to us within the studio inquiry sessions, eventually became the source material for the public performance ritual. The trance imagery and moving gestures slowly began to weave together the story of two women seekers returning to the matrixial Source.¹² We came to realize through our Authentic Movement together that our roles were different. We physically embodied different aspects of the Divine feminine creative process, and these differences, as revealed through the moving body, were to be honored. Tannis generally held the space of the maker and shaper, and Barbara of the de-structor and un-doer. Within the trances and in the studio, we had rich experiences of bodied communication that were quite beautiful to experience: but at other times, we felt physically destabilized and ungrounded. We often found ourselves struggling to negotiate our bodies within a void or in the midst of shifting ground. Moving together brought us face to face with the great sorrow of knowing the difficulty, and often impossibility, of negotiating space with an/Other and the Self simultaneously.



Figure 5: Bickel, Barbara. (2006). *Re/Turning to Her* video. Vancouver, BC: Forufera Studio. Video still.

12. As spiritual feminists we use the terms matrixial (Ettinger, 2005) and Divine feminine (Irigaray, 2003) throughout the article. Both of these terms refer to the symbolic power of the female body that we believe is not limited to women. As women artists we perform with and through our bodies and as such our experiences are filtered through our particular women bodies. Our use of these terms do not imply an essentialist stance of women being uniquely and exclusively Divine or the sole inhabitants of matrixial spaces. In 2004, Ettinger addressed the essentialist challenge that her matrixial theory has at times attracted. Her post-Lacanian theory is based in the symbolic pre-gendered space of the womb, which relates to all genders. As a feminist she supports women's rights over their reproductive bodies, and will not give up the rich symbolic language that is embodied in a woman's body. She refuses to "surrender to the dominant phallic sphere that censures both men and women and molds them in its phallic frame" (p. 75). Irigaray has also been challenged with essentialism, yet her theory of the Divine feminine can be applied to all humans. She shares a "sensibility with many contemporary people who are discarding former religious orthodoxies in favour of more participatory engagements with a notion of an in-dwelling divine. This replaces adherence to static metaphysical categories of an absolute Being with its doctrinaire truth claims" (Joy, 2006, p. 4).

With/in the Labyrinth

It should be noted that during the months of our inquiry we were being influenced by the powers of creation and destruction occurring simultaneously in many dimensions of our lives. We were not able to always give time and space to fully feel and heal. During difficult personal times Barbara found herself turning to the practice of labyrinth walking¹³ in an effort to find nurturance in the moving ground of her life. This led to the labyrinth being envisioned as an ideal location for the performance ritual (see Figure 6). Minh-ha (2005) demonstrates in her filmmaking how the "self-in-displacement or the self-in-creation is one through which changes and discontinuities are accounted for in the making and

13. According to Artress (2006) the labyrinth's unicursal design echoes the spiral form in nature and for some signifies both the human journey through life and the connection between humanity and the natural world. It is an ancient architectural form that has been used by some for religious practices. It most recently has been revived in North America as a walking meditation practice that is not bound by any one religious faith.

unmaking of identity, and for which you need specific, mobile, boundaries” (p. 130). Our co-inquiry shifted markedly with the support of this sacred structure, which has boundaries that are free from containment. In particular, the center of the labyrinth, which we experienced as a multi-dimensional space, became quite significant.



Figure 6: Fisher, R. Michael. (2006). Labyrinth from above. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School of Theology Labyrinth. Digital photograph.

Historically the center of the labyrinth has been a space for receiving Divine direction as well as one of mythical descent (Westbury, 2001). We both had engaged the labyrinth as part our prior spiritual practices. Its ancient roots are intertwined with mystery and called to us, offering an anchor in the midst of our very open, shifting, unsettling inquiry. The labyrinth as an ancient art symbol crosses cultural and religious boundaries (Compton, 2002). The labyrinth has surfaced and disappeared at different times in history. Researchers of the labyrinth have found that it contains no one truth. But instead it holds “[a]mbiguity, tolerance, acceptance of multiplicity, of many beliefs, of variety and change and

ironically the ‘messages’ of a pathway which is not multiple but singular ... In the one is the many and in the many, one” (Westbury, p. 96). This ancient art form resonated with our exploration of spirituality and the artistic process very well.

Once the decision to perform on the labyrinth was made, our recurring experience of the void became located and directed into the labyrinth’s center. It became evident that the void was the unthought, forgotten aspect of the Divine feminine in our main religious traditions. Our task was to do the grieving, lament, and recovery work to reclaim the Divine feminine within the ancient container of the labyrinth’s center.

The story that took form, guided by our trance and movement work, was the departure and descent of the Divine feminine into the void or the earth, which was located in the center of the labyrinth. Tannis served as the elder and became the priestess who unraveled the spool of fate (blue thread) leading to the center of the labyrinth, and descended into Her embrace. Barbara was the initiate priestess who followed, struggling to reclaim the thread of life and whose grief called Tannis back, revealing Her gift of Love.

Luce Irigaray (1992) referred poignantly to the loss of the feminine in Western religious traditions and the need for alternative processes to facilitate recovery of the Divine feminine. She wrote, “Femininity is precisely, that which is excluded from patriarchal representations and can only be glimpsed in their gaps and silences. For it to return, and to unsettle that which repressed it, a special process is required” (cited in Larrington, 1992, p. 448). A spiritual inquiry through a/r/tography as ritual became the special process that allowed us to enter into the unknown of the inquiry with trust, and offered a vehicle to move with and towards that which we had forgotten. We have found Bracha Ettinger’s (2005) work addresses Irigaray’s call for a special process to return to the excluded feminine through her articulation of the matrixial sphere, which does not reject the phallic sphere but exists alongside and with it. Similar to how we came to more fully understand the creative process in this study Ettinger understands “artworking(s)” to be the method for entering the matrixial sphere where the “ethical joining-in-differentiating” can take place resulting in “metramorphosis” where we can become m/Other (2005, pp. 708-709).

Re/Turning to Her: The Performance Ritual

During the two weeks prior to the public performance ritual of *Re/Turning to Her* we met regularly at the Maltese labyrinth at the back of the School of Theology to rehearse, and the process of the ritual formation intensified. We unloaded our bags for the performance ritual that held the symbolic artifacts revealed to us in our initial trance journeys—a large spool of blue thread, a blue glass bowl, a blue snake cloak, a synthetic red flower, and many yards of white fabric. These performance objects anchored our experience of the trances.

We were often tired and unfocused coming from meetings and appointments, so there was little time to connect with each other before we began to work; yet we were grateful to be working together at the labyrinth for these few short hours. We entered the labyrinth to rehearse and the sacred story evolved as we assisted each other to fully embody the experience.

We are both seasoned practitioners of ritual processes, yet our personal struggles came to the fore with the pressures of performance and the difficulties of disentangling from internalized cultural habits of being in a hegemonic patriarchal world. Habits such as overwork and fulfilling others needs to avoid feelings of failure, contributed to our struggle to connect and deeply listen to each other; such habits also dulled our ability to listen to, or for the guidance of Spirit together. At times, we lost sight of the larger Spirit work that we were carrying out. Tannis, in later reflective writing on the project poignantly noted that:

During practice sessions, my longing and fear related to disappearing into the void, under the veils of fabric, manifested as a resistance and irritability, which at the time we found baffling, and frustrating. Yet, once covered, the pull to melt completely into a semi-stupor at times made me unresponsive to Barbara's efforts to engage with me, bringing fear and more frustration. An overwhelming grief muted my consciousness, dulled my desire and made each movement effortful. It was as if the process of spiraling into form required that we experience the isolation and separation of the human condition with concentrated intensity.

The spiritual lesson for me is that She is always present, has never been lost, and is especially visible in all acts of love and beauty. It is we who have turn away from Her.

The final dress rehearsal did not go well. We were scattered, and Tannis literally became lost on the labyrinth path. The night before the performance ritual, there was no place left to go but to accept what was unfolding and to trust each other and Spirit to carry us through the public performance ritual.



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

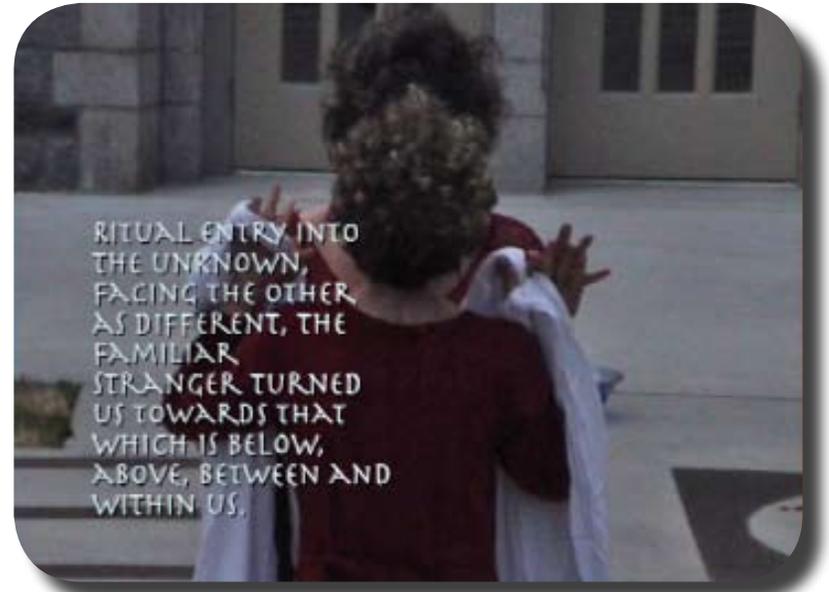


Figure 12. Figures 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12: Bickel, Barbara. (2006). *Re/Turning to Her* performance ritual. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver School of Theology Labyrinth. Video stills.

Post Performance Ritual

Following the performance ritual some people walked the labyrinth. Others joined us for refreshments and conversation. One woman shared that she felt the struggle of her brother, who has Alzheimer's Disease when the thread broke and the way of the path was lost. We had only a small audience, but we both felt very satisfied and elated with the performance ritual coming together without mishaps, and with the opportunity to share it with others (see Figures 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12).

As a closing part of the study, we met and recorded a conversation a few days later with the intention to debrief the project. This was the beginning of working to understand the process we had gone through together—the good and not-so-good parts. Much of the conversation was focused on our differing understandings of the collaboration. Tannis admitted to having the best of both worlds, as the work was done collaboratively but she did not have to take the full responsibility for the art piece.

Her sense of elation following the successful performance ritual was unencumbered by the disappointments that related to aspects of the whole of the project that Barbara carried. Barbara still grieved the loss of the missed details. She shared disappointment in herself for backing off many things she really felt were important because of time restraints, including Tannis's boundary-setting around details of the production. Further, for Barbara, a doctoral student at the time, the difficulty of bringing this kind of work forward into a secular university setting manifested in her reluctance to invite colleagues to the event because she did not know them well.

An important place of struggle that came forward in this post-dialogue was the different understandings of the union of art and priestessing.¹⁴ It was here that connection between our art and spiritual paths was revealed as sometimes difficult to maintain or to be fully cognizant of. Tannis spoke of understanding herself as a performer in the collaboration, and thus working for Barbara. She wanted more feedback and encouragement so she would know what Barbara wanted. Barbara was not coming from such a location of performer and priestess being split and thus, she most often did not have direction for Tannis. This was a place of frustration for Tannis. An excerpt from the post-dialogue reveals the struggle:

Barbara: ... maybe I didn't speak it out loud who knows, I just remember it from the beginning, knowing that this was preparation for priestessing together ...

Tannis: And that's where, this is like a level of learning. The line between performing and priestessing is the distinction between

performing and priestessing.

Barbara: Which is probably, more something, because for me I'm not a performer ... so I don't actually ... I always feel like I'm priestessing, it is not something I have to ...

Tannis: Yeah, it's a new threshold for me.

Despite our blindness and stumbling regarding our roles in the collaborative work, it did become clear to us in the last weeks prior to the performance ritual that we were working to reclaim the Divine feminine the entire time. It just took a long time to realize it, amidst the confusion in our roles as performers/priestesses for Spirit. Due to our full schedules we found it difficult to align our inquiry with the cycle of the dark moon and hence a regular rhythm of returning and reconnecting was lost. In retrospect, we could have revisited our original set of intentions more often as a reminder of the Spirit-directed work we were engaging.

In the months that followed Barbara had the opportunity to make visual art from the project. She entered an intense video making process, working with the many hours of footage that had been collected during the creation of *Re/Turning to Her*. During this time of dwelling with the visual traces of the co-inquiry, she acquired a deepened appreciation for the work they had done. The 16-minute art-documentary style video¹⁵ that accompanies this article collages segments of the initial interview, movement, and sound produced during the studio experience, trance, and the performance ritual—offering a partial visual, audio, and moving glimpse into the full inquiry process (see the video link with Figure 1).

One year after the performance ritual, we arranged to meet at a labyrinth near our homes, to walk the labyrinth together and share further reflections. Shortly before this date Tannis experienced the loss of her companion cat. Upon reaching the centre of the labyrinth Tannis found herself filled with grief and wept, while Barbara walked in circles around her. Upon reflection, we recognized the very familiar experience of the year prior and our performance ritual spontaneously repeating itself; grief releasing into the center of the labyrinth while the edges of the void were held to enable a return. Finding herself in a deeply reflective place,

14. Priestessing, as we understand it, requires stepping into a co-leadership role for creating ritual and holding sacred space for Spirit to co-create within..

15. This video was projected in the AMS Gallery at the University of British Columbia as part of the final dissertation exhibition entitled *Womb Entering* in 2007.

Tannis came prepared with a question: *What impact has the performance ritual had on your life?* Barbara was not prepared for the question but realized as she began to speak that it had multiple impacts that had not been fully shared.

Barbara: It kept me sane as the main creative work I did that year while I was preparing to do my doctoral research. It was a difficult but very satisfying collaboration. Also showing the video to people, and telling the myth/story of the return of the Divine feminine to young girls in my life has been wonderful. They are completely mesmerized watching the video. Even my twenty-four-year-old step-daughter chose to get married on the labyrinth this past year. I am reminded of the importance of taking the video and this work out further into the world. It also gave me the foundation of the labyrinth as a practice of centering in my life.

Tannis: It took a while to realize the impact. The importance of intimacy and relationship with another person, not just animals. I no longer feel the need to dissolve into the Divine Mother but that the Divine Mother is in my body. The shift from formlessness to form with the Divine has occurred, and it opened a very productive year for me with lots of important work around ritual.

These are significant personal revelations that emerged as the result of our artworking together. The importance of working within the symbolic structure of the labyrinth to contain the work while we became lost in the process, staying open to loving each other as struggling women on this journey, and holding the understanding of Spirit as collaborator significantly informed our future work.

Delving Deeper into the Re/Turn

Luce Irigaray (2002) wrote of the unbridled labyrinthal sojourn back to the “forgotten Being,” the mystery that we enacted through our mind, bodies and Spirit in our work together:

Turning back to the unthought of human becoming is indispens-

able. But sometimes the task of discovering it will not be easy. Because what is inadequately thought paralyzes the Spirit as well as the domain to which it has applied ... Between the forgotten Being and the one already fixed in language, the bridges are cut. A flight forward then takes the place of a dialectic movement going from the past to the future, from the future to the past, ceaselessly widening its circle. (p. 99)

Both of us were profoundly influenced at early ages by Christian church rituals led by male clergy. In Tannis’s case, Catholic priests and in Barbara’s case her Lutheran minister father. Our early religious experiences have deeply impacted our current spiritual paths. Tannis at a young age desired to become a nun. Barbara chose to leave the church of her family and ancestors. As young women we both found religious visual art to be a source of spiritual nurturance.

In choosing to create our own rituals as artists outside of traditional institutions and social structures, we encountered a great freedom accompanied by an inevitable existential struggle. Performing ritual on a labyrinth that was part of a Christian Theological School added to the extreme qualities of the experience. We do not know whether the performance ritual transformed those who witnessed the event. We do know that our skills and learning as artists, researchers, teachers, and priestesses were expanded and called into greater awareness. Our increasing ability to hold the space of the unknown, to surface from it when needed, and to share it with others disrupts the fear-based forces that keep the Divine feminine repressed in our society. These skills and awarenesses have been carried forward into other collaborative work.

The significance of the collective emotional grief that we were performing, as part of the larger Kosmos,¹⁶ was not completely clear to us until after the public performance ritual. The heaviness of Spirit that Tannis held, during the months leading towards the performance ritual, lifted almost immediately after the performance ritual. Barbara became

16. The Kosmos as defined by transpersonal philosopher Ken Wilber includes the multiple “domains of existence,” from matter to mind to Spirit, and is not limited to the material realm as the word cosmos is most often related to in contemporary literature (2000, p. 16).

aware of the extent of a physical injury incurred during the last two weeks of rehearsals—only after the performance ritual was over.

Emotional discomfort accompanied us on this inquiry as we stretched ourselves in an effort to remain authentic and open with each other. Our ability to acknowledge and share the emotions that arose was assisted through our spiritual and ritual practices, and the strength of our friendship. Through ritual inquiry, we were able to include and embrace our motivating passions and emotions. Within a shared sacred context of respect and reverence, we accepted our emerging emotional states and did not project them onto the other. Consequently, we kept the turmoil of emotions moving. Educator Megan Boler (1999) supports and acknowledges this as a “pedagogy of discomfort.” She argues that there are “gendered rules of emotional conduct” that have created a hegemonic “politics of emotion” in our society and social institutions (p. xi). To address the educational ethics of emotions she challenges us to not privatize emotions in our learning environments. Emotions, as expression, come (in part) from arational domains, and are necessary sites of resistance to oppression, according to Boler. We need to recognize how we turn emotions into an “other” or dangerous “stranger” through our current constructed discourses of emotions.

In addition, we can in turn become the stranger to ourselves. Minha’s (2005) post-colonial practice reminds us that “assuming the status of a stranger is assuming a site of unresolved difficulty, which can become a site of empowerment only when one faces one’s other strangeness and remains a stranger to oneself” (p. 200). In sharing the emotion-laden process in this article, we cross the public and private barriers of the education discourse of which Boler writes. We also remain in a site of unresolved difficulty bringing the private and arational into the public realm.

As artists, working as a/r/tographers, within a research-intensive university (at the site of a Christian education institution), we encountered many historically oppressive triggers that threatened to undermine the work. Tannis’s reluctance to take a full role in the collaboration was impacted by the project being situated as a research study at the university. Barbara’s desire to not be solely responsible for the project, and wanting it to be an equal collaboration were a denial of her privileged position of power as a member of the university research community. Her struggle

to fully advertise and share the performance ritual within the University community reflected her fear and ambivalence within this privileged community.

The collaborative a/r/tographic ritual inquiry that we engaged and performed publicly contributed to the enactment and deeper understanding of what adult educator Jane Vella (2000) calls a “spirited” and sacred epistemology. The public performance ritual moved us beyond our personal selves and into the world. Vella (2000) locates “spirited epistemology” where “[e]very education event is movement toward a *metanoia*, the passage of spirit from alienation into a deeper awareness of oneself” (p. 10). Although awareness of ourselves, mirrored by the other, at times brought great sadness, we continued to work through and learn within the evolving experience. Through personal practices and during reflective moments after our sessions together, we were able to recognize and distinguish personal emotional struggles and the resulting grief that included individual aspects, but was larger than us as individuals. Our stated intentions at the start of the inquiry involved working with Spirit. What that has come to mean to us is that we were not only collaborating with each other but we were collaborating with Spirit. As Tannis clearly articulates in post-performance reflection writing,

As artists creating ritual, we learned that habitual attitudes learned in secular art and theatre making must expand when working in a sacred context to include awareness of Divine participation. The artist becomes a collaborator, a vehicle, a mediator, and must be cognizant that she is not in control but in the presence of a mysterious unfolding. Human parameters of emotional and physical reality are limited and can prevent us from discerning the truth of revealed reality. These shifts in perception change everything, as the artist’s ego must become transparent, fluid, yet strong enough to sustain awareness of Divine presence.

We are struck how clearly Luce Irigaray’s (2002) writing of the Divine feminine holds and reflects the essence of our collaborative experience:

The rift between the other and me is irreducible. To be sure we can build bridges, join our energies, feast and celebrate encounters, but the union is never definitive, on pain of no longer existing. Union implies returning into oneself, moving away, dissenting, separating. To correspond with one's own becoming requires an alternation of approaching the other and dividing from him, or her. (p. 157)

Coming together and going apart was the familiar pattern of the trances, Authentic Movement, rehearsals, and performance ritual. Each moment of reunion was combined with the pain of separation.

Through assisting and witnessing each other in the process of a sacred a/r/tographic ritual inquiry, we traveled to the hidden and forgotten roots of our spiritual/religious traditions. By performing and documenting the performance ritual of *Re/Turning to Her* on the outdoor labyrinth of a theological school, we embodied the role of artists as public intellectuals disrupting the "culture of fear" (Fisher, 2006; Giroux, 2003; Palmer, 1998) that too often accompanies the diverse expressions of religion and spirituality. In a small way, we have entered what is most often a secular visual culture dominated by a phallic lens and imbued it with a matrixial lens fed by ritual and Spirit through the public performance ritual. Through further sharing the process and experience in video and writing we desire to assist in widening the circle of compassionate multi-faith awareness that does not exclude the feminine aspects of the Divine.

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