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Exploring Soul Loss Through Arts-Based Research

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Arts-based approaches to scholarly inquiry are becoming increasingly common in qualitative research. The research presented here examines the psychospiritual impact of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), and a spectrum of soul loss was identified including soul wounding, soul withering, soul shattering, soul flight, soul theft, and soul murder. Part of the data set consisted of 24 mandalas by participants and the researcher, as well as one integrative drawing based on the use of *imaginal resonance*. The art data permitted a depth of insight into the psychospiritual impact of sexual abuse that went beyond what had been provided by other data streams. As such, concurrent mandala-making and imaginal resonance may be fruitful transpersonal methods for future researchers.

Keywords: *arts-based research, trauma, psychospiritual, soul loss, sexual abuse*

When I wandered through the valley of death, art was my salvation. Rage, despair, shame, loss: all these were given form through the application of paint to canvas. Little did I know that art, which was such a catalyst for my personal struggle, would later become an essential tool in my work as a researcher.

Eisner (2008) wrote that “the life of feeling is best expressed through those forms of feeling we call the arts” (p. 7). Images are among the most powerful ways to communicate emotions. One reason is because art has a unique ability to reflect inner experiences (Leavy, 2009) through the use of symbols, containing multiple levels of meaning (Womack, 2005).

I am a survivor of psychological trauma and as I painted my way through my healing process, the dark, haunting memories of my near annihilation were given form in pictures instead of words. My artwork was violent, disturbing—even hideous. In time, however, my inner healing gradually became reflected in my artistic expression. The palettes to which I was drawn changed from dark, angry hues to brighter, more joyful colors, while themes of lamentation and suffering slowly gave way to light and hope. Observing the visual forms spontaneously emerging from my psyche, I carefully monitored my own rebirth.

I have been an artist all my life and images remain my primary intuitive language. Weber (2008) noted that “image communicates concrete and abstract thought in an economical fashion making it an excellent vehicle for conveying academic knowledge” (p. 42). As

a licensed psychologist specializing in the treatment of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), I learned that images were also an excellent way of communicating clinical insights. For this reason, I often draw for clients my visual impressions of their inner struggles. This background served as a key resource that allowed me to safely monitor participants’ clinical presentations throughout the interview process.

Study Overview

Childhood sexual abuse is a serious social problem that leads to lasting medical and psychological disorders in many survivors (Wilson, 2009). While it is believed that up to 95% of victims do not disclose their abuse (Martin & Silverstone, 2013), those who have been identified number in the millions (Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). In this paper I do not provide a full report of the study’s procedures and findings, but extract those elements that best reflect the role creative expression has played in this study.

Method and Procedures

My study of the psychospiritual impact of childhood sexual abuse utilized intuitive inquiry, a hermeneutic research method that uses five iterative cycles: (a) Cycle 1, clarifying the topic; (b) Cycle 2, developing a preliminary lens; (c) Cycle 3, collecting and analyzing data; (d) Cycle 4, refining the researcher’s interpretive lens; and (e) Cycle 5, discussing theoretical implications (Anderson, 2011). The soft structure of intuitive inquiry permits the qualitative researcher a wide scope of options in terms of data collection and analysis. The following sections will focus on selected

aspects of Cycle 3, highlighting the role of imagery and the researcher's imaginal response to nonverbal data.

Data collection, analysis, and follow-up.

During Cycle 3 of inquiry, data from twelve women were collected in two distinct phases using semi-structured interviews and arts-based approaches. At the end of 60-75 minute face-to-face interviews, participants were invited to create visual representations of their trauma narratives while I did the same from the researcher's perspective. Telephone follow-ups were later conducted with each participant to assess their post-interview wellbeing and discuss the study's findings.

Analysis for the study involved a range of narrative, dialogic, imaginal, somatic, and arts-based approaches to the participants' and researcher's data (most notably, the drawing of imagery in a pre-delineated circle, reminiscent of Jungian mandalas). I also consulted with a peer reviewer (D. Netzer) to deepen my understanding of participants' mandalas, and to gain perspective on my own artwork. My final integrative drawing for the arts-based data set was explored from a transpersonal perspective using *imaginal resonance*, a way of allowing works of expressive art to emerge from felt experience (Netzer, 2013). Of the multiple data streams collected, I believe that the art data offered the most profound insights into the psychospiritual impact of sexual abuse.

Concurrent mandala-making. Traditional mandalas are elaborate circular drawings with complex geometrical patterns that have a spiritual significance in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. As a sacred art form, they depict the universe, embodying the totality of existence, and serving as receptacles of divine energy (Cornell, 1994).

Carl Jung (1952/1956) was the first person in Western psychology to use mandalas in a clinical context, regarding them as archetypal symbols emerging directly from the unconscious. Jung (1944/1953) believed mandalas possessed a metaphysical nature and reflected the psychic core of individuals' personalities. Over the past decade, in preliminary research mandalas have been empirically shown to decrease negative symptomatology in survivors of psychological trauma (Henderson, Rosen, & Mascaro, 2007) as well as individuals struggling with anxiety (Curry & Kasser, 2005).

Visual images often capture that which cannot be expressed in words and "the process of creating the image becomes the source of questions, problems, and insights" (Sullivan, 2008, p. 244). As such, understanding

the complex layers of any image involves a hermeneutic struggle to extract meaning from the work. There are a number of approaches to the interpretation of art, ranging from the relativistic to the conservative (Franklin & Politsky, 1992). The former locates the meaning of a work squarely in the subjective interpretation of the viewer, while the latter insists that meaning is inherent within the piece itself. My own view aligns with the participatory approach to artistic interpretation, which holds that meaning is negotiated in the interplay between object and viewer (Veroff, 2002).

All 24 mandalas in my soul loss study were created using identical paper, wax crayons, markers, and drawing chalk. During the making of the artwork, my participants and I sat facing one another at opposite ends of the interview room. As such, participants and I were unable to see one another's drawing at the time of their creation. This blinded approach was my deliberate attempt to highlight any similarities and differences in participants' and my subjective experiences of the stories that had unfolded. Each woman was invited to draw an image that captured the emotional resonance of her personal narrative, while I did the same from my own perspective.

Once the mandalas were completed, my participants and I sat together and explored their meaning, discussing similarities and differences in how the drawings were rendered. The uncanny resonance observed between some mandala-pairs (Figures 1 through 6) came as a surprise. While I had anticipated thematic parallels to be present in the drawings, detailed similarities in the use of color, space, and line dynamics were unexpected.

A Spectrum of Soul Loss in CSA

The findings of this study suggested that soul loss might be a meta-construct containing a spectrum of psychospiritual injuries including soul wounding, soul withering, soul shattering, soul flight, soul theft, and soul murder. For the purposes of the study, soul was defined as the nucleus or structural hub at the core of the architecture of the self. The architecture of the self was defined as the psychological infrastructure underpinning the global personality.

Metaphorically, this model of soul can be thought of as the hub of a bicycle wheel at which all points converge: the very essence identity. The outer ring of the wheel represents the public mask that is shown to the world, while the spokes of the wheel represent their

various life roles or aspects of self. Even when the outer mask is intact, a compromised soul puts the entire self-system at risk.

Soul Wounding

Two participants in the study resonated with the concept of soul wounding, which involves a discrete injury to the most essential level of the survivor's being. This form of psychospiritual trauma creates a sense that a core part of the self has been maimed but not destroyed.

When discussing the impact of the abuse by her father, one participant noted that she was never completely broken by her experience of sexual abuse. The bright, lush imagery used in her mandala affirmed this claim of overall wellbeing: "I think it was because my spirit never got squashed. ... I don't know how I'd put it. Acceptance. Peace. All of it kind of in one. You know, it is what it is, man. ... We can't change a thing" (Nora, personal communication, April 8, 2013).

Another participant was able to identify both negative and positive outcomes of her abuse experience. While her mandala depicted the disembodied head of the grandmother who witnessed her abuse and failed to intervene, the interview suggested that at least some of her core remained intact: "the sexual abuse ... made my soul better, if that makes any sense to you. ... I understand the human condition better. ... I'm not so judgmental.... [but] deep down I'm just not right. ... it's a wound on my soul" (Cathy, personal communication, April 8, 2013).

Soul Withering

Soul withering was the second thematic node on the soul loss spectrum, involving the sense that one's soul has shrivelled slowly over time. The ultimate result is a desiccated inner world, devoid of richness or life.

Only a single participant in the study evoked the theme of soul withering noting "[sexual abuse] affected me from the first time. ... my soul ... that's what I think I would try to protect. ... Mine just got more, more withdrawn. ... More tighter. ... more dimmer and dimmer and colder. ... Part of you dies" (Yvonne, personal communication, April 11, 2013).

This participant's mandala depicted a barren house devoid of color on the left side of the page, with a small sun and five flowers on the right. My mandala of her story, in contrast, consisted of a single candle surrounded by darkness. Although the focal image of each drawing was quite different, they shared a core theme of meagreness that was reflected in the colors, content, and techniques.

Soul Shattering

The third node on the spectrum of soul loss was soul shattering, defined as the felt sense that a part of the self's core has been broken into pieces.

Discussing how sexual abuse by multiple family members affected her development, one participant stated "it's like it shatters something. ... It doesn't shatter the goodness that one is, but it shatters something just above it" (Sepi, personal communication, April 5, 2013). Her mandala consisted entirely of thin, wispy threads of color floating vertically down the page, while mine depicted concentric circles surrounding a partially shattered core.

Soul Flight

Soul flight was the fourth thematic node identified on the spectrum of soul loss. Soul flight is defined as the sense that one's soul has, [volitionally] left one's body. This description shares intriguing parallels with the clinical concept of dissociation.

Describing the psychospiritual impact of her sexual abuse, one participant evoked the experience of soul flight. The mandalas associated with this thematic node depicted floating stick figures and a flying bird in the midst of escape. Although she had reported her father's abuse to her mother, the disclosure was not believed and her molestation continued: "I feel like ... my soul left, and didn't return. ... It flew away. ... And I don't know how to stop it from flying [sic] again. Life would get good ... I'd feel like I'm intact again And then [swooshing sound] gone" (Emily, personal communication, April 12, 2013).

Soul Theft

The fifth node on the soul loss spectrum was soul theft, which involves feeling as if the perpetrator has stolen the survivor's soul from her very body. While the soul itself remains intact, it is dislocated from its central place within the architecture of the self.

Both participants who resonated with soul theft felt their abusers had ripped something essential out of their psychic cores. One woman's mandala depicted a frozen child with no hands or feet. She noted "When I was soulless ... I [had] no self-love. ... I [was] a dirty whore. ... My soul took all the shit that they said I was [at the] core of my being ... they robbed me" (Mel, personal communication, April 10, 2013). The other woman, in contrast, focused her mandala on the drawing of a hand representing the abusers who violated her: "My soul I think has been broken. ... The whole damn thing

Cracks and cracks and cracks ... the soul snatching one [resonates] ... Because all the lightness was taken" (Jo, personal communication, April 22, 2013).

Soul Murder

The final node identified on the soul loss spectrum was soul murder, defined as the annihilation of the survivor's core sense of self. In this form of psychospiritual injury, the innermost level of identity is destroyed. Of the 12 participants in the study, 5 identified soul murder as the most accurate descriptor of their psychospiritual injury.

Discussing the impact of sexual abuse on her life one woman noted "[the soul] bleeds and bleeds and bleeds. ... I would agree with murder" (Blanche, personal communication, April 22, 2013). Another woman whose mandala depicted a bullet hole in her soul declared "[sexual abuse] ate my soul. ... until there [was] nothing left" (Katnis, personal communication, April 12, 2013). A third woman's mandala revealed a little girl dying on a bed. She said "It's like there's something missing inside of me. ... I do feel like a part of me died" (Suzy, personal communication, April 22, 2013). A fourth woman stated "I know I was damaged soul deep. ... I do believe that my soul was completely murdered" (Penelope, personal communication, April 22, 2013). Finally, a fifth woman reported "[sexual abuse] fractured my entire being. ... To murder a life like that, he may as well have just completed the task because what was left after he tossed me aside was just a human body without anything" (Trish, personal communication, April 8, 2013).

Narratives of Soul Loss

Following are three exemplars from the data collected during my soul loss study. The mandalas, in particular, seem to capture the essence of the different psychospiritual injuries along the soul loss spectrum.

Nora's Mandala

During our interview, Nora reported that her father had molested her for as long as she could remember. She also witnessed ongoing domestic violence in a family system that she described as a "war camp." Her story was one of violation, degradation, and betrayal. Nora began sexually acting out with peers in kindergarten and this behavior continued, unabated, well into middle adulthood. She noted that she spent over thirty years in prostitution as a direct result of psychological conditioning related to her sexual abuse.

For Nora, the violation of her body was so commonplace that she was unable to recall a time in her

life prior to the sexual abuse. By the age of 7, Nora was completely conditioned to think of her abuse as normal and became enraged when police arrested her father for raping her sister.

What I found most interesting about Nora's mandala (Figure 1) was that her stargazer lily, with its lush leaves, rich colors, and ample use of space, suggested an improbable level of wellness given the unspeakable nature of her abuse. During the interview, Nora repeatedly spoke of her deep faith in Christ, reporting that she had had a conversion experience years before after nearly being murdered. In that moment, Nora gave herself and her future completely to God. From her point of view, her soul was remade in the giving and she was spiritually sanctified.

Nora's lily, then, was a symbol of hope, healing, and possibility, despite the suffering she had endured. My mandala of Nora's story (Figure 2), in contrast, showed a cross and a broken heart. For me, this image captured the essence of both Nora's heartbreak and healing. Although the drawings depicted dramatically different content, similarities in the use of bright colors, strong lines, and ample space suggested a depth of inner wellbeing that was not readily apparent to me during the interview.

Mel's Mandala

Mel was one of two participants in the study who evoked the concept of soul theft. For two years her grandfather repeatedly molested her and while her mother believed her disclosure and reported it to police, the rest of the family ostracized Mel. She eventually lost her court case against her grandfather due to lack of evidence; however, several other victims came forward and Mel's grandfather was later convicted as a sex offender.

Mel's sexual abuse resulted in a number of psychological issues ranging from anxiety to depression. She noted that it felt as if her grandfather had torn her soul from her body and placed it beyond her reach. Mel's mandala (Figure 3) had a frozen quality, showing a child with missing hands and feet with mask-like features reminiscent of a Japanese Kabuki doll. Despite the surface cheerfulness of the image, then, the drawing seemed devoid of authentic emotional depth.

My mandala (Figure 4), on the other hand, was highly charged and showed Mel's soul being ripped from her body. The black talon symbolized the power of the perpetrator to take from the victim that which was most precious. For me, this image

highlighted the truth of the matter, whereas Mel's mandala appeared deliberately constructed to mask the depth of her injury. I was intrigued to note that my drawing inadvertently used a similar color palette to Mel's and that the woman in my picture was also missing her hands and feet.

Trish's Mandala

Trish's experience of soul murder resulted from years of sexual abuse by her father. She did not trust her mother enough to disclose the abuse but did, unsuccessfully, attempt to get her mother to leave her father several times. Trish's sexual abuse eventually resulted in severe psychological issues including PTSD, dissociation, addiction, and chronic pain. It also destroyed her sense of safety, her trust in others, and her ability to form healthy relationships. Shamed, broken, and feeling utterly worthless, she entered into prostitution where she remained for many years.

During the interview, Trish reported that sexual abuse fractured the core of her being and that she wished her father had killed her outright rather than leave her a broken shell. Despite the magnitude of her suffering, however, Trish retained a passion for learning and dreamed of going to university one day.

Trish's mandala (Figure 5) captured her experience of soul murder through the use of a single, unbroken, monochromatic line. This abstract image, devoid of color, seemed to reveal the astonishing depths of her emptiness. Bold, simple strokes from a broken woman, she wrote in the top right corner of the page "erased and left alive."

To me, Trish's drawing seemed to follow the outline of an eraser and I wondered if her mandala had captured the very moment of her annihilation. I also used a monochromatic palette in my drawing of Trish's story (Figure 6), choosing purple rather than black to convey a sense of mourning. My image of a faceless woman showed the sundering of Trish's entire being, reflecting her comment that, perhaps, some injuries cannot ever truly be healed. An alternate interpretation of Trish's drawing was that it showed the thread needed to stitch the woman in my drawing back together again.

Imaginal Resonance

Bricoleur is a term used to describe qualitative researchers who are "creative, resourceful, innovative, intuitive, introspective, self-reflective, poetic, and open to multiple ways of knowing and communicating" (Netzer,

2013, p. 6). Imaginal resonance, an approach to generate and analyze nonverbal data in qualitative research, was developed by Netzer (2008). This approach draws on Maslow's (1966/1998) theory of experiential knowing and Claire Petitmengin-Peugeot's (1999) diachronic model of intuition. Its purpose is to assist researchers in intuitively facilitating the creation and processing of nonverbal data (e.g., mental imagery and artwork). After I completed my analysis of the individual mandalas in my study, I followed the imaginal resonance procedure to explore them as a whole through an integrative, transpersonal lens.

The five steps of the imaginal resonance procedure include a) immersion and interior listening; b) waiting and open experience; c) availability and innocence; d) unconditional acceptance and intuition; and e) surrendering and a closing procedure (Netzer, 2013, p. 14).

Immersion and Interior Listening

I began my imaginal resonance process by creating a wall collage in my yoga room where I could sit with the mandalas without a preconceived agenda. I then smudged the collage with white sage smoke, ritually preparing myself to receive intuitive insights.

Waiting and Open Experience

The waiting phase of the procedure was a challenge for me as deadlines were upon me and I was anxious to proceed. Nevertheless I persevered in stillness and silence, trusting that eventually something would come.

Availability and Innocence

Maintaining a state of openness is an essential part of the Imaginal Resonance process. I used my vulnerability as a newly returning student to hatha yoga to help me remain in a state of open innocence.

Unconditional Acceptance and Intuition

After three days of sitting quietly in the presence of the mandala collage, the words sacrifice, crucifixion, and renewal appeared in my thoughts. After four more days of processing the words as images, a small green shoot unfurled in my mind's eye. D. Netzer (personal communication, August 22, 2013) recommended I buy a live plant and work with it intuitively. I purchased a tiny plant on day 11 of this procedure, which immediately inspired me to draw (Figure 7).

The resultant drawing was a rendering of my plant, which epitomized my hope for the participants in my study. The green background symbolized their creative potential, while the blue represented their innate purity. Black was a reminder of the darkness from

Figure 1. Nora's mandala.

*Figure 2. Jacqui's mandala
(as witness to Nora's story).*

Figure 3. Mel's mandala.

*Figure 4. Jacqui's mandala
(as witness to Mel's story).*

Figure 5. Trish's mandala.

*Figure 6. Jacqui's mandala
(as witness to Trish's story).*

Figure 7. Imaginal Resonance drawing.

which growth can emerge, while red remembered “the sacrificial blood of survivors poured out upon the altar of Life” (Linder, 2014, p. 320). Finally, yellow represented the eternal soul and its continuing promise of rebirth.

Surrendering and a Closing Procedure

After an additional week of sitting with the wall collage, it became clear that my imaginal resonance process was at an end. The experience left me with a profound sense of peace and I ritually closed the process by once again smudging the mandalas.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the soul loss study, it seems clear that the mandalas were both the most complex and challenging of all the data streams. For example, while the semi-structured interviews offered the protection of at least some cognitive containment, working with the mandalas as a collective was like being caught in an emotional rip tide. Sometimes I was curious and excited about the process, while at other times I found myself overwhelmed and deeply afraid. To me, the wall collage seemed to be raw trauma emotion given form and I was unsure just how much of such material I could contain.

My imaginal resonance drawing took me even farther down the rabbit hole into a more transpersonal exploration of the impact of sexual abuse. Along the way, I became poignantly aware of my participants’ raw, bitter courage, as well as my own impossible hope for their total healing.

During follow-up, participants reported numerous positive insights gained as a result of the study. Some also indicated that they were continuing to deepen those insights in individual therapy in accordance

with the study’s inclusion criteria and each woman’s commitment.

Certainly, my own involvement with the study resulted in lasting personal change that was likely related to the depth of my exposure to the data. Looking back, while the interviews and other techniques were necessary for my study, I do not believe they facilitated sufficient transpersonal insight. Only with the help of arts-based research did I fully come to appreciate the words “the spirit [is] always burning though the flesh is torn apart” (Rice & John, 1999, track 13).

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