

**Quiet Prayers:**  
**Talismans, Contemplation**  
**and the Quest for Peace**

by

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***BA (Honours), B.Ed., BFA***

***Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education***

***Mount Saint Vincent University***

***Halifax, Nova Scotia***

***April, 2009***

## **Dedication~**

This project is dedicated to the teachers and administrators who struggle to do their best. Amidst crises, mayhem and never-ending demands, they show up day after day with the courage to teach and assist. The job can be challenging, frustrating and heartbreaking at times, and yet they give what they have freely; they inspire many, including me. I consider it an honour and a privilege to call myself a teacher.

I am deeply grateful to many individuals for supporting me throughout this thesis project. Thank you to Dr. Michelle Forrest for her attention to detail, patient and supportive guidance, and for having the faith in me to let me find my own path. Thank you to Dr. Nez Elik, who sat on my committee, gently guided me, and introduced me to the writings of Dr. Mark Epstein and to the concept of compassion fatigue. Thank you to the friends, family and colleagues who listened to me talk about the never-ending thesis, never questioning why I was bothering. Thank you to Doug Pace, with whom I had the great fortune to teach for three years. His words, "Leave it at the door," got me thinking about how teachers deal with the stresses that they face. These words were the seeds of this project, as I realised that I had to find a caring and connected manner with which to deal with the stresses I was experiencing as a teacher. Thank you to Hillary Dionne for photographing my work during the exhibition at the Mary E. Black Gallery, and for showing me the best place on Tancook Island to find willow.

The deepest of thanks go to my children, Chloe and Scarlet. They understood the many evenings, weekends and weeks that I spent away from them, as I worked to get this project done. They forgave me for always being tired as I struggled to hold everything together, and reminded me of how important it is to live the life and be the person that you aspire to be.

Finally, my deepest love and gratitude to my life partner, my husband Jamie. Without his support I would never have had the confidence to tackle this work, nor the stamina to see it through. In this life and the next my love, ALM.

## Abstract~

This project explores the need for one teacher to deal with the emotional stresses she is experiencing within the classroom. It examines the effects of having students in crisis in the classroom, and how difficult it is as a teacher to bear witness to their problems. It takes a brief glance at the issues of compassion fatigue and burnout in the teaching profession. It explores how spirituality may play an important role within a caring classroom, and follows one teacher's quest to make a deeper, more spiritual connection between her 'difficult' students and herself.

Part of this project involves the process of acknowledging, facing and dealing with such issues. Research methods include ScholARTistry, Narrative Inquiry and Art making. This thesis is an artistic foray into how art making can be both a meditative and healing process, and seeks to find through art making coping strategies that can be used for teachers.

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**Quiet Prayers:**  
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**Introduction~**

This thesis is an exploration; an exploration of teaching, of the issues that students today are facing, of how youth in crises can affect the learning environment, and of one teacher's attempts to deal with the deep, spiritual issues she is faced with as she struggles to create a peaceful classroom and a connected spiritual self. This project is an act of meditation; an arts-based exegesis that seeks insight into the inner self and tries to find calm in the midst of strife. It is a work of hope; hope for the future, often difficult to find during trying and stressful times; hope that students can move beyond the stresses and crises that they may be facing, to find an inner strength of their own; hope to find a spiritual center within myself, the teacher, that can inform and touch upon the teaching that happens within my classroom. This thesis project is an exploration of how I, as a teacher, can possibly reconcile my internal conflict, face my personal fears of getting too close to students who are suffering, and effectively deal with the personal issues my students have, to which I am exposed within the classroom. It is an outward, tangible expression of that inner conflict and angst; an artistic exploration into the unknown, in an attempt to find a spiritual peace that will inform my teaching and transform my classroom and myself.

Within this thesis I explore my feelings towards those most difficult of students who have left their mark on me over the years; those students who continue to haunt me as I continue to worry about them. I use writing and the visual arts to look within myself and express the hopes and prayers that I feel for them. This project is a quest to find inner peace with the difficult students who have come into my life, and contains the hope that if this sense of personal peace can be achieved, then I will be able to transport that spiritual openness into my classroom practices. It is sincerely hoped that through this thesis, I am able to find an alternative to the emotional dulling out and detachment that I have begun to feel when faced with the intense desperation that some students may be experiencing. Instead, I want to connect inwardly with what I am witnessing, and perhaps discover a spiritual foundation upon which to build my classroom. I would like to discover for myself what Shahjahan has found when he says that “when I teach, my body, spirit, and mind are all aligned to the task of teaching.” (p. 299). To date, I have only found such a sense of inner harmony through the process of art making. As a practising visual artist, it is through my studio work that such peace has occurred. More detail about this process and my experiences are explored within Chapter 4 of this work.

As I look for a means to reconnect with the caring parts of myself, of dealing with the detachment and withdrawal of students that I often see around me, I find solace in Parker Palmer, D.W. Winnicott and Mark Epstein’s words of hope. Palmer sees hope if the individual teacher can face her inner fear and find his authentic voice and self, what he calls “the teacher within” (Palmer, 1998, p.30). Referring to himself and to teachers, Palmer states, “by understanding our fear, we could overcome the structures of disconnection with the power of self-knowledge” (Palmer, 1998, p.37). British child

analyst D.W. Winnicott would call this concept of self-knowledge ‘going on being’ (D.W. Winnicott as cited in Epstein, 2001, p.30). In his book *Going on Being*, Epstein explores Winnicott’s philosophy of the same name, saying that in going on being, Winnicott “meant the uninterrupted flow of the authentic self”, and one that “does not need to connote any fixed entity of self”. Expanding on this, Epstein presents that going on being “impl(ies) a stream of unimpeded awareness, ever evolving, with continuity, uniqueness and integrity (that) carries with it the sense of unending meeting places of interpersonal experience, convergences that are not blocked by a reactive or contracted ego” (Epstein, 2001, p.31). For Palmer, Winnicott and Epstein, this idea of self-knowledge, of mindfulness, embraces the struggle with anxiety and fear as a path and leads one toward a deeper connection with the spiritual self. The struggle can therefore have purpose and meaning. Epstein says, “if we stay with our anxiety, we have a special opportunity to know ourselves more authentically” (Epstein, 2001, p.6), while Palmer does not find fear a wholly negative force. “It is important to remember that fear can also be healthy. Some fears can help us survive, even learn to grow- if we know how to decode them” (Palmer, 1998, p.39). The concept of looking deeper within, not only to conquer fear but also to become a better teacher in the classroom, is a prevalent one for Palmer, one that potentially places the onus upon the teacher to find the path towards connecting with the student. His words bring to me inspiration and hope, as I explore these concepts through my thesis work.

Fear is powerful on many levels: it can bring with it the power to grow and to learn as Epstein and Palmer say, and it can be a powerful impetus for artistic creation and expression. As a visual artist, I have often used my own personal fear for inspiration;

examining my fearful responses have allowed me to focus upon and gain insight into my deeper, inner self in ways not always evident on the conscious level. This new insight and knowledge have then served as catalysts for the creation of artistic works that have an inner depth and meaning connected to my authentic voice; they speak of both the experience of fear and the process of trying to cope with it. In this thesis, I will turn to my artistic practices and explore my inner responses to the fear, detachment and potential pain that I see around me in the classroom, as well as feel within myself.

The teaching profession, considered one of what Debra Zellmer calls the “helping professions” (2003, p.19), brings with it certain challenges for which contemporary teacher training and professional development may not prepare its members. When faced with students who may be in crisis, or may be dealing with the affects of past or present trauma, teachers are not always equipped with the means to protect their own emotional and psychological well-being, nor always given the means with which to separate the professional self from the personal one. While counseling services may be available to teachers, through their schools and their unions, these services often focus upon helping the teacher already dealing with professional and/or personal difficulties. Training in how to deal with the stresses of the classroom prior to entering into the profession, that is to say, positive skills that allow the teacher to effectively deal with what they may encounter, is often not given to teachers in training. This void in skills training is one that may leave many in the profession with angst and stresses that can have direct and indirect affects upon their professional and personal selves.

Research by others has explored the different ways in which female and male teachers perceive and handle the work-related stresses they experience. Ravichandran and Rajendran (2007) conducted a study of 200 male and female secondary school teachers, concluding that the results of their study “indicate[d] that there is a gender difference on perceived Personal Stress, [and that] female teachers reported more stress as compared to their male counterparts” (p.134). Gupta and Jenkins’ research (1981) into the stresses amongst elementary teachers, and the differences between the genders, coincides with Ravichandran and Rajendran’s conclusions. In their work, Gupta and Jenkins conclude that, “the results of [their] study show that women are much more likely to report the experience of role stress than are men, that the stressors tend to be more potent for women than for men, and that stress results in the experience of psychological strain for both women and men” (p.12). In addition to these findings, Gupta and Jenkins (1981) speculate that, “it may be that women consider teaching to be more critical to the development of students, and that this variable, therefore, poses greater problems for them” (p.14). Other researchers, including Quinn and Shepard (1974), Sharma, Yadava and Yadava (2001), and Nieva and Gutek (1981), have explored the differences between how male and female employees handle work-related stress.

Although I am using my own experiences, and have created female fictional teachers within the narratives of this work, I will not be pursuing a gender analysis involving how male and female teachers process stress herewith. It is acknowledged however, that this work could be used in the future to do such analyses, and that that work could prove beneficial in the areas of education or women’s studies.

While other professionals, such as those in physical medicine, social services and psychiatry, are taught methods of self-reflection, analysis and separation from the clients they deal with and their problems, teachers are given no such guidance. Acknowledging these challenges and needs, Shrewsbury speaks of this need for teachers to separate from and analyse their classroom experiences, saying, “Critical thinking... is not an abstracted analysis but a reflective process firmly grounded in the experience of the everyday”. (Shrewsbury in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.54) This process is one that requires awareness, mindfulness and regular practice if it is to be effective. Indeed, not partaking in a constructive process of reflection may lead teachers to feel overwhelmed and engulfed by the issues that they may face within the classroom. Bel hooks takes this concept of teacher well-being even farther, exploring how self-actualization is fundamental if one wants to connect and affect the classroom in a positive way. She states, “progressive, holistic education, ‘engaged pedagogy’ is more demanding than conventional ... pedagogy. For unlike (other) practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.54).

Bergsgaard and Ellis extend this concept of teacher self-analysis and well-being, examining how it affects the teacher, the classroom environment and the students directly. Taking the position “that mental activity in human beings occurs interactively, and in some instances independently” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.56), they divide this interaction into three stages, the Organic Impulse, the Idea Development Process and the Self-Observing Stage. Each stage inherently possesses challenges and

opportunities, and in many ways Bergsgaard and Ellis' descriptions of them echo the stages in the artistic process that I traverse when creating. As with many inspirational experiences, the Organic Impulse stage occurs "in response to external sensory stimulation or as spontaneous impulses emanating from within the Self" (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.57). As with many forms of emotive art, such as my own, artistic responses to external and internal stimuli can be linked to this concept of Organic Impulses. Bergsgaard and Ellis highlight that this stage of human mental activity "include(s) the conventional five senses, basic needs such as sustenance and shelter, as well as emotions such as fear, anger, loneliness, love, hate, compassion, curiosity, and jealousy" (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.56). Keeping to the idea that this stage can be linked to experiences that I consider as contributing to artistic inspiration, this parallels my idea that fear can be an initial impulse for expressive creation. This notion of fear as existing on a basic level of brain impulses (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.57) also speaks to Epstein and Palmer's ideas that fear can bring with it growth potential; it can provide the impetus for self-reflection and change.

For Epstein and Palmer, Bergsgaard, Ellis and myself, in order for growth to derive from fear and organic impulse, another level of awareness must occur. In my artistic practice, this next level involves reflection and a processing of the experiences or thoughts I have had begins. Bergsgaard and Ellis call this second stage The Idea Development Process, which entails "the rising of thought within the mind characterized by the capacity to recall, anticipate, discriminate, create, problem solve, choose, desire, and imagine" (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.56). This level of reflectivity and processing goes beyond the reactionary responses which occur during the Organic

Impulse Stage, “though these ideas interact with the Organic Impulse to create a reciprocal cycle of thought-emotion, thought-emotion” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.56). Indeed, speaking of my own creative process, I am highly aware of this dancing between levels, and often, in the moment, am cognizant that it is occurring. While the Idea Development Process, according to Bergsgaard and Ellis, is a creative, imaginative and problem-solving stage, remaining within it can be detrimental to personal well-being. This is “the process through which we worry, develop countless angst-inducing scenarios, create stereotypes and biases, make assumptions, and generate unwarranted feelings of fear, anger, loneliness and despair” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.61). Remaining in this stage can therefore result in emotional upheaval and additional stresses. Without the training to step back and “recognize the illusory nature of the products of the Idea Development Process (we are unable) to locate ourselves in a perspective which is far more likely to allow us to observe the true nature of these constructs and the reciprocal interplay with the Organic Impulse” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.61). In essence, the professional and the personal selves become entangled, leaving the teacher unable to separate and cope with that which she experiences within the classroom environment. It can leave the teacher disconnected from the inner self, unable to find the stability necessary to deal with the problems that arise, nor the spirituality necessary to feel whole and mindful. From an artistic perspective, one can remain stuck in this stage of rumination, never using the Organic Impulse or the Idea Development Process as catalysts to create; one is left with ideas and inspiration, but not the ability to transfer those foundations into artistic works.

As I began this work, I started in researching the area of fear. In retrospect, it is no surprise to me why that was the place in which I commenced; being very much caught between the Organic Impulse and the Idea Development Process, I felt overwhelmed and fearful of the stresses and angst that I was experiencing professionally. In essence, it was my personal fear of whether I could cope with what I was facing in my classroom that lead me to this thesis, and it is there, with that fear, that I began.

Bergsgaard and Ellis say that it is during the Self-Observing stage that true personal and professional well-being can be attained. Considering this last stage from an artistic perspective, in many ways the realising of a work of art is akin to the Self-Observation stage; it is through the final stage, the physical creative process, that I find the freedom for the ideas, emotions and experiences I have had to be released. It is through the making that the inner becomes the outer. Bergsgaard and Ellis define the Self-Observing state as “the condition of consciousness characterized by awareness, objectivity, clarity, acceptance, and being in the present as well as by the absence of opinion, preference, prejudice, and attachment” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.56). This idea that one is able to step back, objectively, and process what has come before is a powerful one, especially if it entails a release of the individual from the events, emotions and situations which they have experienced. Considering the need for teachers as caring professionals to be trained and empowered to find well-being within both facets of their lives, Bergsgaard and Ellis state that “it is the emergence of the Self-Observing (stage) that we see as a critical and integral step in the personal and professional development of teachers” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.56). Yet despite the potential benefits to teachers of having skills that enable them to cope with the

stresses and trauma found within the classroom, the need for such is often not even acknowledged within the field of education. Indeed, many professionals become stuck, unhealthily so, by the stresses of the classroom environment, unable to cope with what they witness and experience. Some languish in what Bergsgaard and Ellis call the Idea Development Process.

There is a need for teachers to effectively acknowledge and deal with what they witness within their classrooms; for them to move beyond what Bergsgaard and Ellis call the Idea Development Process into the Self-observing stage. On self-examination, I recognise that there are parallels between this movement between Bergsgaard and Ellis' stages and the creative process that I employ for making sense of my life experiences. Using art making as a means to grow, that is to say, to deal with what I face in life in a healthy and constructive manner, has been of great benefit to me. Acknowledging that the issues faced within the classroom affect me, as they do many other teachers, I must also admit to often feeling as if I am floating aimlessly within the Idea Development Process. It is natural therefore, that I should turn to my art making practice to help me attain as a teacher the growth which I am sometimes able to attain as an artist and person.

## **Thesis Outline~**

Chapter One of this thesis deals with the research methodology and the various research methods used. It explores how scholARTistry can express the Artist self,

Researcher self and Teacher self, and why it is suited as a method to this project. It looks at narrative inquiry, and how its qualities of creating social context from individual experience, its ability to be plurivocal and cyclical in nature are advantageous to my purposes. It also examines whether art making can have meditative and reflective qualities, and how those can affect the maker.

Chapter Two looks at the quest for mindfulness, and how art making can act as a vehicle to a spiritual connectedness for the artist; that a sense of spirituality can be found within the act itself. The chapter also explores the role of fear within contemporary society, and how that fear may be affecting the classroom. Facing trauma is then explored, acknowledging that there are youth within our society who are in need and potentially in crisis. Finally, this chapter looks at the problems surrounding teachers who emotionally isolate themselves from the neediness found within the classroom, in an attempt at self-protectionism.

Chapter Three explores how teachers can use their inner spirit to connect with those in need. This idea of shifting perspectives can lead to new levels of awareness and has the power to alter perception. The chapter also considers the roles of mindfulness and caring for the teacher, and how they can impact on the classroom.

Chapter Four deals with the art works and the narrative pieces. It begins by considering the role of talismans, both their historical roles as well as their purpose in this particular thesis. The chapter continues with an outline of how the artistic works

evolved, why they were chosen to be part of this project, as well as descriptions, photographs and analyses of the works. The chapter concludes with two fictional pieces, Owen and Lucy, which explore two students in need and their relationships with their teachers, Ms. Jones and Ms. Balli.

Chapter Five focuses upon analyses of the works. It contains narrative analyses of the pieces Owen and Lucy, as well as analyses of the artworks *Obi Against Hunger*, the *Wee Talisman (Small Wishes for Openness)*, and the *Talisman for the Future*.

Chapter Six contains the conclusion and summative responses to the thesis. It discusses whether the work was successful or not. The chapter includes suggestions for further research, and a last words section that consists of a narrative piece which exemplifies the personal transformation that has occurred through this work.

## Chapter One

### Methodology~

McNiff extends the value of self-exploration and discovery into the idea of art making and perceives it as a valid and important form of research into the self. The directness of the process allows the inner-self to come forth, a voice that he feels deserves both attention and respect. He says,

The images and processes of artistic creation are always at least one step ahead of the reflecting mind. If we continue to follow the standard behavioral science methods of establishing what we plan before we do it, we undermine the power of our discipline to offer something distinctly new and useful to research. (as cited in Franz, p.1)

Given my desire to explore spirituality as a vehicle through which to connect with my struggling students, the advantages of art making as a research method seem a positive fit for me. Witz et al. discuss the need for researchers of spirituality to find a meaningful method that they are personally able to connect to. They suggest that “when studying spirituality, research methods must reflect a process of understanding the participants’ life experiences, personal histories, attitudes, and subjective reflections about their lives.” (as cited in Campbell, p.10) Given this, there are therefore major advantages for

me to explore this thesis through the artistic process; through what I know. From past experience, I know that art has enabled me to find a deeper meaning beyond the realm of thought, a spiritual connection to the world which has allowed me to face and deal with the pain that I have experienced. I have on occasion, found a sense of transcendence of self through art making; this has allowed me truly to free myself from the restraints of the world, of the pain that surrounds me, to find a deep, profound joy. Mark Epstein speaks of how meditation can lead to the discovery of joy and rapture, and how these 'mental factors' can begin to act as platforms for transformation. Speaking of joy and rapture Epstein says, "they are enablers of the capacity to go on being, since they permit an individual to find balance in a sea of change. No longer struggling to find certainty in an endlessly shifting reality, a person grounded in her own awareness is free to discover and declare herself afresh as life unfolds" (Epstein, 2001, p.215). Perhaps through this freeing of the self I can find peace and inner flexibility.

It is hoped that by extension, art making will also allow me to deal with the pain and possible trauma that I am witnessing in others, specifically, in my students. Campbell, an artist-teacher, discusses how there can be a meaningful connection between art making, teaching and spirituality. She contends that, for participants in one of her studies, there was a direct connection between spiritual selves and the outward manifestation of such in their teaching and art making. She states that these participants "experienced a new awareness of making connections between an inner spiritual core and the outward manifestation of this spirituality in both her and his art and teaching." (Campbell, p.10)

For my own research, I see additional benefits to using an art making method to explore the topics within this thesis. Elliott Eisner presents the idea that the arts may provide a “productive way to help us understand more imaginatively and more emotionally problems and practices that warrant attention in our schools,” (Eisner in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.18), problems such as the issues being explored herewith. Jeanne Randolph, discussing D. W. Winnicott’s work, highlights that “in his book *Playing With Reality* (Winnicott) raises the possibility that in art it is the ambiguity between the objective and the subjective that gives artwork a unique psychological validity” (Randolph, 1991, p.26). This combination of the objective and subjective may provide a valid vehicle through which to explore the self and the context within which the self experiences, allowing art making to unite the two perspectives. Jill Franz (2005) discusses the “ontological turn” that art-based research can facilitate, and with it possibilities that I also embrace as having major worth for my own research. She argues that these methods, alternative to dualistic and what she calls traditional research, can be “characterised by: the belief that any action or event is explicable only in terms of multiple interacting factors; an acceptance that understanding is influenced by individual systems of meaning; the view that research especially in the social context is about understanding individual cases rather than forming universal laws” (p.2). The opportunities that arts-based research brings with it, including the ability to approach research from alternative perspectives, stem to some degree from the multiple perspectives of the art making process itself. Together, they allow for an inner, spiritual voice to conjoin with external forces.

Using what is inherent in my creative process, it is therefore hoped that through this project I will better develop an empathetic bond for my students who are dealing with potential crisis and trauma; that I can connect with them through what Dissanayake calls “intimate art”, a form that she believes “can create bridges between people.” (as cited in Campbell, p.20) Art making as a bridge that can connect the spiritual; as a means towards understanding and compassion; as a spiritual tool that will help me to deal with what I see.

The research in this thesis has occurred on multiple levels. Firstly, the literary review served not only to establish previous research in the area, but was also insightful and educative in the areas of mindfulness and enlightenment, as well as secondary victimization and compassion fatigue. Beyond the literature review, research was conducted using arts-based and narrative inquiry methods. The aesthetic component of the art making work, combined with the self-reflective writings, and post-creation examination of the creative process, all combined to create this thesis.

### **ScholARTistry-**

The proposed hybrid of artistic and scholarly methods fall into the realm of what Nielsen calls scholARTistry (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2008, p.9). This blurred-genre of work involves “tools used by educators and other social scientists to

explore the human condition.” (p.9). This methodology seems well suited to this thesis, as it places a high value on expression and aesthetic qualities, as well as allowing for the incorporation of textual-based writings. Additionally, as a visual artist, this hybrid method allows me to conduct my research using the visual as well as the textual forms of expression to which I am accustomed. Nielsen highlights the three goals of scholARTistry, all of which I highly value and perceive as important to this thesis. These goals are “to make academic writing an area where virtuosity and clarity are valued, to make educational research an area where the arts are legitimate inquiry, and to infuse scholarship with the spirit of creative connection.” (In Cahmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.9). Irwin and Springgay would consider my project as action research, as they consider teacher research a form of action research that is practitioner-based (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.109). They also describe this style of research as “deeply committed to the meditative and contemplative practice,” (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.109), which correlates perfectly with this thesis.

Irwin and Springgay might say that my project is best viewed as being an exegesis, as it is not a work that is directly researching for answers. (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.117) As this project is an exploration for an intangible, unquantifiable unknown, it does in many ways meet the concept they put forth for an exegesis. According to Irwin and Springgay, “an exegesis is a critical explanation of the meaning within a work. In the arts, an exegesis is often extended to include any documentation that contextualizes the work (Sullivan, 2004) and helps to critique or give direction to theoretical ideas.” (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.117) My reflective and

narrative writings, a series of self-reflective stories, coupled with my aesthetic works, thus create this thesis.

It is critical to consider the importance of the viewer, the audience, within the context of this work. These pieces were exhibited at the Nova Scotia Centre for Craft and Design, and the viewer, though indirectly involved with the project, was an entity to be considered, one that gave another dimension and continued life to the project. Barone discusses the important role arts-based research can have when he says,

Arts-based research [can have] the power to involve members of the public in history-making dialogue, or in what I have called *conspiratorial conversations*. A conspiracy suggests a communion of agents engaged in exploratory discussions about possible and desirable worlds. When an arts-based work engenders an aesthetic experience in its readers or viewers, empathy may be established, connections made, perceptions altered, emotions touched, equilibria disturbed, the status quo rendered questionable. (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.39)

This involvement of the viewer with the artwork is an important aspect of the project for me, for while this body of work is about personal exploration, it is also an indirect acknowledgement of the situations that students and other teachers may be experiencing. More importantly, it is about the individual both directly and indirectly within the classroom: the student, the teacher, the school staff, the parent. This work, it is hoped, also speaks to them, for in many ways, while rooted within myself, it is about us all. The art object, as Winnicott and Randolph discuss, has the potential to communicate that

universality through its very existence; it can convey specific meaning through the interaction and interpretation of the viewer with the art itself. Of this Randolph says,

The model of the art object is of an object amenable to an interaction with the viewer, reflecting the hypothesis that in some way the materials and methods of which it was made had been rendered by the artist into something amenable to subjective interventions, a subjectivity very like primary process, yet exploratory, not reactionary. (Randolph, p.26)

To re-iterate the words of Eisner, he sums up beautifully so many of the valuable qualities that I appreciate within arts-based research:

The distinguishing feature of arts-based research is that it uses aesthetic qualities to shed light on the educational situations we care about. Arts-based research is not simply the application of a variety of loose methods; it is the result of artistically crafting the description of the situation so that it can be seen from another angle. (in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, p.22)

### **Narrative Inquiry-**

Narrative Inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration ... over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.20)

Narrative serves not only to express the needs of the individual creating the work, but also as a means to communicate to the outer world the individual experience. An extension of that outer communication is the power that narrative works have to transform the personal experience into a global one; a means for the individual's voice to echo the experiences of the greater community. In this way, narrative is both powerful and intimate, in that it can express the voice of one and have it touch the heart of another.

Narrative inquiry places a strong emphasis on the concept and import of human experience, both that of the individual as well as those social. Narrative inquiry-based researchers Clandinin and Connelly highlight the value experience has within research, stating, "Experience... is the starting point and the key term for all social inquiry" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.xxiii). Linking their work to educational thinker John Dewey, they acknowledge, "in our work, keeping experience in the foreground comes about by periodic returns to the writings of Dewey... (for whom) education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.xxiii). Dewey, saw life and experience as key elements to understanding both the education of the individual, as well as the educational system within which the individual exists; the personal and the social exist within a symbiotic system, each contributing to the experiential process as a whole. Of this, Clandinin and Connelly say, "for Dewey, experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in a social context" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.2). The strengths that I personally find through the story-telling

process, its ability to communicate and incite experience on multiple levels, are also inherent within narrative inquiry as a research method.

Narrative inquiry, with its strong focus upon the experiential, has a vital role to play within the field of research. By examining how humans experience, we are better able to grasp those innately important elements of life that go beyond physical touch. Clandinin and Connelly see experience and narrative as important within research, and value their place within the field of education. They say,

The study of narrative (...) is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories. (...) Narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.2).

Experience and its affects upon people and relationships is not only acknowledged, but highlighted in narrative inquiry, making it an excellent method of research for my project.

I am naturally drawn to narrative inquiry as a foundation for my own research inquiry, as this is also at the core of who I am. An example of this intertwining comes in how we view the field of education. If we wish to understand learning, learners and schools better, we must look to the teachers as well, for they are key components within the educational relationship and experience; their stories speak to the whole experience and

better enable us to see the global within the individual. Of their own work, Clandinin and Connelly say, “we see teachers’ narratives as metaphors for teaching-learning relationships. In understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.3). This completely parallels that which I am attempting to do in this exegesis; not only am I trying to better understand and make sense of the individuals within the project, including myself, I am working to better understand the phenomenon of teachers coping with, and trying to cope with, the workplace stresses they experience in relationship to student interactions. Fundamental to this project is the understanding that teachers experience both professional and personal relationships within the classroom setting, both of which affect them. Clandinin and Connelly fully recognise the importance of the role of the teacher within the classroom environment; hence, they value her voice within their research. Of this they say, “according to narrative construction, the teacher is not merely a filtering variable or a factor to be considered as either an impediment or a catalyst for the achievement of objectives. Rather, the teacher is part of the curriculum and therefore part of the establishment of the goals in the first place and part of the ensuing achievement” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.28).

The recognition in the narrative construct that the teacher plays an integral part of the whole is important. This thesis highlights that idea, speaking directly to my professional and personal story of being a teacher. The reflective writings that have been created in this project, act as a narrative account and fit within a type of literature that Clandinin and

Connelly call “Teachers’ Stories and Stories of Teachers” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.3). Clandinin and Connelly highlight the importance of the individual narrative to understanding the larger system saying, “the sense of the whole is built from a rich data source with a focus on the concrete particularities of life that create powerful narrative tellings” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.5). Just as I am choosing my own voice to express the individual, so too am I using my voice to explore the bigger whole.

Voice plays a key role within narrative inquiry: it can speak to the experience of the individual, that of a community, can possess the power to transmit meaning in an authentic manner, and can touch an external audience and can contain within it a multiple of perspectives. Britzman discusses how vital the role of voice in research is, stating,

Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community... The struggle for voice begins when a persona attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process... Voice suggests relationships: the individual’s relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual’s relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process (as cited in Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.4).

Once again, the idea of the connection between the individual and the greater whole is important in narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this personal/social relationship, saying, “narrative inquiry entails a reconstruction of a person’s experience in relation to others and to a social milieu” (p.39). This is particularly important when considering the work of a teacher within a classroom, as the

work occurs within a public forum. In order to understand the social context of what is occurring within schools, we need to understand the experience of the individuals within those classrooms. Griffiths and Macleod (2008), in discussing the work of Avramidis and Norwich, echo this idea and the important role that narrative inquiry plays in understanding society. “Avramidis and Norwich (2002) call for more research using alternative methods such as narrative and autobiography. They argue that it is only through these methods that our understanding of the complexities of human behaviour in the social context can be developed” (p.122). The connection between multiple voice and society can be better understood through narrative.

### **Art Within Narrative Inquiry-**

This ability for narrative to speak through many channels is what Barnieh (1989) calls the “plurivocal” (in Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.9). Clandinin and Connelly describe the plurivocal, what they term a multiple of “I’s”, saying, “the ‘I’ can speak as researcher, teacher, man or woman, commentator, research participant, narrative critic, and as theory builder. Yet in living the narrative inquiry process, we are one person. We are also one in the writing” (p.9). This ability of narrative inquiry to perceive the speaker from numerous perspectives is advantageous, particularly within my own research; the voice of the teacher, the spiritual being, the woman, the mother, the artist, the participant, the witness and the observer, can all be present within the work. This plurivocality is a strength also found within art-based research. Barbara Bickel

celebrates *A/r/tography* for the same reasons that I find advantageous within arts-based and narrative inquiry methods. Of its ability to represent the multiples within the self she says, “*A/r/tography* calls for an inner collaborative relationship between my artist self, researcher self, and teacher self. Each role engages a critical hermeneutic, self-reflexive practice or art making and writing” (Bickel in Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (ed.), 2008, p.126). The plurivocal “I” found within narrative inquiry and arts-based research, allows for a sense of complex dimensionality of being, acknowledging that one cannot be touched by a person or event without the other elements of the self being affected. It also honours experience and different ways of knowing, valuing alternative methods of expression, such as the arts. “One of our tasks in writing narrative accounts is to convey a sense of the complexity of all of the “I’s” all of the ways each of us have of knowing. We are, in narrative inquiry, constructing narratives at several levels” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.10).

The “I” can be present and expressed beyond the written form, that is, contained within visual artistic works that have an alternative, yet vital, voice of their own. My choices for expression extend directly from a personal need for alternatives to spoken and written language, which never fully encompass what I want to say. Beyond the form, the very process of art making itself is a form of communication that extends beyond substance. This making process, with its emphasis on the experiential, echoes the valuing of experience found within narrative inquiry. Within art making, I am able to unite the multiple elements that I am exploring: experience, meditation, the spirit and the greater universe; for through this process they are all present within the “I”. Considering the

process of art making and creativity, and how it can serve to unite the internal and external through experience, Cameron states, “what we are talking about is an induced- or invited- spiritual experience. I refer to this process as *spiritual chiropractic*. We undertake certain spiritual exercises to achieve alignment with the creative energy of the universe.” (Cameron, p.1). This ability to translate experience onto different planes makes art making vital to my research.

Given the emphasis within narrative inquiry of experience, the idea of art as experience (Dewey, 1934) strengthens art’s role within narrative inquiry research. The very act of making is the act of experiencing, of being in the moment, awakened to the world around you. Bach, a narrative inquiry researcher who uses photography within her work, expresses this idea. She says, “as a visual learner with deep roots, I love the mystery of narrative inquiry- the mystery of simultaneously inquiring while living a life narratively, a being that engages fully with the senses of the body and the mind” (Bach in Clandinin (ed.), 2007, p.281). For Bach, as for myself, the making of the works serves not only to express and communicate, but also to discover and experience; the making is both response and process, through which reflection and experience can occur. In my work, the pieces themselves are a tangible form through which to communicate to the outer world, yet they also have a more profound purpose: the making of the art works allows for both expression and experience, experience that is as vital as any other component within the research. Visual work within narrative inquiry is also seen as a powerful communicator. De Mello says, “considering that narrative inquiry is a kind of experience-based research (Clandinin, personal communication, 2004), it seems that art can help narrative inquirers create a space where the experience

can be vicariously lived (Barone, 1995)” (de Mello in Clandinin (ed.), 2007, p.207).  
Once again, art possesses a powerful voice with which to communicate.

Given that art can be interpreted as experience, and that it has the potential to transmit experience to others, there is a direct relationship between it as a medium and narrative inquiry as a practice. Both encourage the viewer to bring to the work their own experiences, to interpret and take from it as they see fit. Both encourage viewer involvement with the work and a deeper connection through personal meaning. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) say, “the narrative inquirer does not prescribe general applications and uses but rather creates texts that, when well done, offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications” (p.42). As with the experience of viewing art, the reader of narrative inquiry is encouraged to create a personal relationship with the work. Through the experience of the interaction, the work and the individual are able to interconnect. In this way, the work resonates on multiple levels with multiple meanings; it reflects back to the constructing of narratives on several levels, which Clandinin and Connelly spoke.

I am able to quantify, measure, photograph and visually share the art works within this project, and in so doing, they are able to speak to others. The experience of making these works, however, is in many ways a spiritual journey, of which description through words can only go so far. Using narrative inquiry therefore, in which the audience is able to interact visually and physically with the works themselves, allows me the

freedom to express myself in a multitude of ways, from multiple perspectives.

Through narrative inquiry, I feel I am free to use whatever voice and means is necessary to communicate most effectively. As Clandinin and Connelly state, “there are choices of form and substance. Choices of substance relate to the purposes of the inquiry which, at the time of writing, may have evolved from the purposes originally conceived for the project and in terms of which much of the data was collected” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.11). The journal writings, reflective pieces, poetry and art works in this exegesis together compose a narrative that speaks to experience, a narrative comprised of what Clandinin and Connelly (1990) describe as various narrative threads (p.7). Narrative inquiry, with its openness to multiple media and voices, suits this thesis work well. As de Mello says, “the landscape of arts-based/informed narrative inquiry seems engaged with the idea of honoring multiple aesthetic perspectives” (de Mello in Clandinin, ed., 2007, p.218).

Time is viewed as malleable within narrative inquiry, presenting an organic, intertwined sense of what narrative is. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe what they call ‘temporality’ as a central feature to narrative thinking (p.29), temporality referring to a non-linear approach to time. Given the nature of the work within this thesis, narrative that exists in a non-linear framework is important, as the narrative and art works are revisited and reworked throughout the process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this process as “back and forth” (p.138), and see it as integral to narrative inquiry methods. Visual art has an inherent quality of this sense of back and

forthing, as artists often repeatedly return to works. Bach reiterates this idea of time moving fluidly within narrative inquiry and art, saying,

In any story told, multiple selves speak, and these selves are temporal productions residing in both the present and a reconstructed past. To this extent, past, present, and future, as contained in stories, can be seen as productions or creations that may intersect and overlap in nonlinear organic ways. Just as living a life is unbounded, visual narrative inquiry is also open to possibilities and imaginings” (Bach in Clandinin, 2007, p.285)

It is the openness, the possibilities, the imaginings that draw me to narrative inquiry, just as the creative process draws these elements out from within me. Both allow me to explore and express and particularly to experience.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Quest for Mindfulness~**

As a teacher and visual artist, this project reflects the two professional parts of who I am. It is an arts-based work that, through the creation of the works of art, explores the manner in which the very act of art making has the potential to work out problems and allow the artist and the teacher to connect with the spiritual, inner self. It is an attempt to experience the freedom that comes from a deeper connection to self, to find change and solace through a shift in perspective rather than through a solving of the world's problems. This search for the real person within, a centering of the self is a quest of self-care that I, as a teacher and person, can benefit from. Mark Epstein's own quest for mindfulness through psychotherapy and meditation allowed him a deep insight into change and going on being, one that allowed him better insight into his patients and helped him to delineate the role of the professional. "Change did not come from trying to get rid of my problems or from going into them more deeply. It came from accepting what was true about myself and working from there. (...) As I learned to question my own identifications, I came to be able to live more fully in the moment, and I felt closer to who I really was" (Epstein, 2001, p.23). This quest to find the inner self is one that is deeply personal, and extends well beyond what we train professional teachers to do. The affects of the mindfulness of which Epstein speaks, however, can be important to

the teacher and the classroom, and are therefore explored in this project. It should be understood that this project does not attempt to present to teachers the path to connecting to the inner self, as each person must discover their own individual path. What it does do, is show one teacher's attempts to find her own path, and establishes the importance of that quest to that particular teacher. This work is similar to Epstein's quest in that it seeks to reconnect the individual to her individual centre; it is a path toward mindfulness.

This project is research into how art making can be a form of meditation and contemplation, one with the potential to connect the individual to the universal whole. It is important at this point to explain what is meant by the term 'the universal whole', as it is used within this thesis. Much of the research for this project has stemmed out of Buddhist teachings that have explored the interconnectedness of the universe and all within it. This is in direct relationship to the understanding of the inner self, as that knowing of the spiritual core can then be perceived as being linked, and part of, a greater whole. This concept of interconnectedness, of a universal whole, views all humanity as sharing in common purpose, in common goals. Commonality is thus able to create a link between peoples, one that can be deep, compassionate, empathetic and spiritual. When the concept of universal wholism is embraced, regardless of the backgrounds and behaviours of others, one is able to find a sense of unity and equality with others. As a teacher, I can therefore extend this concept of universal wholism to the students before me, including those who represent different perspectives, who are behaving in challenging ways, and with whom creating an emotional link may be difficult. This linking can include others who are seemingly different from me, allowing me an

inclusive, rather than an exclusive, perspective. As a teacher, this interconnectedness is important, as it allows me to see past the individual, the problems and issues, the behaviours, into a spirit that is united with my own; it allows me to use compassion and empathy as the foundations of our relationship, rather than as mechanisms with which to deal with problems that may arise. Compassion and empathy allow me to see past societally driven, hierarchical barriers, such as teacher and student, privileged, powerful, educated and not, so that human being can connect with human being; it seeks to find commonality within the spiritual, as opposed to focusing upon the external and social differences. All of this is based on the principles of equality and commonality as found within the universal whole. The Dalai Lama speaks of this commonality of people in this way,

Compassion that is free from (such) attachment, that is genuine compassion. That kind of compassion is not so much based on the fact that this person or that person is dear to me. Rather, genuine compassion is based on the rationale that all human beings have an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering.... They have the natural right to fulfill this fundamental aspiration. On the basis of the recognition of this equality and commonality, you develop a sense of affinity and closeness with others. With this as a foundation, you can feel compassion regardless of whether you view the other person as a friend or an enemy. It is based on the other's fundamental rights rather than on your own protection. Upon this basis, then, you will generate love and compassion. (The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p.115)

In this way, I must recognise that the suffering of another affects me, and that in being compassionate and empathetic to another is to be so to myself. If I seek to cease my own suffering, find my own inner peace, then I must recognise that that is also the goal of other human beings. When I understand that we all share the common, innate goal of

being happy, then perhaps, I can better understand that others behave as they do as part of their personal quest for happiness. Recognising the universal whole means understanding our interconnectedness, and it is the acceptance that regardless of how we present ourselves, our spiritual cores are united and similar.

Twelve works of art were created as part of this project. They appeared in an exhibition entitled *Quiet Prayers: Talismans, Contemplation, and the Quest for Peace*, held at the Mary E. Black Gallery of the Nova Scotia Centre for Craft and Design. The show ran from May 2008 to July 2008 and was open to the public. Given the physical constraints of this project, intimate poems, analytical, narrative and self-reflective writings for only five of the pieces will accompany the photographs of those specific works; photographs of the other seven pieces seen in the exhibition are not housed in this document. Together, the writings and images examine the possibilities of art making as a vehicle with which to connect spiritually to difficult issues and behaviours within the classroom; they explore whether this form of insightful practice can enable a teacher to make peace with herself and accept her students struggling with difficult issues. Reflective, post-art making writings on the five selected pieces explore the validity of such research, and consider whether teaching practices and the self, the plurivocal self comprised of the teacher, artist, woman, mother, partner, spiritual being and researcher, have been altered through this work.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to define the term 'spirituality' as it is used herein. 'Spirituality' in this work, does not refer to a particular faith tradition, nor does it refer to any particular religious beliefs, theories or practices; rather, it is being

presented as an all-inclusive approach, which focuses upon the inner self and a feeling of connectedness to the outer world. This approach is more aligned to what may be considered secular, though it is still faith-based. Epstein presents the meaning of the word “spiritual” as “anything that takes us beyond the personality”, discussing how through “Buddhism (he was) given access to this spirit”, the rediscovery of which was “of crucial importance to (him)” (Epstein, 2001, p.2). Epstein parallels the spirit with the “uninterrupted flow of the authentic self”, that which D. W. Winnicott calls ‘going on being’ (Epstein, 2001, p.30). Indeed, Epstein (2001) attributes his understanding of the connection between his spiritual and his psychotherapy practice to Winnicott. He says, “In psychotherapy I found an interpersonal parallel to meditation, but it was not until I came across the writings of the British child analyst D.W. Winnicott that I found the *raison d’etre* for such an approach. Winnicott had the theory that put together much of my experience for me. He wrote evocatively of what he called a young child’s “going on being” (p.30). This flow of the inner and outer selves is based on connection. Barman echoes this idea of a flow outward, a connectedness beyond the self, stating, “spirituality is about connection and making those connections” (Barman, 2002, as cited in Shahjahan, 2004, p.297). Parker Palmer takes the concept of connectedness even further, and defines spirituality in this way,

The ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos- with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive. (Palmer, December 1998- January 1999, p.6)

For Palmer, the key when conceptualizing spirituality appears to be in finding a larger connection between the individual self and the world. In this thesis, I, too, will be taking this approach to the spiritual.

## **The Force of Fear~**

Fear is a human instinct that has the power to effect and sway human behaviour. Berggaard and Ellis count it among the basic emotions and senses that comprise the Organic Impulse (Berggaard and Ellis, 2002, p. 56), while Epstein sees the fear of death as “the last obstacle to going on being” (Epstein, 2001, p.189). It can be a powerful catalyst for change and growth and it can be a force that paralyses and binds. With its dualistic nature, it is not fear itself, but how one perceives and approaches it, that ultimately dictates the power that it can wield.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are faced with a planet experiencing vast changes, from the crises facing the global environment, to the challenges of globalization and the unknown path of technological advancement. For many, it is a time marked by fear and concern, as the planet’s pressures are added to people’s personal, daily stresses. It is a period in history that presents to humanity great struggles for answers and meaning, as we are being presented with an image of the future that is potentially dire and destructive. People are overwhelmed by media reports predicting decline and destruction, predictions that suffuse the contemporary psyche. Winnicott sees this interruption of going on

being as “a sense of disconnection that often plagues people in the modern world, [...where] reactivity eats up, or monopolizes, awareness, making it less available for the here-and-now” (Epstein, 2001, p.136-7). This demand for reactivity is ever-present in contemporary society; on a daily basis, scientists and environmentalists such as Canadian, David Suzuki, are calling to the world to change our ways or else face catastrophic results. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established to confront such issues. Its role is to “assess the scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to climate change, as well as its potential impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation. The IPCC's assessment reports are benchmarks in humanity's understanding of climate change”<sup>1</sup>, and unfortunately, their predictions are filled with alarm. The IPCC’s Working Group II reported that “the potential for large scale, irreversible impacts presents severe, but poorly understood risks. Projected climate change could prompt sudden reorganizations in Earth systems with catastrophic ramifications.”<sup>2</sup> It is little wonder that people, faced with such predictions, are fearful. This fear permeates the lives of the citizenry within every strata of contemporary society, from the elderly to the young, and can have an impact on how the world, and the individual’s role within the world, is perceived. Statistics Canada, examining the incidences of stress found within the Canadian population concluded that,

A sizeable number experienced single or multiple episodes at levels likely to be clinically relevant. More than 1.6 million Canadians experienced multiple episodes of distress during this decade (1994/1995 to 2004/2005), and almost 3 million more experienced at least one episode. Certain characteristics were associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing either a single or multiple episodes. The people most likely to

experience distress were women, younger people, those who were single or previously married, and those who had low income or who were not employed.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, as a woman who deals with youth, I myself often vacillate between feelings of despair for the planet and a burning, almost panicked need to make an impact on the dire situations we are all facing; there is an imminent sense of fleeting time and irreversible damage occurring that leaves me feeling frustrated, exhausted and despairing. Facing this emotional turmoil and clouding fear, I am left feeling spiritually drained.

As a teacher, I frequently witness a connection between the inner self and the angst triggered by the external world, witnessing worry and fear on the faces of my students. For them, as for us all, the future is filled with uncertainty and doubt. Many students believe that they lack the power or ability to make the necessary changes to halt the environmental degradation already occurring, never mind save the planet from what is predicted to come. The United Nations Environment Programme states that,

Climate change is now widely recognized as the major environmental problem facing the globe... The threat that climate change poses to peace, security and sustainable development led UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to make climate change - what he calls "the defining challenge of our age" - one of the priorities for the UN system. ...Evidence is building that impacts are being felt in the form of melting icecaps in the polar areas and increased variability of temperature, rainfall and storms in virtually all regions. The scientific consensus underpinning the rising political and public recognition of the climate problem has been captured in the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ... (and) clearly states that it is no longer relevant to discuss whether the climate is changing but rather how much change we are committed to and how fast this will occur.<sup>4</sup>

On one hand today's youth are presented with the concept that the future belongs to them; that they can become the people they want to be, or create a future of their own design. This is a message that youth are often told. Alternately, we bombard them with facts and statistics and hand them bleak options, where climate change is inevitable and the planet is looking to the future to repair the mistakes that have been made.

Living in a state of contradiction such as this can be difficult to deal with, not only for youth but for adults as well. In 2007, in response to its citizens' fears and concerns surrounding the issue of genetically modified foods, the British government launched a public consultation to deal with both the hopes and fears that such an issue, some would say a technological advancement, presents. Reporting on the consultation process in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, James Randerson, science correspondent, wrote about the government's wish for the people to understand that this new scientific research could provide hope. At the same time, they wanted to assuage their fears. Randerson quoted the consultation coordinate, Martin Earwick, director of the British Science Museum, saying, "The public are not stupid. They don't want something forced on them. But equally, they are not the experts, that's why we have scientists."<sup>5</sup> Earwick continued to say that people are "often cautious or hostile when faced with new technology", and that the consultation process has been instigated to allay fears and highlight hopes. Somehow, such mixed messages often do little to solve the issues of societal contradictions; nor does placing the hopes of humanity within the hands of scientists alone.

Little wonder the students are fearful. Not knowing whether I am facing a hopeful future or a potentially destructive one, I am fearful as well. As a teacher I walk a fine line between educating my students, encouraging them, empowering them with information, and overwhelming them with facts and often fatalistic predictions. Admittedly, it is often difficult to remain hopeful and optimistic myself, in the face of potential crises. And yet, it is important for me to deal with the fears that I witness and experience, so as to remain positive. The Dalai Lama explains how fear and suffering can be positive catalysts for change and growth when he says,

Within a Buddhist context, when one reflects on the fact that one's ordinary day-to-day existence is characterized by suffering, this serves to encourage one to engage in the practices that will eliminate the root causes of one's suffering. Otherwise, if there was no hope, or no possibility of freedom from suffering, mere reflection on suffering just becomes morbid thinking, and would be quite negative. (The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, p.143)

The environment, and the manner in which the planet is suffering, is but one area in which changes and challenges are being faced today. Economic strife and a disconnect between those who have and those who need continues to grow. The World Trade Organization (WTO) emphasizes the need for urgent economic growth in an attempt to deal with hunger and poverty. "Extreme poverty is a huge problem. 1.2 billion people survive on less than a dollar a day. A further 1.6 billion, more than a quarter of the world's population, make do with one to two dollars a day. To alleviate poverty, developing economies need to grow faster, and the poor need to benefit from this growth."<sup>6</sup> As with the IPCC's warnings, people are being asked to react to situations of urgency. The WTO's message speaks of a need to act immediately, as the human

suffering due to poverty appears overwhelming. With an increased global awareness, as well as further developments in technology that allow for greater communication around the world, people are being presented with more and more information about the needs, wants and trials of those across the planet, as well as those within their own societies. According to Cutler, such a bombardment of information may be difficult to process and comprehend, and people may be struggling to understand and accept the suffering that occurs within their own lives, as well as all of those around them (Cutler, 1998).

Indeed, many children in Canadian schools struggle themselves with the effects of living poor. Fundamental essentials, such as nutritious food and physical activity, are lacking for some youth. Statistics Canada reports that “cross-sectional research using the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) has shown that Canadian children and youth living in lower socio-economic status neighbourhoods have a greater likelihood of being overweight or obese”<sup>7</sup>. While issues surrounding the improper balance of food, nutrition and exercise exist for Canadian youth, some children struggle simply to have enough to eat. Recognising that many Nova Scotian children between 4-12 years of age were lacking in the nutrition necessary to learn in school, the government of Nova Scotia began *The Provincial Breakfast Program* in 2005. Organised in conjunction with the 2006 *Food and Nutrition Policy for Nova Scotia Public Schools*, this program serves to help those who arrive at school hungry, regardless of the reasons behind that hunger.

The availability of school breakfast programs increases the probability that students will eat breakfast and, in turn, improve their learning. School breakfast programs are not intended to

replace nourishment at home, but rather to support parents/guardians who are the primary providers.<sup>8</sup>

While the reasons behind why Nova Scotian children may be arriving at school hungry may differ, poverty plays a role in some cases. There are children for whom a breakfast program is not a supplement to the morning's food, but rather the source of it. While the rates of childhood poverty vary among Canadian provinces, "close to 1.2 million children - almost one child out of every six in Canada - still live in poverty".<sup>9</sup> Campaign 2000, a coalition of more than 90 national, provincial and community organizations across the country, produces reports that focus on the state of poverty and its effects on Canadian children. In their 2001 report they stated,

Child poverty rates are disproportionately high among vulnerable social groups. Approximately half (52%) of low income children in Canada live in female one parent families. According to the 2001 census, 49% of children in recent immigrant families and 34% of children in racialized families are poor.<sup>10</sup>

One need therefore look no farther than many classrooms in many public school in Canada, be they urban or rural, to see the effects of poverty. On a daily basis children live with economic uncertainty and anxiety that the food, heat and shelter they need may be unattainable for their families. I know in fact, from personal experience in dealing with the families of some of my students, that the effects of poverty exist within my own classroom, and that several of my students live lives filled with worry.

It is not surprising then that, with the bombardment of messages and information the media and technology are continuously conveying, a great number of citizens perceive

that they are living in a period of crises. In response to this perception, many social commentators suggest that North Americans live in a culture of fear. Fear, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, is "a feeling of anxiety and agitation caused by the presence or nearness of danger, evil, pain; timidity; dread; terror; fright; apprehension". There are differing ideas however, about how a culture can be driven, or guided, by the element of fear, and whether that fear is fabricated, or is a response to external factors. Commentators such as linguist Noam Chomsky, film maker Michael Moore and sociologist Barry Glassner believe that fear is deliberately constructed within a society for two possible reasons: 1) to keep its citizens following the desired path constructed by politicians and corporations, so that they continue to follow their agendas and consume their goods and ideologies, or 2) to "distract the public's attention from allegedly more urgent social issues like poverty, social security, unemployment, crime or pollution."<sup>11</sup> Other commentators take a different tack when examining the culture of fear, such as University of Kent (UK) professor Frank Furedi. In his 1997 book *Culture of Fear: Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectations*, he discusses the culture of fear as being emergent, in that it grows from people being culturally informed about the issues and crises around them. This view sees fear and alarm as the natural results of the dissemination of information that occurs through our media and technology; it is the exposure to the facts and predictions of the world and society that is creating fear and stress within the average citizen. It should therefore be considered that the constant reporting of crises and stress is perpetuating and expanding upon this contemporary view that citizens have of being overwhelmed and vulnerable. Thinking to my own life, I can attest to feeling more angst-ridden and fearful when the media

bombards me with images and news of doom and chaos; I find myself more apt to live in a heightened state of despair and worry when I listen to the news regularly or watch television programs based on death, natural disasters or violence. In his commentary on how the media's penchant for what he calls overkill, creates within society an unrealistic sense of fear and pessimism, and destroys journalistic integrity, Joe Saltzman says,

Media overkill destroys any rational discussion of the issue being explored. It offers a dramatic account of a singular event often caused by chance and turns it into a national disaster ready to happen again any time, any place. It is not an accurate or fair portrayal of what and who we are. It is not responsible journalism. (Saltzman, 2002)

This tendency for media overkill can leave a public believing in what Saltzman calls 'media myths' and can, as he states, "cause[s] unnecessary trauma and make[s] bad situations worse" (Saltzman, 2002). It can contribute to a culture where fear is prevalent.

As citizens within a society, it is natural that children may also be affected by living within a culture of fear. While fear and uncertainty about the self and the future may be natural parts of the period of life called adolescence, such fears may be exacerbated by the societal and global uncertainty presented by the media. In many societies youth may be hearing of these planetary stresses and are sharing in the concern over the future of the Earth, adding potential angst to what may already be trying lives. These predictions of gloom may be affecting their views of themselves, the world and their future. Such uncertainty however, coupled with the examination of the self which may occur during adolescence, may be diverting attention away from other crises that some youth may be facing. During adolescence youth "experience not only physical growth and change but

also emotional, psychological, social, and mental change and growth”<sup>12</sup>. Change can contribute to the defining of self during this transitional period in human development, as “adolescence is the period between puberty and adulthood”<sup>13</sup>. Yet the element of transition can be a difficult one, as it may be perceived as an innately chaotic time that is by definition problematic. In their research on how young people are perceived and depicted by society, Stevens et al. (2007) state that “discussions and debates around the nature of young people, premised on adolescence as a problematic and deficient stage, work from deficit perspectives: Adolescence is a difficulty to be dealt with and there is a need to escort this population through what is defined as a problematic stage” (p.108). There can be serious consequences to the presumption that the problems and uncertainty that youth may face at this time can be easily attributed to, and dismissed as, the natural angst experienced during a stage in development, or can be attributed to the fears that we are all dealing with in a world filled with change and uncertainty. When children and youth behave disruptively in the classroom, such acts may be too easily labeled as adolescence, coupled with the stresses and strains of everyday life within a culture of fear, rather than being investigated more deeply as symptoms of other issues.

## **Facing Trauma~**

There are many youth, however, who may have additional issues and fears facing them, beyond the transitional ones of adolescence and of living within a culture of fear; some students in our classrooms may be dealing with stresses resulting from psychiatric

and physical trauma as well. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the Collins English Canadian Dictionary definition of psychiatric trauma as “a powerful shock that may have long-lasting effects.” Such effects may manifest themselves in a multitude of ways, potentially affecting many facets of the youth’s life. In examining the issue of trauma, I also wish to consider the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition, as it discusses trauma as “resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury” and defines trauma as a “disordered psychic or behavioral state”.<sup>14</sup> The connection of psychiatric trauma with behaviour may be an important one, as trauma may be a contributing factor to disruptive behaviours within the classroom. When considering the factors that come into play within the classroom environment, disruptive behaviours can have a potentially high impact on the efficacy of instruction, the safety to self and the emotional stability experienced by both the students and the teacher. As such, in my personal practice I have had to take an approach that considers, explores, addresses and attends to such behaviours in an attentive and pro-active manner, so as to deal with the individual in crisis rather than simply with the behaviours themselves. Differentiated learning styles, learning disabilities and physical challenges are often explored when trying to analyze struggles within the classroom that students may be facing, but perhaps trauma should be considered as a potential factor as well. Youth dealing with personal trauma may face challenges that are complex given their age, as “trauma is a challenge to meaningfulness, and the enormity of this challenge is greatest for the youngest victims. They have less well-developed cognitive skills to be employed in making sense of the world, and they have not had the time to build a solid framework for meaning” (Garbarino, 1996, p. 471).

Diagnosing trauma within youth can be a difficult challenge. The Public Health Association of Australia, through their Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, investigated the effects of immigration detention upon children, and the subsequent trauma that resulted from such detention. Their research concluded that children facing post-traumatic stress disorder were far more difficult to diagnose than adults facing PTSD. They determined that “the early research had used general screening instruments which were unsuitable to assess child stress reactions.”<sup>15</sup> Using behaviour as an indicator of trauma can also be problematic, as a uniform reaction does not exist amongst victims. In examining how children deal with trauma, the report stated that,

The psychological reactions of children subjected to severe trauma are not uniform, but are related to the context in which the experiences take place. From the existing research, it is appropriate to conclude that children who have been exposed to war, violence and persecution are all influenced by such experiences, but their reactions are dependent on their physical and psychological health, the presence or absence of parent/s, family and friends, their material conditions, their earlier experiences, the types of violent experiences to which they have been exposed, and the losses these experiences have caused.<sup>16</sup>

While the circumstances contributing to the trauma that immigrant children in detention face may seem severe, it should not be presumed that trauma does not affect students in the everyday, Canadian classroom. Nor should it be presumed that the crises that Canadian youth may be facing have less of an impact on them; that only extreme cases can have behavioural, physical and psychological effects upon the victim. Trauma and

crises, and their resulting effects, cannot be quantified, but rather, as stated above, each case must be assessed individually and dealt with on a personal level.

### **Breaking Away~**

Faced with possible uncertainty and confusion due to previous or on-going trauma, and the potential for misdiagnosis, it is not surprising that students in crisis may find it difficult to cope within the classroom setting. As a member of the classroom learning community I, as a teacher, must also bear witness to the struggles and pain that such students experience, thus affecting my interaction with the students in crisis, the general classroom environment, as well as my own state of anxiety and spirituality. To date, my resources for dealing with the issues I have faced have been my own spiritual belief system and my desire to help those in need. Students in crisis however, can have an enormous impact on the environment and those around them, and the personal feelings that I face arising from those who cannot cope in the classroom have become my own struggle to deal with the challenges of what are often termed 'difficult students'. Parker Palmer, in trying to understand better what are often perceived as 'difficult' students, presents the idea that fear can be a tangible presence within the classroom. "The silent and seemingly sullen students in our classrooms are not brain-dead: they are full of fear. The Student from Hell is not born that way but is created by conditions beyond his or her control" (Palmer, 1998, p. 45). He goes on to say,

Students are marginalized people in our society. The silence that we face in the classroom is the silence that has always been adopted by people on the margin- people who have reason to fear those in power and have learned that there is safety in not speaking.

(Palmer, 1998, p. 45).

In this way, the struggling student may be displaying the characteristics of fear, which have similarities and potential associations with the characteristics of trauma. In my classroom experience, Palmer's observations are true. Some students do seek the safety of quiet and solitude and I have encountered students I would describe as ghosts, in that they strive to become invisible non-entities within the classroom and society. Yet there is in such situations the potential to establish an environment that is more caring-based in nature, one in which all are respected and honoured. Regardless of the specific behaviour-set, it is important to consider that unusual and difficult behaviours can be indicators of inner angst, angst that may be triggered by a variety of possible sources.

While schools are attempting to create support systems for struggling students, ones which work towards meeting their psychological and academic needs, efforts can be slow and difficult. Support staff, professionals who may work with the school system and/or directly with the classroom teacher, can often be involved. Such support staff may include social workers, psychologists, counselors, program support teachers and educational assistants, and can extend beyond the school doors into the community at large to include child welfare services and addictions counselors, to name but a few. These professionals are often involved in the educational process as well, to best support and help students dealing with academic and social challenges that become present within the classroom. Within my own teaching practice for example, the school in

which I work accesses many of these support staff, via site-based meetings, counseling referrals and contacts with external agencies, all so as to best assess and address the needs of individual students who are struggling. Sadly however, even with the additional supports given by the school system and public sector, such youth may continue to struggle within our schools. Students may often, despite the efforts and concern of those in and out of the school system, withdraw from the world around them and retreat deeper within themselves.

And what of the teachers dealing with these struggling students in our schools? As members of the same society, many of them may also be dealing with the effects of fear and anxiety. Teachers as well may be struggling to cope with the issues facing today's citizens and they too, may find themselves living a detached life in order to do so. This propensity to disconnect from the fears and problems of life, coupled with the added stresses found within the classroom, may be proving too much for them. Palmer discusses the anatomy of fear and how it can affect people, and specifically, how it may be affecting teachers and students. The culture of fear, in Palmer's opinion, dictates that "to avoid a live encounter with ourselves, we can learn the art of self-alienation, of living a divided life" (Palmer, 1998, p.38). This division of self, this disconnectedness, may have detrimental affects upon the teacher and her ability to connect with the student. "If we want to develop teaching, we must understand -and resist- the perverse but powerful draw of the "disconnected" life" (Palmer, 1998, p.36). Palmer sees the disconnectedness within a teacher as a possible means of avoiding the fear that she may be experiencing. He says that as teachers, "we cannot see the fear in our students until we see the fear in ourselves. When we deny our own condition, we resist seeing

anything in others that might remind us of who, and how, *we really are*” (italics in original) (Palmer, 1998, p.48). The culture of fear may be having an affect upon the teacher as well as upon the student, and it is potentially impeding the way in which the two interact. I have often felt myself overwhelmed by the struggles that I witness occurring within my students and have felt the need to withdraw emotionally from what I see and feel around me. In an attempt to protect myself, I have begun to disengage from the people I deal with at work, students and colleagues. My personal experience has lead me to agree entirely with Palmer as he explains this tendency for optimism to be overshadowed by grief and despair. He says, “the deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more grief we are likely to know.” (Palmer, 2003/2004, p.381). Over the years of teaching, I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the students whom I work with. Those students struggling with personal issues have occupied a great deal of my mental space, whether their struggles be due to their inabilities to function in the classroom academically, their difficult domestic situations, or the emotional crises that they appear to be going through. These students do not leave my mind as I leave the school building at the end of each day. In many cases, they continue to occupy my thoughts for years after we have worked together. Being a person who constantly thinks about people, projects, work and life can be exhausting. I often wish that I could turn off my mind for a break from myself, even if only to sleep. Despite this desire, I am not able to rid myself of the constant thinking and it often leaves me tired and frustrated. In addition, when dealing with issues of concern for which there is little more that I can do for my students, this reflection often seems pointless. It must be said here that when I

speak of not being able to help my students, I am speaking about my inability to extend beyond my professional duties and role within their lives, to a deeper, more personal connection with them. At school, I work hard to be attentive and actively support their needs, aligning the necessary resources to the students' situations. If a student discloses issues of abuse or neglect to me, which has happened on several occasions, I immediately take these issues to the administration so that they can be attended to by qualified professionals. Trained as a facilitator for the Canadian Red Cross' "It's Not My Fault" program, a program which teaches youth to better understand and potentially disclose issues of abuse that they may be aware of or dealing with themselves, I have lead sessions and have openly discussed intimate issues of need with hundreds of students. Many of these conversations have dealt with distressing and upsetting topics. I am not a trained counselor, however, nor do I purport to be one. Like most other teachers, I have not received the professional training of a counselor, nor been given the skills to personally deal with the emotional disclosures that counselors face. Yet as a teacher, I am exposed to disclosures and difficult emotional issues on a regular basis. At work, beyond my teaching duties, I see my role as one of listener and mediator, one who helps join the students in need with those who can best help them. When students are struggling academically, I assist within my own capacity as classroom teacher, but also seek out those more specialized in the areas in question to best support the student. When dealing with students facing personal and academic issues, I see my advocacy role as similar. A counselor, however, I am not.

The emptiness to which I am referring here is my wish to help at a more fundamental level, one which does not synchronize with my professional role in the students' lives. I wish that I could embrace them and tell them that it will get better, but in reality that may not be the truth. This personal role in their lives is not the role that I should occupy, nor the one they may want me to occupy. I am well aware that for some of my students it is intensely important that at school they are able to present a face of normalcy, the appearance that everything in their lives is fine. For some, my appearing unaware that they may be facing issues of crises or potential trauma IS the role they need me to fulfill, so I support them in that manner, when that is what is necessary. Yet, the very awareness of their needs is something that continues to affect me.

Uniting the roles of the professional teacher and the individual self in a healthy way is a struggle that many within the teaching profession have. While others within the helping professions may face the same issues, their training often addresses the stresses they may face and works to help them deal with those stresses through education. Learning to be a self-advocate, and to help the professional deal with the issues that arise is important. The focus here should be to teach them how to support themselves. This omission in training of those in the teaching profession can have serious ramifications; faced with serious issues of trauma within our students, teachers can either push away in an attempt at emotional and spiritual self-protectionism, or draw closer to the student and problems in an attempt to 'heal the pain'. Both options have potentially detrimental effects for the teacher, as well as for the student. For the teacher, when professional and personal boundaries are crossed, the individual can become too closely aligned with the

needs of the student; teachers can become overwhelmed and drained from the personal contact. Debra Zellmer (2003) explores the phenomena of occupational burnout and Compassion Fatigue in what she calls the Helping Professions and outlines how those in these professions are particularly vulnerable to these syndromes. She states,

There is no denying that the nature of service to others is stressful. (...) The professional work of caring and relieving emotional suffering brings with it the risk of absorbing that suffering and experiencing emotional pain as a direct result of exposure to other's traumatic material. (p. 20)

Zellmer refers to Figley, Gentry, Baranowsky and Dunning to describe this suffering, calling it Secondary Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome or Compassion Fatigue (Zellmer, 2003, p.20). While Compassion Fatigue and burnout can vary in their severity and duration, with burnout often being more severe in effect, the two share commonalities. “Associated with burnout are depression, feelings of alienation, helplessness and hopelessness, a loss of idealism and spirit, and physical and emotional drain” (Zellmer, 2003, p.19). Compassion Fatigue, according to Figley, differs from burnout in that it has a faster onset as well as recovery (Figley, 2002). Zellmer states however, that despite the differences, Compassion Fatigue can also result in “an acute sense of helplessness” (Zellmer, 2003, p.20), a disconnection from others and emotional exhaustion. Extending the idea that compassion fatigue and burnout can affect the empathetic teacher who works with students in crisis, Naylor, Lambert and Scott (2009) say,

A common form of stress among workers in health, education, and social services is ‘compassion fatigue.’ Similar to Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), compassion fatigue could affect any teacher whose continued empathic engagement with students has

led to vicarious traumatization. A related condition, burnout, is a 'state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion or dissatisfaction with one's workstation' (5) which often emerges gradually overtime, and is more likely to affect older teachers. (p.46)

In both burnout and Compassion Fatigue, it is vital that the professional understand how to protect and distance herself emotionally from the trauma and pain of others, as "in (all of) these occupations there is a risk of compromised care to clients and patients served by professionals suffering from extreme occupational stress" (Zellmer, 2003, p.19). Expecting practitioners to disconnect themselves personally from the stressful professional encounters they have is potentially unrealistic. In the teaching profession in particular, where the teacher exists and functions within a public space, coping with the potential trauma and crises of others can prove additionally challenging. Brinkley and Youra (1996), in their discussion of the difficulties involved with witnessing testimony of historical trauma, explore the demands placed on she who bears witness. They acknowledge that not only can there be stresses in the witnessing process, but the subsequent responses to such disclosures can also be extremely difficult. They state, "to receive the words of a witness is to find that one has also become a witness that one's responses are there for others to witness as well. Once the transmission begins, one cannot stand outside its address" (Brinkley and Youra in Simon and Eppert, p. 176). The very reception of such testimony can bring with it stresses and challenges for the personal and professional selves. Subsequently having to deal with these challenges can be additionally stressful.

While Dori Laub highlights that bearing witness to trauma can pose issues for the listener, it need not be internally confused with the witness' own experiences. She emphasizes that a separation from the experiencing of pain and the witnessing of it must occur if an effective, professional relationship is to occur:

The listener... will experience hazards and troubles of his own... While overlapping to a degree with the experience of the victim, he does not become the victim- he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he pays attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task. (Laub as cited in Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, 2000, p.62)

Many in the helping professions instinctively try to protect themselves from the pain of those with whom they work, to focusing upon their professional obligations. Epstein, in describing the egos tendency to shield and protect itself from outside pain says, "our self-centeredness causes us to create an uneasy relationship with the world in which we try to fend off any threats to our hard-fought security" (Epstein, 2001, p.56). The resulting embodiment of the distanced, emotionally dulled-out teacher, whom Zellmer would describe as suffering from either burnout or Compassion Fatigue, is one that I have personally encountered many times. This individual has a work face that deals strictly with the curricular teaching role she has within the classroom, often separating her emotional and professional selves. She often perceives her role as essentially to help the students in her classes learn the material, so that they can then move on.

The need to deal with the demands within the classroom can have the opposite effect on teachers. Instead of distancing themselves from the students, the teacher can become

deeply involved in the emotional and psychological struggles that her students may be facing. Often considered the 'caring teachers', those willing to sacrifice the self for their students, these professionals can face serious issues that result from the blurring of the professional and personal selves. The antithesis of the uninvolved teacher, these martyr caregivers can lose their inner selves in an attempt to control and resolve the problems and issues of those around them. Once again, adequate training for teachers in how to deal with students in potential crisis, while staying mindful to the self, is lacking.

Epstein, a psychologist who works with just such clients, discusses the dangers of those in the care-giving professions from getting too personally linked to the crises of those they work with; the desire to help another may come at the expense of wounding the self. "The desire for control, in the form of being a helper, is as much of an obstacle to healing another person as it is to healing oneself" (Epstein, 2001, p.56). Thus, the caregiver becomes lost in an attempt to fix the souls of those around them in need.

As a teacher, there are moments when I find myself tuning out those students in my classroom who are constant challenges and are emotionally draining to me. I try to bring compassion, empathy and the concept of spirituality into the classroom, but faced with behaviours that are disruptive and students who are 'difficult', I find it challenging to see the individual spirit beneath the behaviour and disruptions. When I do attempt to see the difficult student as a person, I begin to detach emotionally, for fear of being traumatized by their pain, particularly when I know that that particular student is dealing with extreme domestic issues. I try to keep those challenging students at a distance and focus upon teaching to those who outwardly appear to want to learn. This tact however, has not worked well for me. I find myself torn. I am concerned for the education of

learners who are not apparently learning, and for their emotional welfare, and yet am wrestling with the perception I have of them as enemies who are disruptive to the classroom environment. I can recognize that they are people who are struggling and suffering and need help, but I often find myself unable to get past their anger and defenses, and am left exhausted by the attempts. Exhausted by, and no doubt in fear of, their pain.

This desire to avoid the pain and suffering of others has caused me to distance myself from those in need. In reality however, I know that despite these efforts, these struggling students affect me. Hart (2004) acknowledges that dealing with those who are struggling can be a difficult task, one that can be too challenging for some to face.

Children and adults who are empathetically sensitive can get overwhelmed or lost in others' emotions. Some compensate by constructing a hard exterior or finding other means to try to shut off this sensitivity. Others remain overwhelmed and disoriented. (p.37)

Cutler (1998) points out that the desire to avoid suffering is a natural one, and adds insight into facing and dealing with such when he says,

The wish to get free of suffering is the legitimate goal of every human being. It is the corollary of our wish to be happy. Thus it is entirely appropriate that we seek out the causes of our unhappiness and do whatever we can to alleviate our problems, searching for solutions on all levels- global, societal, familial, and individual. But as long as we view suffering as an unnatural state, an abnormal condition that we fear, avoid and reject, we will never uproot the causes of suffering and begin to live a happier life. (p.148)

In essence, it is in being witness to the suffering of others and learning to accept it that may hold the key to being able to deal with and assist those around me as well as myself; viewing the student from an empathetic, peaceful perspective, rather than from one of conflict, seems necessary. Palmer speaks of the need “to deal with conflict from a place of peace, to advocate for change from a place of hope” (Palmer, December 1998-January 1999, p.11). I would like to find this place of peace within myself, so that I can approach change with optimism. To do so, to uncover a teacher who is peaceful, compassionate and empathetic, I no doubt need to connect with what Palmer calls the “undivided self”. Palmer’s undivided self is “an integral state of being central to good teaching. In the undivided self, every major thread of one’s life experience is honored, creating a weave of such coherence and strength that it can hold students and subjects as well as self. Such a self, inwardly integrated, is able to make the outward connections on which good teaching depends” (Palmer, 1998, p.16). It is the discovery of my own integrated self, which I hope, can occur through this thesis. As well, I aim to discover how acknowledging, identifying and learning to cope with the stresses that I, as a teacher, face within the classroom, can lead me to be a more connected and grounded teacher. It is also hoped that his subsequent awareness will allow me to advocate for the needs of others within my profession.

While aspiring to an undivided self who is connected to others and peaceful within herself, I must acknowledge that finding that spirit within is challenging. In an attempt to protect my spirit, I have in the past tried to emotionally removed myself from the classroom. Perhaps in doing so, I have also been detaching myself from the caring

principles I know to be the foundation of who I am. To turn away from such a foundation seems to imply a rejection of the manner in which I view myself; a fundamental picture of myself that I have worked hard to create. Nel Noddings speaks of the aspects of caring that help one to define the self, and the manner in which it relates not only to the self picture that one creates, but to the individuals with whom one interacts. She acknowledges that when faced with stress the one-caring has a choice, to be true to the caring, ethical self, or to turn away from a potentially painful situation. That is, she examines the decision to be true to the self or to detach from it. She considers that struggle in this way-

When I reflect on the way I am in genuine caring relationships and caring situations- the natural quality of my engrossment, the shift of my energies toward the other and his projects- I form a picture of myself. This picture is incomplete so long as I see myself only as the one-caring. But as I reflect also on the way I am as cared-for, I see clearly my own longing to be received, understood, and accepted. There are cases in which I am not received, and many in which I fail to receive the other, but a picture of goodness begins to form. (Noddings, 2003, p.49)

This idea of a caring relationship being reciprocal is important. Noddings is not saying that the cared-for is going to return the concern and care being given, but instead is acknowledging that by caring, the care-giver is receiving something in return. If the care-giver sees himself only as giving, he will eventually become depleted and emotionally empty. If however, there is a recognition that something within the care-giver is satisfied within the caring relationship, then the very act of caring is a nourishing one. This ability to see caring as an act that feeds the care-giver is crucial, for it

understands that through the act of caring one also receives; the care-giver is nurturing and strengthening his sense of self. Noddings continues,

I see that when I am as I need the other to be toward me, I am the way I want to be- that is, I am closest to the goodness when I accept and affirm the internal "I must." Now it is certainly true that the "I must" can be rejected and, or course, it can grow quieter under the stress of living. I can talk myself out of the "I must," detach myself from feeling and try to think my way to an ethical life. But this is just what I must not do if I value my ethical self. (Noddings, 2003, p.49)

It is heartening to be presented with the idea that the act of caring is so straight forward; that if caring is accepted as a non-negotiable part of who the care-giver is, then it is simply accepted that they will care. Beyond the involvement with those who may be in need, it is the constant internal struggle around how much to care that I find exhausting. As a professional, I am always concerned that I am too close to the people that my students are; that I am interacting with them beyond seeing them simply as learners. If my goal is to help my students make deep connections between themselves and their learning, which it is, then it is necessary that they, as individuals, be involved in the process. Accepting and working with individuals therefore makes it impossible for me not to connect with them. If my authentic, caring self is involved, then that connection will be even deeper. The freedom therefore lies in understanding that if I am true to myself, then caring, and how much to care, is not a question to be wrested with- it is a simple fact that can be accepted.

Now that we have considered the stresses that teachers face within their profession, and the need that I personally feel, to find a more mindful approach to my work, we will examine how finding the spirit within can lead to a more connected, caring teacher, one who is able to bear witness to that which she faces within her classroom.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Finding the Spirit Within~**

This idea of the teacher looking within and connecting to the inner self is not unique to Nel Noddings and Parker Palmer. Even outside of the field of education,

people have been making the connection between great teaching and the heart. John Steinbeck, the American novelist, referred to great teaching as an endeavour that involved not only the mind, but also the spirit, and commented upon how special and unique are teachers who can connect the two. “I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.”<sup>17</sup> This idea that tapping into the inner self involves a spiritual connection is one that many contemporary educators favour as well. For many, having an element of the spiritual is seen as vital to a caring, transformative classroom, where learning may occur. Kessler discusses the need for students to find spiritual fulfillment within the classroom (Kessler as cited in Campbell, p.5, 2003), while Suhor (1998-9) places the focus upon the teacher, saying that “spirituality grows in the classrooms when teachers see themselves as agents of joy and conduits for transcendence, rather than merely as licensed trainers or promoters of measurable growth” (Suhor as cited in Campbell, p.5, 2003). A teacher who is able to overcome her personal fears, touch her inner self, and connect that inner self to the outer world of the classroom, is one who may start forging meaningful, spiritual contact with her students. This spirit-based contact may be what our students need. It may also be what I, as teacher, need.

As a visual artist, I have found within my art making the closest thing to inner peace and spiritual connection I have ever felt. Indeed, it was to the arts that I turned when faced with the deepest of the personal crises I have experienced to date, the sudden death of my parents. Art allowed me to deal with the aftermath of their motor vehicle accident, and the trauma that I suffered because of it. The trauma I suffered due to their

deaths in fact, lead me to leave the teaching profession for more than a decade, as I searched for a means to wholeness again; the experience provided me with possibilities and forced me to examine my previous perspectives of life and the world before what I knew was broken. That journey of healing took me to the arts, and they in turn helped me to make sense of what I was feeling; they gave me a conduit through which to express my fears, my sorrow and my anger, and allowed me to deal with the pain that I felt. Decker reflects upon the idea that trauma can bring with it possibility, saying that, “trauma breaks down our ordinary perspectives, and through appropriate treatment, it is possible to gain a greater depth of worldly understanding.” (p.39) Such a shift of perspectives can also provide one with tools to help cope with the stresses and crises of life. Cutler states that “the ability to shift perspective can be one of the most powerful and effective tools we have to help us cope with life’s daily problems.” (p.172) A shift in perspectives can thus aid in both perceiving and dealing with experiences and problems. It can also provide a new manner with which to view the positive inherent in these experiences.

Finding the positive within seemingly difficult experience can be challenging. Shifting perspectives however, can provide opportunity to do so, as well as the potential for a spiritual link to a deeper, more connected approach to life. Extending this concept of spiritual connectivity beyond the self, bringing a spiritual connection into my classroom may be a vital element to my own inner quest. Bel hooks highlights the importance of spirituality within the classroom when she says,

It is essential that we build into our teaching vision a place where

spirit matters, a place where our spirits can be renewed and our souls restored... To me the classroom continues to be a place where paradise can be realized, a place of passion and possibility, a place where spirit matters, where all that we learn and know leads us into greater connection, into greater understanding of life in community.” (hooks as cited in Shahjahan, p.308)

This passionate classroom of which hooks speaks, one in which possibility exists, is one that I share as a goal. Within my classroom I wish to open up to possibility, allow students and myself to dream and explore, create a place where the individual matters. Perhaps this extension of the spirit outward into the learning community is a reflection of the inner passion that I feel for both teaching and art. Perhaps teaching and art are but an extension of the inner passion for life that I have. Either way, the spiritual is the fundamental core that both supports and fuels my need for passion and possibility; re-focusing upon that core may be the key to dealing with the stresses and pain inherent in living within our culture.

The act of self-reflection, which may be important when dealing with the stresses of living in a culture of fear, may also be important for connecting with the spiritual. Researcher Laurel H. Campbell views “the spiritual drive [as one seeming] to include the never-ending re-evaluation of one’s response to life in light of what one values the most” (Campbell, 2003, p.18). This never-ending evaluation of what the self values most appears important, but how can confronting fear, making spiritual connections with the inner self, and translating that connectedness to the outer world, help teachers who are dealing with distressed students? Realistically, the idea of remembering the spirit in education may seem elusive to some teachers, amidst demanding curriculum,

differentiated learners and disruptive students. While I would like to see myself as a good teacher, as one whom Campbell describes as able to unify the intellectual and the heart, in an effort to protect myself from secondary victimization (Campbell, 2003), my personal fear keeps me from going deeper into a student's pain. Danieli presents the concept of secondary victimization as such: "Many who have been involved in or observed intervention with traumatized individuals and groups have reported a kind of contagious effect, and labeled this phenomenon 'secondary victimization' (Danieli, 1996, as cited in Garbarino, 1996, p.475). As teachers, is this secondary victimization not a possibility when dealing with traumatized youth? Should those within the teaching profession not receive the training and skills necessary to deal with their students in need? Often, when faced with students' pain, I instinctively retreat inward in order to protect my emotional self. Surely other teachers in the same situation are reacting in the same way. And yet researchers into childhood trauma, such as Meyer and Lansell, clearly state that it is only in going deeper into the trauma, acknowledging and accepting it spiritually, that its victims and those who deal with them can move forward.

A perspective which is sensitive to the spiritual essence of children and youth tells us to be prepared to go further, to recognize the need to deal with the metaphysical wounds that arise from the over-whelming cognitions. To do this we must embrace the spiritual dimensions of traumatized persons and groups and incorporate them into interventions with children and youth.

(Meyer and Lansell (1996) as cited in Garbarino, 1996, p. 474)

In dealing with students potentially in crisis, compassion may come from the witnessing and acceptance of what they are experiencing, which may possibly be pain

incited by trauma. Indeed, it was not until I was able to face and accept the pain within myself after my parents' deaths, that I was able to reconnect with who I am and find spiritual peace. To be compassionate can mean to connect with another in a caring way, a way in which I would like to connect with my students. If this spiritual, compassionate connection could occur, perhaps a relationship based upon respect and trust could be created. The Dalai Lama speaks of the importance of compassion to relationships when he says,

I think that if one is seeking a truly satisfying relationship, the best way of bringing this about is to get to know the deeper nature of the person and relate to her or him on that level, instead of merely on the basis of superficial characteristics. And in this type of relationship there is a role for genuine compassion.

(The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p.102)

It seems that compassion could play a vital role in the process of education, especially if a meaningful connection between teacher and student is being attempted. The Dalai Lama states that "compassion can be roughly defined in terms of a state of mind that is nonviolent, nonharming, and nonaggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other." (The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p.114). This definition seems very close to the manner in which I attempt to interact with my students, and seems a logical guide for my daily classroom practice. Following this model, I would therefore need to extend myself even further to those students who appear in crisis, even when their behaviour may establish them as confrontational and difficult to deal with. This choosing to extend the self may appear a

difficult choice, one with potentially demanding claims upon the individual, but Noddings would argue that to choose not to care could have more serious consequences.

A large part of the anguish (...) associate[d] with our apprehension of freedom springs from our awareness of obligation and the endless claims that can be, and will be, made upon us. We feel that we are on one hand, free to decide; we know, on the other hand, that we are irrevocably linked to intimate others. This linkage, this fundamental relatedness, is at the very heart of our being. Thus I am totally free to reject the impulse to care, but I enslave myself to a particular unhappy task when I make this choice. (Noddings, 2003, p.51)

Noddings and the Dalai Lama share an understanding of what Noddings calls the 'fundamental relatedness' of all peoples. This interconnectivity is one of the factors that allows compassion to be possible. The Dalai Lama speaks of this interconnectivity between all beings, what Noddings refers to as an irrevocable linkage, in this way:

Whenever I meet people I always approach them from the standpoint of the most basic things we have in common. We each have a physical structure, a mind, emotions. We are all born in the same way, and we all die. All of us want happiness and do not want to suffer. Looking at others from this standpoint rather than emphasizing secondary differences... allows me to have a feeling that I'm meeting someone just the same as me. I find that relating to others on that level makes it much easier to exchange and communicate with one another.

( The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p.90)

Given that we are all similar and questing for the same things in life, perhaps the struggle is therefore one of choice; the choice that I am faced with as to whether I engage more deeply with those in need, whether to truly care or whether not to. Deep down inside I know that I do need to feel more empathy for these students and resist the

urge to push them away when their behaviour may have sabotaged a carefully planned lesson, or they have ridiculed something that is important to me. Being able to heed the Dalai Lama's words and see within each person a spirit who is searching just as I am, may make the ability to care for them easier. I know that I need to look at these students with understanding and try to connect spiritually with them, and with myself, when in the heat of the moment I may view them as 'the enemy'. In Buddhist terms, the enemy is viewed as a gift; one who teaches us to dig deeper within to find our own compassion.

There are many, many people in the world, but relatively few with whom we interact, and even fewer who cause us problems. So when you come across such a chance for practicing patience and tolerance, you should treat it with gratitude. It is rare. Just as having unexpectedly found a treasure in your own house, you should be happy and grateful towards your enemy for providing that precious opportunity. Because if you are ever to be successful in your practice of patience and tolerance, which are critical factors in counteracting negative emotions, it is due to the combination of your own efforts and also the opportunity provided by your enemy. ( The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, p.179)

It is from a new perspective that I must consider how those before me in need are presenting me with the gift of opportunity. Instead, I have always considered disruptive behaviours and challenging interactions with students as obstacles to my teaching, but this new perspective presents with it a new dimension to the classroom situations I face. Difficulty, the enemy and trauma may all be vehicles to self-reflection and new perspectives, and may provide the opportunity for personal growth. "Trauma breaks down our ordinary perspectives, and through (it), it is possible to gain a greater depth of worldly understanding" (Decker, 2007, p.34). It is via this shifting in perspectives, this

development of a *supple quality of mind* as Cutler calls it, and that we have an opportunity to “embrace all of life- to be fully alive and human” (Cutler, 1998, p.187). Crises may provide us with great opportunities, if we know how to embrace and use them, and the difficult student may be the catalyst to incite just such opportunities.

### **The Undivided Self~**

This idea of freeing the self and others from pain has its assumptions and its challenges. Perhaps the other does not want help, and is it not presumptuous to even assume that one should, could, ‘cure’ the pain of another? By taking on the responsibility for another’s problems, is the one struggling really being assisted? Palmer examines the idea that there is a reverse side to caring, one that inflicts itself on the soul. He highlights this idea saying, “the last thing the soul wants is to be fixed or saved (...). The soul wants simply to be witnessed, attended to, heard.” (2003/2004, p.383). Perhaps the teacher who embraces the trauma of the student should instead bear witness and simply acknowledge the soul’s existence, not try to cure its pain.

Being open and present, free of attachments, is necessary in order to be aware of the issues in front of us. While Epstein speaks of freedom for the self through a change in perspective, his meaning can be extended to include the concept of our attempt to free those around us from themselves as well. Mindfulness, the going on being true to the self, is key. He says,

In our desire for freedom, we imagine that we have to eliminate unwanted aspects of ourselves. Change will happen naturally as we open to the truth. The more we bring our attachments into awareness, the freer we become, not because we eliminate the attachments, but because we learn to identify more with awareness than with desire. (...) Although traumatic and terrible things may have occurred, it is the individual's mind that perpetuates the suffering, and that can be trained to change. As long as we are struggling *against* the feeling, hoping to eliminate it by getting high or being cured, we are still attached. We can relieve unsatisfactoriness only by sharpening our focus and changing our perspective. (Epstein, 2001, p.71)

It is the change of perspective of which Epstein speaks, that I am able to find through art making. While caught within the whirlwind of the stresses and angst that I am facing, it is easy to become overwhelmed and lost. Focus in this instance tends to be on the desire to resolve and eliminate problems. Bersgaard and Ellis (2002) might say that this rumination on problem solving keeps me stuck in the Idea Development Process. Instead, the goal should be to identify the issues, and then free oneself from them through a shift in perspective; in essence, to move beyond the fixations of solving and riding oneself of the stresses, on to what Bersgaard and Ellis term the Self Observing Stage (2002). In this stage, one can, as Epstein says, open to truth, open to acknowledgment and to awareness. By turning inward, which I am able to do through art, it is not that I escape the unwanted aspects of myself and my world but rather, that I am able to reconsider them in a new way. Opening to the truth, as Epstein says, makes the quest for clarity seem easy to attain. If truth always exists, then finding it may be as easy as quieting the mind, re-positioning our perspective and becoming aware of that which already exists. Perhaps it is not in the solving of the world's problems that

solutions are achieved, but rather in the awareness of our attachments and our acceptance of such. Indeed, solutions, when taking this approach, seem antithetical to the desired goal; it is in the spiritual awareness of a deeper connection that can lead one to mindfulness.

While I try to quietly acknowledge and hear the struggles my students are facing without solving their problems, I nonetheless find that I have trouble disconnecting from their pain effectively. I am in need of tools to do so in a healthy manner, so as not to take their burdens home with me. I ask myself, if I am experiencing this personal and professional struggle, how many other teachers are experiencing the same issue? Given my struggles to balance my personal and professional selves within the workplace, what stresses am I experiencing when I include my private life demands into the mix? Naylor, Lambert and Scott (2009) state that “sixty percent of Canadian workers suffer from high levels of stress as a result of trying to balance work and family commitments”. Given the vulnerability and neediness of those with whom teachers work, compounded with the already stressful issues of balancing personal and professional obligations, teachers may be struggling.

Caring may be the foundation for my concern over my students, yet the continuous thinking about their needs is not a solution to dealing with what I am facing. I can be rational about why a student is behaving in a destructive manner, but that does not alter the fact that my classroom may be suffering due to their behaviour. Delving deeper within their neediness is also not the answer. It is evident that something beyond

thought is necessary for me to find a sense of peace with these students and to put my mind and spirit at rest. Compassion fatigue and burnout are very real problems in teaching and I am aware that I must protect myself against them. Looking to the public press and professional literature, there are various options that have been put forward to deal with the stresses and burnout that occur within the helping professions. “Popular antidotes range from meditation, yoga, and physical exercise to development of worker support networks, worker ‘time outs’, in-service training, staff retreats, job rotation, and job sharing” (Alderman, p.87, 1980 in Zellmer, 2003, p.20). Sensing that I was in need of some way to deal with the stress that I was experiencing in the classroom, over the years I sought out some of these antidotes. While I have attempted several of these stress-reduction techniques, including yoga, mediation and physical exercise, I have had difficulty incorporating them into my life on a regular basis; despite my need for them, they have become one more thing to deal with amidst the personal and professional juggle, and they were dropped in favour of family and job commitments. Mediation in particular has always appealed to me, though I find myself unable to sit still and quietly focus inwardly while the stresses of life swirl around me. While learning to calm the mind in order to deal with the swirl is the point of such techniques, nonetheless I find it difficult to get over the initial trials of quieting my thoughts in order to establish a meditation practice. I do, however, recognise that it is an option I might explore further. Moving beyond coping strategies and looking at the deeper needs I am expressing, Epstein seems to sum up what I am searching for perfectly. He says, “mindfulness is the antidote: it is training in not holding on. Requiring a radical acceptance of whatever (is) happening, whether I like it or not, mindfulness offer(s) a

means of rising above my own individual cravings. (... It) is the attachment to self” (Epstein, 2001, p.79).

Tobin Hart discusses the need to open up beyond rational thought into what he calls *the contemplative mind* as a means to connect with students and the self. Examining a variety of forms of contemplation, such as prayer and meditation, he presents the idea that the act itself has fundamental benefits. “Most traditional contemplative practice emphasizes present-moment awareness and the intrinsic value of the experience rather than the secondary outcomes” (Hart, p.34). It is the connecting to the moment, to the thoughts and the experiences, that is emphasized here; it allows one to detach from the emotionality of the subject of the thoughts, so as to better appreciate and understand them and their effects. Hart expands upon this when he says,

Contemplative practice is also commonly described as enabling a type of detachment from the contents of our consciousness, the thought, feelings, and reactions that flow through our mind. (...) This allows us to observe the contents of our consciousness rather than simply being absorbed by them. Such arms-length distance allows us to recognize and change, potentially interrupting usual patterns of thinking and impulsivity, freeing the mind to notice unexpected insights. (p.33)

In this, as with Epstein’s mindfulness, I see possibility. What I feel is lacking in my life is an ability to acknowledge and contemplate the students and their issues around me, yet find a manner to spiritually come to terms with them and not transfer their stresses onto myself; I need to find what Richard Brown calls ‘self-insight’. Brown (1998) links the concept of self-insight, what he calls “contemplative observation”, directly to the

teaching profession. Based on the idea of Buddhist meditation, of contemplative observation Brown says, “this method synchronizes the observer with the learning environment; awakens and clarifies perceptions, thoughts, and emotions; and develops knowledge and compassion. In contemplative observation, we observe not only what is happening in the environment, but also what is simultaneously occurring within ourselves, the observer” (Brown as cited in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.61). I feel a connection to Brown’s linking of contemplative observation directly to the classroom environment and the teacher; he not only acknowledges the need for teachers to distance themselves from the experiences of their students, but to deal with them in a method linked to self-care and mindfulness. Hart offers up additional effects to the self-reflection that I am searching for, explaining how contemplative practice can help one deal with the emotional crises of others. He says,

When we have the power of both experiencing this intensity and also witnessing it, we can take a deep breath, center ourselves, and distinguish between our own and others’ experience. We then gain greater freedom to appreciate their experiences, perhaps sending them our intention of compassionate caring, but we need not hold on to their experience or confuse it with our own. (p.37)

Meditation has long had benefits that lead to a sense of calm and inner peace; it can allow one to step beyond the ego and observe from a new perspective. Epstein says, “the mind softens in meditation through the assumption of a particular mental posture called “bare attention”, in which impartial, nonjudgmental awareness is trained on whatever is to be observed. (... Through this practice) the mind learns how to be with

ambiguity while learning to be fully aware” (Epstein, 2001, p.7). This sense of awareness can bring with it a sense of freedom, one that allows the practitioner “to let go of concepts and opinions and to break down constricting boundaries, not to create a new ideology” (Epstein, 2001, p.8), bringing with it a release from stress. Garbarino (1996) acknowledges that meditation can play an important role when dealing with stress and trauma. “Although meditation is ‘foreign’ to many western populations, it may be useful in assisting victims find spiritual resources otherwise inaccessible for them.... Meditation helps reconnect to a feeling of oneness with all life, helping those who practice it to access a sense of peace.” (p.475)

Many traditions share the concept that a contemplative practice is essential to dealing with stress and to finding inner peace and fulfillment. While meditation is the contemplative conduit for some, prayer is the channel for others. Indeed, some such as Decker view both practices as essentially equal, saying that “prayer is also the basic foundation of coping. In mystical prayer, it is difficult to determine if there is any difference between prayer and meditation.” (p.39) Unfortunately for me, despite my efforts at both prayer and meditation, I am always left feeling false and empty after such forms of contemplation. Perhaps this is due to a lack of practice; I turn to such methods when most in need rather than developing a routine practice to which I can turn when wanting. Bergsgaard and Ellis stress that contemplative practice, what they call Self-Observation, “cannot be conjured up when needed but must be developed through consistent practice” (Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.63). While practice and persistence

may play a role in my contemplative abilities, I am also aware that finding an authentic vehicle through which I can voice my inner spirituality is required.

My natural instincts tell me that if this sense of inner peace is what I desire, then I should turn to my art making as a form of contemplative practice. When in my studio making, I am able to escape the binds that seem to surround me in everyday life; I am able to experience each moment for as it is. Perhaps it is the need to concentrate so keenly upon the materials and process that allows me such focus, or perhaps it is the need for such that drives me to the studio in the first place. Whatever the reason behind the drive, through art I am able to find an inner connection that otherwise is lacking in me. Perhaps having tangible objects in front of me allows me a means through which to focus.

In many meditative traditions such as prayer, physical objects are used to focus the attention and breath, to bring the individual into the moment, to experience. Prayer beads and rosaries have been used in some traditions, while worry beads and iconic images can be found in others. For the purpose of this thesis, I am choosing to focus my meditative practice upon the objects known as talismans. A description of talismans is included later in this work, under the section entitled 'The Artistic Works'. It should be noted that while talismans are often used to focus the mind's attention on the prayer or meditation, in this project the making of the talisman itself is aiming to serve that purpose. Reflection upon the making process and the subsequent results of this project may determine whether the objects themselves possess the power to focus the mind and

spirit, and whether the experience of creating them can do the same. The power of the talismans for me comes in the making of them; the inner process of discovery that occurs in their making, rather than upon the final objects themselves; it is the process of creating the talismans which is being explored as meditation.

In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron examines the concept of art making as a form of meditation, saying,

There are many ways of thinking about meditation. Scientists speak of it in terms of brain hemispheres and shunting techniques. We move from logic brain to artist brain and from fast to slow, shallow to deep. Management consultants, in pursuit of corporate physical health, have learned to think of meditation primarily as a stress-management technique. Spiritual seekers choose to view the process as a gateway to God. Artists and creative mavens approve of it as a conduit for higher creative insight.... Even taken in combination however, they are still intellectual constructs for what is primarily an experience of wholeness, rightness, and power. We meditate to discover our own identity, our right place in the scheme of the universe. Through meditation, we acquire and eventually acknowledge our connection to an inner power source that has the ability to transform the outer world... Meditation gives us not only the light of insight but also the power for expansive change. (Cameron, p.14)

Extending the idea that contemplative practices such as meditation and prayer are spiritual activities, and following Cameron's argument that art making is a meditative practice, then art making can be said to have spiritual elements to it. Cameron in fact, equates spirituality and the process of making art when she says, "creativity is an experience- to my eye, a spiritual experience. It does not matter which way you think of it: creativity leading to spirituality or spirituality leading to creativity." (p.2). Art making as spiritual exploration parallels the experiences I have personally had in my

studio while creating. In my quest to turn to a more spiritually centered place from which to deal with my students, I therefore see the validity in exploring my spirituality through my art.

Cameron offers up this concept of art making as a restorative process that can touch the inner self, saying,

When we engage in creative recovery, we enter into a withdrawal process from life as we know it. *Withdrawal* is another way of saying *detachment* or *nonattachment*, which is emblematic of consistent work with any meditation practice.... Ordinarily when we speak of withdrawal, we think of having a substance removed from us.... It's useful to view creative withdrawal a little differently. We ourselves are the substance we withdraw *to*, not from. (Cameron p.6)

Cameron's idea of creative recovery is akin to the escape and isolation that I am able to experience while making art; it allows me to turn within myself and focus on the moment and the spirit. This is not an escape from, but rather, an escape to; I am not running away from the outside world, but rather, turning inward in order to face, contemplate and deal with that which is causing me anxiety. This echoes Hart's idea that through contemplative practice one is better able to examine the emotions and issues that one is faced with, and deal with them in a more effective and detached manner. In this instance, it is contemplative practice through creative recovery and art making.

Epstein describes this process of restoration and expansion as enlightenment, seeing the recovery of going on being as a key requirement for such. In my art making practice

I find that I am sometimes able to go beyond the self, beyond the need to control everything around me; I am open and in the moment, aware of the fluctuation of possibility. As I create I am aware that any tiny variable can alter the path which I am on and in many ways, I need to be flexible and open to changing direction. When working with wood for instance, I know that if I try to force things too quickly or in a manner that doesn't suit the material, it may burn or crack. In metal, aggressiveness on my part is often rewarded with snapped blades and broken drill bits; sometimes I try to drill so hard into metal that I feel it resisting me that I scorch my own fingers while trying to hold it. In glass, one of my favourite media, nothing I can do will make it behave in a way it does not want to; it simply protests, cracks, and I have to start again. I have learned that mistakes and flaws do not exist within the materials, but rather in my interaction with them. I am always to blame if problems arise, and it is my ego and my desires that keep me from finding harmony with the materials I use. At such times, in order to move forward I must stop, quiet myself and listen; I must listen to myself, my breath, my materials and my surroundings. The moment, and my awareness of the moment, are essential to me being able to connect with my materials and my work. It is I, the artist, going on being.

Perhaps this awareness is an important step towards mindfulness and the pursuit of enlightenment. Epstein says, "the road to enlightenment lay in this direction [the recovery of going on being], the Buddha discovered, not in self-abnegation. Rather than existing in a state of reactivity, fighting against reality or clinging to it as it inexorably changes, the Buddha discovered that relaxation into his own being permitted him to

relate to the world with an openness and acceptance that had been missing” (Epstein, 2001, p.115). In my personal art making process, it is only when I am accepting and conscious that I am able to unite with my materials and simply create; I can simply be. It is then that I am most able to hear my inner-self. I feel that this is akin to what Epstein (2001) calls ‘speaking from the inside’, and I can closely relate my experience to his. He states, “speaking from the inside required me to be at one with my experience, instead of operating at a protective distance. It forced me to experience myself more directly, to improvise, and to take chances in my expression of myself” (p.140). In this manner of self-discovery, I see my art making and self-exploration as a unified process.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Art Works~**

When I make art I am often able to look inwardly, explore issues that upset and confuse me, and am sometimes able to consider and shift toward new perspectives. Art

making allows me to be both present within the moment and the subject, yet removed enough from the catalyst so as to consider better its affects upon me. Referring to Winnicott's perspective on this dualistic nature of both art making and the art object, Jeanne Randolph says that "in this context, (the creation of artworks is) like play, where subjectivity and objectivity overlap, (...) as an adaptive relationship with the mysterious world" (Randolph, 1991, p.30). Using the art making process, I am thus often able to make a spiritual connection to myself and to the world around me, extending myself outward to create a deeper sense of meaning as I deal with the issues that surround me.

Dillard extends the idea of self-reflection, and sees connectedness and spirituality as essential truths to being human, as well as to the field of education.

Each one of us is spirit. The embodied energy of life. (...) It is about understanding that our unity with others (...) is influenced deeply by the ways in which we are in unity with ourselves and the ways in which we re-member the spirit in education in our unity with others.  
(Dillard, p.385)

Through self-reflection, focus upon the spirit and an embracing of the concept of interconnectivity, a unity through breath as Dillard so poetically phrased it, I am approaching this artistic and narrative research. I am able to turn to art making as a means with which to cope personally and professionally with what surrounds me. I am able to do so by accepting the strife and trauma that some of my students may be facing and knowing that we are all united in our basic desire to be happy.

Looking to my own past, my personal crises drove me towards art as a vehicle to cope with what I was facing. Now that I have learned the skills necessary to face, accept and deal with the personal issues I face, I value my art making practice as one of the most important elements of myself. I seek to use the crises and the possible effects of trauma I see around me in the classroom as a catalyst, and through art making deal with what I am witnessing, perhaps reconnecting with my students in need. This sense of continuity in practice is key to the personal expression and exploration that I now find myself engaged in. Looking to Dewey, whom Clandinin and Connelly describe as having “held that one criterion of experience is continuity, namely that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.2), this personal journey is an extension of my past into my present and toward my future. Indeed, as I look forward to finding within myself a spiritual core that informs my classroom and personal practices, art making resonates as a vital personal voice. Considering that “each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.2), my creative past has therefore lead me to this point, from which I may consider and create the caring future I seek.

Noddings makes a parallel between the creative process and the process of caring. She sees a connection between how both can be undervalued, as they are founded in the concepts of being receptive and open, rather than objective and analytical. In both instances, Noddings sees society as valuing the activity above the ability to act. She states,

When we discuss creativity in schools our focus is almost invariably on the activity, the manipulation, the freedom. And, similarly, when we talk about caring, our emphasis is again on the action, on what might properly be called caretaking. But the caring that gives meaning to the caretaking is too often dismissed as “sentiment.” In part, our approach to creativity and caring are induced by the dominating insistency on objective evaluation. How can we emphasize the receptivity that is at the core of both when we have no way of measuring it? Here we may ultimately decide that some things in life, and in education, must be undertaken and sustained by faith and not by objective evaluation. (Noddings, 2003, p.22)

Can shifting my perspective therefore, transport these concepts into the classroom and go so far as to help me deal with the trying students who have the ability to cause me so much grief?

Noddings might describe this as entering the ‘receptive mode’, one which would better enable me to connect to both my students and their needs, as well as to my spiritual and ethical self. She grasps that a shift in perspective, toward the intuitive self, can alter the manner in which we approach relationships.

We can switch from an assimilatory mode to a receptive-intuitive mode which, by a process we do not understand well, allows us to receive the object, to put ourselves quietly into its presence. We enter a feeling mode, but it is not necessarily an emotional mode. In such a mode, we receive what-is-there as nearly as possible without evaluation or assessment. We are in the world of relation, having stepped out of the instrumental world; we have either not yet established goals or we have suspended striving for those already established. We are not attempting to transform the world, but we are allowing ourselves to be transformed. (Noddings, 2003, p.34)

It is with a shift in perspective, achieved through the process of this literature review, that I approach the creation of the artistic works and narrative writings. Bell-Scott (1994) would call these ‘life notes’, personal narratives that constitute journal writings and reflections (as cited in Dillard, p.387). In addition to these informal works, there are six formal pieces of writing to accompany five of the exhibition pieces. One piece, entitled ‘Getting To This Place’, explains the creative process that brought me to this thesis and the artistic works contained within it. There are also four self-reflective pieces that explore my personal experiences within the classroom and the issues that have inspired the artistic works. In addition to these, there are two wholly fictionalized pieces of writings that are in narrative form, that tell the tales of two students and their teachers, Ms. Jones and Ms. Balli. These fictional pieces present to the reader general issues being faced by youth within contemporary society, as well as by some teachers within the contemporary classroom. There are also visual pieces in the collection that,, in an attempt to better understand and explore the secondary victimization process, consider the experiences of the teacher. One artistic work, a large-scale piece entitled ‘Talisman for the Future: Our Children’s Wishes’, was created as a voice for ‘Hope’; a looking to the future with the hopes and optimism that I personally strive to discover within myself and within my students. All of the works were photographed and included as part of the project documentation, and include detailed descriptions regarding the materials and techniques used.

## **Talismans~**

Talismans are the creative focus of the aesthetic work for this project. These ancient objects are considered to have spiritual bases, often with attributable magical properties (Dubin, 1987, p.12). Some say that amulets, which the Collins English dictionary describes as “a trinket or piece of jewellery worn as a protection against evil”, differ from talismans, in that talismans bring supernatural powers upon the wearer. Others describe the two as similar, and view talismans as also being imbued with the power to protect. The Collins English Dictionary attributes both qualities to talismans, defining them as “a stone or small object, usually inscribed or carved, believed to protect the wearer from evil influences [and] anything thought to have magical or protective powers.” Of importance here is the ancient, cross-cultural, wide-spread belief that talismans have spiritual power. “Virtually every religion in human history has offered its adherents small decorative objects which purport to do anything ranging between healing, protection or success.”<sup>18</sup> The tangible, physical form of talismans, representing an intangible attempt at spiritual connection, makes them an ideal focus for this work. As art works that contain intimate writings, talismans are also unique and ideal vessels for this project. In her discussion of Ethiopian talismans, Susan Kapuscinski-Gaylord describes these vessels as a form of book, in that they contain written texts and are valued for their linguistic content, and not only as an artistic piece for self-adornment. “While most other books are used to disseminate and share information, these books [talismans] are private and made for a single individual.” (Kapuscinski-Gaylord, p.35) In this way the intimate, written content, and public, visual elements of talismans, make them an ideal path to artistic and spiritual exploration.

The ancient Egyptians saw talismans (amulets) as enormously vital to their culture, and they occupied places of importance within both their daily lives and their ritualistic ones.

Amulets were very important throughout Egyptian history. The common word for amulet in the dynastic periods was *mk-t*, or “*protector*” and *udjat*, “*the thing which keeps safe*” and “*the strengthener*”. Each shape was believed to help the wearer in specific circumstances encountered in life and the afterlife. Amulets were widely used in personal jewelry from the Fifth to the Twelfth Dynasty (2494-1786 B.C.[E]).” (Dubin, 1987, p.14)

In other cultures as well, talismans and amulets have been valued. Dubin (1987) states that in Zulu culture, shamans wear talismanic necklaces said to protect and heal (p.47), while eye beads, often called ‘the evil eye’, talismans worn to ward-off evil, have been “worn by people for over five thousand years, [and] perhaps more than any other [class of bead], reaches across a wide range of cultures and a great span of time.” (p.106) It should also be noted that many cultures have worry beads, both used to give the wearer time to pause and reflect, and to connect with a spiritual base. Worry beads are seen “in present-day Greece, Turkey [and] the Middle East” (Dubin, p.32). Their “primary function [is] as a release for tension provides a security that may, in fact, be subconsciously spiritual.” (Dubin, p.32)

Given the historic and contemporary spiritual associations that the talisman as object has, it has therefore been chosen as the vehicle for artistic exploration in this project. It is to be noted herewith that my aim in using talismans is not to evoke a spiritual

experience, but rather to focus upon a spiritual awareness within myself. As previously mentioned, it is in the making of the object, in the art making process itself, that I perceive the strength, not within the object as an artifact. In no way am I purporting to possess mystical powers, or to be creating objects that possess powers of their own. As talismans are intended to be worn on the body, the pieces were created with that purpose in mind. The exception to that is the large-scale piece, which is intended not as a talisman for an individual, but rather for the community. It was created as a stand-alone piece, with the intention that the viewer will interact with it, within the talisman's physical space.

The series of writings that accompany the talismans are narrative and self-reflective in nature. The writings explore the idea that there can be spirit in education. They also examine the idea that in confronting fear and pain through the art making process, can potentially lead to a spiritual connection with the inner self. Post-art making writings, found within the project's conclusion section, reflect upon whether this process has led to a deeper personal connectedness to the outer world, and if the project has expanded my ability to deal with distressed students. Photographs of the talismans accompany the project. Included with these are a reflective analysis of the creation and meaning of each piece, as well as a detailed description of its dimensions, and the materials and techniques involved in its creation.

### **Getting to This Place**

I first encountered the idea of talismans several years ago, while working at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia as an artist-teacher. I had been teaching children's classes there for a few years, and was designing a summer course for six to eight year olds. In my preliminary preparatory work for a new class, I discovered a book entitled *Multicultural Books to Make and Share* by Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord (1994). In it was a project called Wish Scrolls, a form of Ethiopian talisman. Accompanying the project was a brief description of what these talismans were and what purposes they served within their society.

#### Wish Scroll (Ethiopia)

Small scrolls of vellum (specially treated animal hide), were, and still are, made in Ethiopia. They are placed in cases of metal or leather and worn, either tied to a belt or hung around the neck. The scrolls are talismans, prayers for personal protection and cures for the sick. While most other books are used to disseminate and share information, these books are private and made for a single individual. (p. 35)

I was immediately fascinated by these scrolls. As a book artist, I had been studying historical bindings that reflected the cultures and people that created them, and was drawn to these bindings. We created them in that summer course and I stored the idea of doing future work around the concept of these talismans in my mind for a later time.

In 2001, shortly after coming across Kapuscinski Gaylord's book, I was invited to participate in an exhibition entitled "The Art of Worship", at the Mary E. Black Gallery in Halifax. The exhibition, an exploration of liturgical furnishings created by Nova Scotian artists, was curated by Kate Langan, herself a Nova Scotian artist and writer.

Liturgical furnishings are objects used within the act of worship, for public or private purposes. They can be found throughout the world and are not tied to any specific form of religion, faith or devotion. Ms. Langan also wrote a book on the topic, released in conjunction with the show, published by Nimbus Publishing Limited. The book took a closer look at the artists and the works within the exhibition, including interviews about the artists' personal faith practices, if any, and the reasons as to why they create liturgical furnishing pieces.

I contemplated for some time as to what type of piece I wanted to create for this show. I knew that it needed to be deeply personal; have an authenticity to it that represented the spirituality that I felt within, yet had not acknowledged since the death of my parents several years earlier. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, I had left teaching and turned to making art as a means to deal with, and make sense of, the pain and emptiness that those deaths had created in my life, and somehow I knew that finally it was time to create a piece that honoured that inner journey. As I finally worked through these thoughts and came to this realisation, the piece made itself known to me: I would create a chemise, a medieval book cover of sorts, for my father's hymnal. A chemise would not require any type of interference with the original book, as a re-binding would, but would instead create another layer, a skin in essence, that would cover and protect the volume. It could be removed at any time, thus maintaining the integrity of the book as it existed. It was a sensitive addition, not a re-construction.

My father had been a United Church of Canada minister. Much of my youth had been spent in church, with music being the most comfortable form of devotion that I had

found. I have strong memories of my father sitting in his office at home, carefully choosing the hymns each week to accompany the liturgical message of the sermon. As we sang those hymns on Sundays, they always connected me to the voices of both past and present worshippers, as well as to my father himself. I was never a particularly pious church-goer, yet I always felt a sense of awe concerning the universe and its interconnectivity. It was when I was part of the greater whole that I felt most connected to my inner self. The music gave me that connectivity within a religious setting.

I created a knit and embroidered chemise for the hymnal, the Red Book, as it was affectionately called in church<sup>19</sup>. The front of the piece was hand knit in very fine thread, while the back was embroidery on silk. The textile design was a mirror of the original cover design and the effect was both simple and elegant. I dyed the fabric and materials used for the knitting and embroidery on a cold, crisp winter's day, and in the moment I experienced an awareness that I was honouring my father's memory by using my gifts to create something of beauty. In making the piece I realized that I could not locate knitting needles fine and long enough to handle the work I needed to do, so I created my own. This was my first introduction to working with fine metal, an experience that would later lead me to jewellery-making courses and another dimension of my artistic expression.

As part of the piece I created a box in which to house the hymnal. Its creation utilized some of my traditional book binding skills, as well as some of my new-found metal techniques. The box has a double lid, the top-most, outer layer containing my father's initials cut in silver, with a silver cross as a closing feature on the front. As the first

level of the lid is opened, the viewer is presented with a second, inner layer, which contains a poem that I penned to my father. When the box is opened, it is possible to prop the two layers up together, so that the poem is the primary focus of the piece.

While the visual art work is an integral part to the whole of my piece, The Red Book, so too, are the words. I composed these quickly, at the end of the working process, yet for me they were key to the entire piece:

My Dearest Father~

Who taught me to look  
Deeper then the surface,  
To question and challenge and grow,  
To love and honour and respect.  
I am blessed by your guidance.

It was you who introduced me  
To the music of ages,  
The sounds of long ago  
That echo  
In the souls  
Of a forgetful humanity.  
Music to lift and conquer  
From the depths  
Of despair.  
Music to exalt and celebrate  
The joyousness of life.

I owe to you the visions of love  
That now guide my daily life,  
The happiness that I have found,  
The treasures that I have seized,  
The humility I attempt to practise.

Thank you for the music.  
The memories,  
The lessons,  
The love.

~S.

In retrospect, I see these words for what they are: a prayer to my father. They are, in themselves, a form of devotion: to the past, to our relationship, to the greater universal strength that I recognize myself to be a part of. Just as in the past I had expressed these thoughts during worship, as well as during personal moments of reflection and contemplation, these poetic words are a form of offering to a greater spirit beyond myself; they are a connection between the inner and the outer universe.

From the exhibition and book came an interview with CBC Radio for their show *Tapestry* (January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2002. *The Art of Worship*, produced by Erin Pettit and Susan Mahoney). *Tapestry* explores the gamut of spiritual practices, various faiths, beliefs, traditions and connections to that beyond the Self. It looks at individuals and groups, at the public and the private, at the popular and the obscure. The interview for the show made me realize that while I may not be a religious person, I am certainly a spiritual one. It allowed me to focus on my manner of devotion, which comes in the form of art and words and ultimately, their melding into prayer.

The first talisman piece I created came shortly after the *Art of Worship* exhibition. It was made as an attempt to deal with a dying grandfather. This relationship was a little strained, making heart-felt honesty not always possible.

My grandfather, my father's father, was a very religious man who followed the teachings and beliefs of the Church, and attended services regularly. For both him and my grandmother, having a son who had become a minister was a great honour and source of pride. He never truly recovered from the death of my parents ten years earlier,

and I always sensed that he was emotionally self-protective around me. Indeed his wife, my grandmother, had eventually died of grief 16 months after my parents had passed away; despite months in ICU, the doctors never did find a cause for her illness, and it was accepted that she had lost the will to live. In my grandfather I sensed an emotionally exhausted person who feared loss and the accompanying pain. Perhaps in me he saw that loss.

I had a relationship with my grandfather, in which I told him that I loved and supported him. Yet inside of me, there were deeper, more personal thoughts that I felt it impossible to share with him at the time. Thinking back to the idea of Ethiopian talismans, worn on the body to ward off illness and to protect the wearer, I decided to create a talisman for him. This was not to replace what had to be said, but was instead an adjunct; it was my prayer for him. The intension was never to give this to the person for whom it was created, but instead to offer it up to the universe, from me, on his behalf. My grandfather was not aware that I had created the piece.

I knew that my grandfather's death was imminent and that nothing I did would alter that. I was not praying to change the world or his situation, but rather to bring peace to it. Realistically, I was also trying to bring a sense of inner peace to myself; doing something tangible in a situation that I had no control over. I made sure that I told him what needed to be said, but I also had more to tell. His talisman was designed to be worn on a belt, and was created in the same fine red silk from which my father's hymnal chemise had been made. It was, like the chemise, hand knit, and had a beaded pattern on it, with sterling silver detail and structural support. The scroll contained within the outer

structure has beaded detailing on its rod ends, and a knit end piece that wrapped around the scroll for closure. Its written contents read as follows:

May your God give you strength and comfort.  
May you look back on a long life filled with pleasure,  
pride and love.  
May you find happiness today in those around you  
and joy in the thought of  
joining those you have loved and lost.

At this point in my life I was working in my studio and teaching occasional courses for various arts institutions in Nova Scotia. I was not teaching in the mainstream school system and did not live a very public life. With those that I met and worked I had very casual and brief relationships, my closer associations being all family and friends. The talismans reflected the people I knew and my relationship with them. They were intimate objects that grew out of intimate personal connections.

Only a few months after creating these two talismans I returned to teaching in the public school system. Suddenly I was exposed to and became aware of pain and difficulties within the multitude around me. Every day I looked into the eyes of a tired, confused, injured child and knew that their life at that moment was filled with distress. I saw in both the students and the staff people struggling with the issues and situations they were faced with. Some confided in me their troubles, while others withdrew and became guarded and closed. I did not go looking for these personal struggles, yet they were all around me and very much present within the classroom.

I took tangible actions and connected these students with the guidance counselor, reported incidence of abuse to the principal, helped students use their writing to express their thoughts and feelings. I knew that all that could be done was being done, yet I was not able to walk out of the school at the end of the day and leave the students and their issues behind me. For the first time in many years, I felt as I had when my parents had died; I knew that I had to find a way of dealing, on a personal level, with what I was facing, or it was going to devour me. This time, most fortunately, I knew that I had an artistic outlet that would help me express these emotions and thoughts in a constructive way, and so I turned to my artistic practice.

I immediately thought of the talismans. They seemed a form of both prayer and protection for the person they were inspired by, and offered me a spiritual outlet. It was obvious that it was spirit that was feeling strained; physically I was fine and mentally I knew that actions were in place, where necessary, to assist. What I needed was a manner in which to connect with the person in need, without crossing the boundaries of professionalism. As with my grandfather and my friend, there were things that I wanted to say that were simply not able to be said.

The creation of the talismans had another, unexpected effect, however; they allowed me to see the learner, for all of the talismans to this point were created for students within my classes, differently. They were no longer students trying to learn, they were spiritual beings trying to grow. In my Masters courses at Mount Saint Vincent University, we had on many occasions discussed finding the individual within the learner; of creating real learning experiences that connected them to the curriculum, but

this went far beyond that. This was finding the spirit, the universal connection between the universe and the whole; of all of us moving through life together, recognizing the connection that we share. Subjects began to blur and a more fundamental concept began to inform my teaching practice. And while the change was probably imperceptible to anyone looking from without, there was a radical shift for me within.

My classroom began to change as well. As I dealt with each person I tried to look beyond the form standing in front of me, and find an inner spirit within. The atmosphere in the classroom became more quiet, more open and accepting. My lessons became less about me 'telling', and more about helping the learner to 'ask'. No longer did I see myself as a teacher, but rather as a guide; someone also trying to find their own personal questions and answers. I didn't give answers to a question that I, or someone else, had thought important, I helped the students to find their own questions, and then asked them to find the answers that were right for them.

This all sounds very new-agey and like hand-holding fun, but that was not how it was. I expected more of my students, not less; I expected them to be responsible and respectful, of themselves and the community that we were as a class and a school. Any form of disrespect was dealt with seriously and immediately, with issues discussed and personal reflection. It was emphasized that every voice was vital and important, and that without the strength of each individual, our whole would suffer. We focused on the individual finding the power within themselves, so that together, we could evoke change.

I continued to reflect upon the crises that some of the students were facing in private, and looking at them and their spiritual, inner selves in relationship to them as learners. I realized that as long as these students who entered my classroom had crises, then there was crises in the classroom as well. The very fact that the crises joined us in the learning environment meant that learning was not the only thing happening; people were dealing with problems as well as trying to learn. And just as it is impossible to separate the content of the curriculum from the learner, that is, it is necessary to engage the individual with the content in order for learning to occur, it became apparent that it was impossible to separate the learner from the spiritual being within, the person from the emotional, deeper existence that was inside.

Several questions have arisen within me as I continue to work on the talismans. These are direct extensions of me finding a way to cope with the problems that my students face, allowing me to focus more on the students and the teaching while I am in the classroom. If I feel a need to recognize the spiritual within, the presence of the heart and the soul, and to bring that into the classroom, why should it be any different for the students? If connecting to the deeper strengths and purposes within myself help me deal with the issues and crises that are all around me, do the students need that same sense of connection? We, as educators, are encouraged to acknowledge that we don't teach a mass, a lump, called 'the class', but rather individual people, and the fact is, these individuals each have their own, often private, questions and problems. If I am in need of a manner in which to cope with the problems that I see around me, aren't they? If I need to change the classroom to reflect a deeper, more vital essence of what it means to be human, to connect with that beyond my mind and body, into my heart and spirit,

don't they need that as well? Are we not all, the teacher included, learners within the classroom?. If this is true, and I believe it to be, then how can any of us learn effectively when our spirits are wounded? And if witnessing pain within my students wounds me spiritually, then does it not wound them as well, given that they are each a member of the classroom community? Here is the story of Owen, a fictional student. It is the story of a wounded child.

### Owen

Everything about him spoke of an older man in his late 50s or 60s: his casual posture, his pudgy physical shape, his cranky demeanor and even the manner in which he talked. From a distance, he stood hunched slightly, with a weightiness to him that implied years of effort and disappointment. When he walked, he shuffled a little, giving the impression that he had lived a long time and knew that there was no point in this life to hurrying through it.

The first time that Ms. Jones noticed Owen he was standing outside of his grade seven classroom, right across the hall from her own. He was chatting with his teacher, arguing almost, with an air of settledness to him that belayed his 12 years of age. His gestures and his stance seemed oddly out of place in a middle school; he seemed an old man in the guise of a youth. His teacher stood by the door, peripherally listening to him, weariness all over her young face. She appeared to be scanning the halls and Ms. Jones had the impression that she was plotting out her escape route.

When Owen walked into Ms. Jones' classroom the following year, he bellowed at her for instructions as to where to sit. They had never formally met before and she found his behaviour odd. For a slow moving guy he certainly seemed anxious, which came out as pushy and aggressive. Indeed, he seemed to command a presence that was so unique within the class that he was hard to place; he was neither young like the students, nor mature and experienced like the teacher. He grumbled as Ms. J. told him that he could choose a seat anywhere that he wanted for now, though she noted that he was polite in his grumblings. Quite obviously however, he was disappointed with the situation. She saw the disappointed and worried that he might in fact, be upset with her. Later she was to discover that Owen was

disappointed with life in general, and that for him, disappointment was inevitable.

Every aspect of Owen's school life seemed far from easy. Just as his physical appearance lacked a commonality with that of his peers, his interests did as well. He adored country music and was constantly telling everyone that they had to listen to the latest song by his favourite singer. While he expected everyone to appreciate his tastes in music, he would insult everyone else's. He was fast to call anything he did not like 'crap', which usually included everything the other students enjoyed. He abhorred anything that he deemed 'foreign', particularly Ms. Jones' World Music selections. He was about as stereotypically 'crotchety, cranky and old mannish' as could be imagined and quite obviously struggled to relate to and/or interact with everyone.

Once a week the class would go outside to play a game or go for a walk. It was a way to get some fresh air, much needed exercise and to have time as a class together beyond the classroom. Owen never participated in the games, but instead always stood next to Ms. Jones, right next to Ms. Jones, and chatted. Conversation was often stilted and difficult, but while she often found it awkward, he never seemed to notice. She had the distinct impression that he found it easier to be with her than with his peers, a thought that saddened her deeply. She tried telling herself that everything about Owen was old, so perhaps that was the company he sought out. She had to admit to herself however, that his hanging out with her probably had more to do with his lack of social skills than with her great company. During these outdoor activities, when she chose to play with the students, Owen would stand on the sidelines and watch. She hated these moments even more than the sideline chats, always feeling a sense of obligation to keep him company. The few times she tried to give him a task, a purpose of sorts, by making him referee, the results were abject failures. As a ref., he would get into terrible fights with the players, quick to call them names and kick them out of the game. He was uncertain about the rules, but instead of admitting such, he would try to flex his power as judge even more wildly. The students groaned when he would blow the whistle and started to ignore him all together. Ms. Jones soon discovered that it was far less stressful for everyone if she hung out with him and they watched the others together, appointing other students as referees.

Owen had a best friend, Jake, in Ms. Jones' Language Arts class, who was also somewhat of an outsider. Together they would wander the halls, complaining about the latest crisis in their lives or the injustice of their middle school plight. Their conversations revolved around passing judgment on everything: from teachers to homework, students to classes, pop stars to movies to society in general. They squawked and griped and whined. Though united in their front, they rarely agreed on anything; they

argued and bickered incessantly. Ms. J. started to think that perhaps they had a masochistic relationship that was both hostile and codependent, as they were never far from each other and the insults flew incessantly. They did however, seem to recognize that they needed each other in some fundamental way, for when one was absent from school the other was lost. On those 'solo' days, the one at school would slump into a corner away from the other students, trying hard not to bring attention to himself. And when the other returned again, they would resume their trudging rounds of the school, doing the loop, as they liked to call it, moaning about the world.

When given a choice in seats, Owen and Jake sat side by side, very much on their own. On a daily basis they could both be heard telling each other, and those around the room, to 'shut up' and 'keep their traps shut'. Ms. Jones' attempts to teach them less hostile ways in which to interact with each other and their peers did not seem to stick, and their personalities, so very much formed at such an early age, seemed always to drift back to what appeared to be a comfortable place for them. They were belligerent, combative and hostile. They yelled at their peers, often insulting them for even existing, and then would laugh with each other over how witty they were. They whined that everyone was always picking on them, though never seemed able to recognize that they were often the agents provocateurs. As far as they were concerned, they were always the victims of someone else's attacks and completely blame-free for the continuous conflicts they were in.

In an attempt to help them work through the latest crisis in their relationship, Ms. Jones would occasionally have mini meetings with them during lunchtime. The three of them knew that Owen and Jake needed each other and how precariously uncertain their friendship was. Despite all of their efforts, Owen and Jake's dysfunctional relationship was constantly plagued with problems. On occasion Ms. Jones would suggest that they have a meeting with the guidance counselor to work on their relationship, but every time the idea was raised either Owen or Jake would instantly puff out his thirteen year old chest and blurt out, "What? I'm no fag!" leaving Ms. J. frustrated and exhausted. Inevitably, they would then spend the next ten minutes defending their yet-to-fully-emerge sexuality and their teacher would walk away, unable to quiet them down.

Ms. Jones was routinely in touch with Owen and Jake's parents, as they all tried to make sense of the boys' latest outbursts. The parents would e-mail her or call the school, asking for her advice on how to deal with their teenage son, as if being a teacher came with a degree in counseling troubled youth and families. While she often wanted to suggest that they should have started disciplining their children when they were toddlers, that by this point their kids weren't suddenly going to start listening to their parents, she bit her lip and kept quiet. She felt sorry for the parents and knew that they had

a tough job and were seriously concerned about their children. She usually just remained fairly quiet and listened, giving them the shoulder they so desperately needed. Mentally, she made sure to allot the parents additional time during the next parent-teacher meeting and gave her thanks to the gods that she didn't have kids.

. On several occasions Ms. J. suggested that the boys take a break from each other and create some new friendships. She presented it as an opportunity for them to give each other some space, so as better to appreciate the relationship that they had. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," she would say to them with a smile. This only caused them to respond with a homophobic rant and Ms. J. would throw up her hands and walk away. Inevitably, Owen and Jake would bicker amongst themselves and they would break up yet again.

While a new friend would occasionally enter into Owen's life, it was only a matter of time until he would frustrate them past the point of no return leaving him alone once more. During these periods he looked so forlorn and lost, as if he truly belonged no where and to no one. Then slowly he would begin the mending dance that saw him following Jake around the school, trying to get on his good side. Owen would be agreeable and easy-going, transforming himself into the perfect friend. Once forgiven, things between Owen and Jake would be good for about a week and then the signs of relationship stress would start to reappear. During those brief periods of blissful harmony, Ms. Jones would breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that the peace simply couldn't last.

She eventually had to separate them; their constant criticisms and nasty comments had become too much for her to bear. By November, her classroom had taken on the atmosphere of a battlefield and going to work every day had become more and more difficult for her. She used to joke with the other teachers in her carpool, offering "hard, cold cash" to anyone who would switch classes with her for the day. Behind the humour however, she felt overwhelmed by their neediness. The farther she moved them from each other however, the louder they boomed. They were now screaming insults from wherever they were sitting and no amount of physical distance between them could stop the problem; the classroom space was simply too small for the two of them. Owen became even more defensive during these encounters, often randomly throwing out 'shut ups' and 'go to Hells' at anyone in the vicinity who might be looking in his direction. He lashed out indiscriminately, getting no one but himself worked up and upset. The more subtle students soon discovered that they could get his ire up, stirring an already volatile pot and stepping back to watch the mayhem. Being so loud and indiscreet, he often became the behavioural focal point in the class, creating what was always an imminent crisis that needed attending to. Moreover, once he got going, all manner of

insults and vocabulary would start flying, leaving Ms. J. trying to maintain order and a sense of decorum and civility within a chaotic classroom. And while she spent countless hours talking with the class about how every individual was unique and had special gifts to contribute to the community, in an instant Owen could shred her message to bits. Suddenly, with everything going seemingly well, he would become frustrated and start hitting the desk. Then, when someone tried to calm him down, he would turn around and call them a 'jerk', swearing at them and telling them off. Ms. J. found it increasingly difficult to defend those unique qualities in him that made him different from the other students and began silently thinking, "Just shut up, Owen, please." Though she hated herself for even thinking such thoughts, secretly she found herself wishing that he would just fade into the woodwork. She started numbering the days until the end of June on her desk top calendar.

By the Christmas holidays, despite her reluctance to isolate him from his classmates, Ms. Jones had placed Owen's desk closest to her own. Though all of the other students sat behind him, this attempt to keep him from getting into disputes with his peers did not work; he would simply turn around and start throwing his rebuffs at everyone behind him, unconcerned as to who they might hit. He would often talk with Ms. Jones, even when she was in the midst of teaching a formal lesson, though usually he turned in the other direction to react to his peers.

By the middle of January his desk was physically attached to hers. He sat facing her and she had become the focus of all of his attention. He had a tendency to chat constantly, regardless of what activity she was engaged in. It was completely draining to her, but she felt that she had no other choice but to keep him next to her. If she were doing attendance, he would chat. If she were sending an e-mail, he would chat. If she were having a conversation with another student at her desk, he would chat. Often he would stand up and lean over her desk so as better to hear the quiet talks she was having with other students. Frequently during these chats he would interrupt and make a comment about what he perceived as the other student's poor behaviour, their bad attitude, or even what they had just said privately to Ms. J.. He would tell people off and demand that they respect her, all the while stomping all over her privacy. It was exhausting for her to deal with and he sucked the energy right out of her. Even still, she had to admit that in his very unusual way there was an element of charm to him, as she knew that this was his way of showing that he supported and respected her.

Every morning Owen would begin the school day chatting with Ms. Jones. He would enter the classroom as soon as his bus arrived, sit down at his desk and start telling her about the latest excitement in his life. As the weeks progressed, his accounts of his evenings began to contradict

themselves. People and relationships did not align properly and the wild accounts of his time outside of school seemed highly implausible. Time passed and the stories and updates each morning became more and more fantastical. He made a point of coming straight to Ms. Jones when he arrived at school and obviously took pleasure in sharing his latest news with her. She wanted to give him her full attention when he spoke, to make him feel as if he was genuinely listened to, and had to make a concerted point to remember details so that she could inquire about things that he had mentioned. Not being able to make the pieces of his stories fit however, made this very difficult. During Phys. Ed. periods, which he hated, he would make excuses to return to class and talk with her. He started forgetting his gym clothes so that he could return to her room, but then would get angry with her when she sent him back upstairs to sit the period out on the sidelines. He would always have a reason why he could not be where he was supposed to be, instead trying to hide in her classroom with her. Notes scrawled on loose leaf paper started popping up to support his excuses. She was pretty sure that he had written them, but didn't want to challenge him for fear that he might be hurt. She started to feel as if the walls of her classroom were closing in on her, as she could never seem to find a quiet moment alone. Consciously, she had to make an effort not get angry with him or groan when she saw him at her classroom door and started escaping to the staff room just to get away.

Ms. Jones became uncertain as to how to deal with her relationship with Owen, or the stories that he was recounting to her. Should she help him make sense of his day-to-day life, guiding him through what might be a difficult phase and help him face reality? Or should she be an audience, one that would accept and listen to him and take an interest in whatever he had to say, regardless of how removed from reality it was? She started asking him pointed questions, hoping that he would self-correct his tall tales and come back to reality. This tactic however, didn't work, and his accounts only got more inventive and only seemed to upset him. She tried speaking to him about the importance of telling the truth so that others believe and respect you. Somehow, he never made the connection that she was talking about him. She feared that he had been lying for so long that it had become a normal way to live for him. Uncertain as to what to do, Ms. Jones struggled with which role she should take with Owen; as a teacher she kept telling herself, *'Shouldn't I teach him to look at himself honestly and face the realities of his world? Is all of this lying really helping him fit in?'* As a caring nurturing person, Ms. Jones was not sure that this was what Owen, the person, truly needed. She didn't know what to do.

As Owen's relationship with Jake completely deteriorated, Ms. Jones would routinely hear other students saying, "You're a liar, Owen". Actually, it was more like, "you're so full of shit, Owen, you loser!" as they dismissively turned their backs on him, pretending that he no longer existed.

He became even more isolated from his peers and more aggressive and defensive in his reactions toward them. Without his relationship with Ms. J., he was completely alone. The stories became wilder, as he tried to get people to listen to him and what he had to say. It was as if he had to justify his existence to the world.

At the beginning of February something happened that completely changed the way that Ms. Jones saw Owen; one of the students in the class was having a combination birthday and Valentine's Day party and was inviting her classmates to attend. It was a big event that involved formal invitations and dress-up clothes and Ms. Jones' grade eight classroom was all a buzz for an entire week. Invitations went out, students huddled together chatting about what they were going to wear, and the hallways were filled with whether so-and-so was going to be taking so-and-so to the fete. Ms. Jones sat back and enjoyed the teenage excitement over what would, for several of them, be their first boy-girl party since elementary school. She found it all charming.

A few days before the party, while she and Owen were having their daily morning chat, Ms. Jones asked Owen whether he was going to attend the upcoming birthday party. He just looked at her blankly and didn't reply. She presumed that he didn't understand the question and so rephrased her query and asked him again. Very matter-of-factly Owen told his teacher that he wouldn't be going as he hadn't been invited, throwing in an extra, "And parties are stupid wastes of time anyway." Ms. J. was speechless and stared at Owen; she simply didn't know what to say to him. Her mind instantly flew from thought to thought, as she couldn't help thinking of the pain and hurt that he must be feeling at that moment, being so openly rejected by his peers. When she didn't say anything, Owen continued. "Actually, I've never been to a birthday party. I've never been invited to one." It was all so straight forward and sincere that Ms. Jones had no doubt in her mind that Owen was telling the truth. Though she tried to twist her mind around the idea that a child of 13 could have gone their whole life having never been invited to a birthday party, she simply could not grasp the thought. Instantly, she wanted to embrace Owen, to take away what must be so much pain, years of pain, to make him happy and loved and wanted. She wanted to hold him tightly and tell him that everything was going to be fine and that someday this childhood of rejection would all seem like nothing. But she knew that it would not be true and she knew that that was not her role.

Upon the revelation that so much of Owen's thick, tough outer shell must have been formed from year upon year of rejection, Ms. Jones realized that while she was his teacher, that was no longer her most important relationship with him. Now, more significantly, she was his audience, someone who did not question, challenge or judge him; perhaps the only

person who simply listened to what he had to say. Her role as a listener did not involve any sort of evaluation or assessment of him; she was a safe place for him to rest. Academically, she was his advocate, the one who looked into testing for him when he struggled in class. When he discovered creative writing, she became his supporter as he explored narration from bizarre perspectives that left his classmates baffled by who the writer could be. Socially, she was the person who sat down with him and his peers when he got into a fight or mishap in the hallways. Physically, she was the person who fed him when he forgot his lunch, which was often, and her classroom was a safe-haven for him from the outside world. On occasion he would bring her large boxes of chocolates that he hoped would please her. During such times he would sit anxiously in his desk attached to hers, waiting for her to drop everything and jump into the box, twitching in his chair in anticipation. She never had the heart to tell him that she struggled with her weight and didn't want the chocolates, but instead ate several in front of him before he was satisfied that he had pleased her. Then she would share the treats with him and they would celebrate his generosity. Emotionally, Ms. Jones was the one he rushed off the bus to chat with in the morning. She calmed him down when he was angry and tried to explain the perspectives of others when he could not understand them. In short, they spent a great deal of time together and most of it had little to do with curriculum-based learning or occurred during scheduled teaching time.

The epiphany that she could have an alternative relationship with him freed her. She began treating each day as a new adventure, each story as a clean slate. In effect, every day was as if Ms. Jones and Owen were meeting each other for the first time. Their relationship lived in the moment, existentially, and she started imagining herself in an Albert Camus novel. It was complete in and of itself, as she shared in his latest excitement or heartache. He needed her to be someone who would listen to him, to pay attention and accept him exactly as he was. She became that person.

### Heartplate~

There are children in our society who are never invited to a birthday party. Not once. Not in an entire childhood do they receive a playful invitation announcing, "You are invited..." They never have the experience of buying a present to take to a friend's celebration, of choosing the perfect clothes to wear for the occasion, or of anticipating

the fun event. They never have the chance to sit at a table with other children and eat cake, of playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey, or of going home with a 'Thank you for coming' treat bag. They grow into adults without memories of what it is like to attend a birthday party, only imagining what it must be like for other people.

Often these children are overlooked due to differences. They may not be one of the popular kids who is immediately chosen for teams, or is ever asked to eat lunch with friends. They may have a difficult temperament, not understanding social cues or how to interact with peers. They may have special physical or mental challenges that make them 'more work' than many birthday party hosting parents want to take on. Regardless of the reasons, they are often ignored and forgotten.

Some of these children grow up to be reclusive and withdrawn and we as a society look upon them and wonder why they don't just stand up and be more present in life. They are hesitant to take risks and lack the self-confidence to embrace new challenges. Others become angry and belligerent and lash out at those around them. They try to sting and wound others, before the inevitable barbs are lashed out at them.

'Heartplate' is a talisman to protect the hearts, souls and spirits of just such children. It is to keep them whole and remind them that they are loved, even when the world seems to forget them. It serves to protect them from the wounds that neglect can inflict, so that they themselves do not harden and inflict hurt against the world. It is a prayer to

those who need some love, respect and nurturing, amidst the cold, exclusive, competitive environment we call society.

Heartplate was the first talisman that was inspired by my interactions with students, though it was the last piece that I made of the twelve. The thought of the tough outer shells that some students wear, coupled with the pain and exclusion that they feel during their childhoods, left me wanting to create a protective garment for them, one filled with caring and strength. This idea evolved into that of making a talisman to be metaphorically worn on the body, protecting the heart and spirit. While planning this project, my thoughts drifted to fencing and sword fighting, as some students often verbally pare with their classmates. That in turn took me to the idea of creating a talisman in the form of a breastplate.

As the mother of two young children regularly invited to birthday parties, my heart aches at the thought of the poor spirits that have never been invited to one. Originally, I wanted to weave the breastplate out of birthday party invitations that my two daughters had received over the years. If these students could not attend a birthday party as guests, they would be surrounded by invitations to parties that they could attend indirectly. Birthday party invitations are not that big however, and accumulating enough to weave a large piece proved a difficult task.

I settled upon the idea of weaving the primary body for the piece out of Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey games. These games are unique in our culture as they are played almost exclusively by children and at birthday parties. A child who has never attended a birthday party has probably never played this game. This thought still amazes me.

Three game sheets were cut into strips and then woven together in a twill pattern. I arranged the strips so that the printed sides were down, facing away from me, so that the resulting combinations were random and unplanned. This felt like a good fit to me, for I often feel that it is a random twist of fate that determines which children ‘fit in’ and which do not. While some factors that affect behaviour are ones to which the child has been exposed, such as abuse and neglect, other factors are arbitrary, such as cognitive development and cultural background. Weaving the strips together in this luck-of-the-draw way felt like the right voice to express this idea of randomness in life. Before weaving the strips together, I had written thoughts, hopes and wishes for those like the students who inspired me onto a few of the strips. Once woven together these messages were hidden within the inner body of the piece. This harkens back to the ancient practice of bookbinders, in that they wrote a secret message upon the backing paper for a book’s spine, which is then glued into place. The message is not intended to be read, nor does the owner of the book even know about its existence. It is a quiet, secret wish for the owner: a prayer to the one who possesses the volume from its maker.

Finally, strips created from birthday party invitations that my own children had received over the course of 18 months were used to weave the central area within the breastplate, the one that covers the heart. The intention is that metaphorically, the students’ hearts will be touched by the hospitality and community that these parties represent. The kindness of these invitations was woven into a garment that protects the wearer from pain, yet allows him to focus upon the joy that is possible in life.



Heartplate (2008)~

Dimensions: H 50cm X W 31cm X 30cm

Materials: Used birthday party invitations,  
Pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey games,  
Inflatable balloon-covered buttons,  
Thai paper, velcro.

### Lucy~

Lucy was a quiet girl who dressed in dark clothing and tried hard to be different from her peers. Her makeup was heavy and awkwardly applied, and the way in which her foundation suddenly stopped at her chin created the illusion that she wore a mask. She was always seen with her two friends, Anne and Allie, usually hanging out in the upstairs' girls' washroom, or in the stairwell by the gym. Together they made a creative trio that seemed oddly out of place in any situation, though comfortably so. Lucy rarely spoke in class, but had a habit of staring at Ms. Balli belligerently when she spoke. Her marks were excellent, though she never contributed to class discussions or volunteered to help the teacher.

Early in the semester it became quite evident to Ms. Balli that Lucy enjoyed writing and drawing. Her poems were expressive and lyrical, despite their dark and disturbing content. While her classmates took notes in class, Lucy would fill pages and pages of her binder with words and images, often scratching deeply into the paper with her pen.

As she worked in class, she would hum quietly under her breath, oblivious to those around her. Her favourite band, Evanescence, sang beautifully of angst and suicide, often asking those left behind how they felt about what they had caused the victim to do. While this was a typical gothic mantra for her age group, Lucy seemed to languish in its message. Some students said that she and her friends were "emo", popular parlance meaning emotional and focused on the most despairing and depressing elements of the human condition. Ms. Balli would often hear her students talk about their peers in this way and hated the term, as it labeled and categorized, and reduced the idea of emotionality into a weakness. When she looked at Lucy she saw a talented and strong girl who was artistic and creative, not a weak and overtly emotional one.

During the beginning of the semester Lucy followed her friend Allie's lead and chose to portray an attitude of disinterest in English class. Lucy would not speak or contribute in class, instead giving Ms. Balli unnerving blank stares. In the hallways Ms. J. often heard the three girls laughing about what an old bag was and how she ceaselessly droned on about nothing in class. On the outside, the girls were all bravado and disdain, though Lucy secretly continued to submit her assignments without her friends' knowledge.

Lucy's writing echoed the sentiments found in the music she and her friends listened to, with gloom and death as the primary foci. Her artwork,

scrawled around the margins of her assignments, was also very well done, though it always appeared disturbing and lonely to Ms. J.. It often featured faceless, solitary figures with long hair shielding their eyes, wandering amidst gravestones and bleak landscapes. Sensing that writing might be the best way to communicate with her, Ms. Balli wrote notes to Lucy on her assignments, encouraging her to pursue her artistic talents and outlets. When she called her to her desk after class one day however, and suggested that she branch out and start exploring other topics and subjects in her work, Lucy just shook her off casually, as she always did, and kept writing and drawing more of the same.

At some point around mid-term exams, Ms. Balli noticed the marks on Lucy's forearm. Lucy usually wore long-sleeved, black and white t-shirts, cut-off jean shorts and leggings that matched her shirt; her clothes were baggy and hung on her tiny frame. The cuffs of her shirts just about came to the tips of her fingers and when she wrote, the pens would appear to magically float out from her sleeve. When her shirtsleeve was accidentally caught on the corner of the desk and pulled up to her elbow one day, Ms. Balli caught a glimpse of the scars. They were old and new, with layers of cuts covering older scarring. Some were deep and others were scratches. Lucy grabbed her sleeve and hiked it back down, looking about to see if anyone had noticed her. When her eyes met Ms. Balli's, she scowled hard and stared her down. From then on Lucy tried hard keep her forearms covered from view, but from time to time a sleeve would creep up or get caught on something, and the cuts would be revealed. This evidence of self-mutilation disturbed Ms. Balli greatly and she took the matter up with the school's guidance counselor, though little seemed to come from it.

Periodically over the years, Ms. Balli had seen cutters in her classes. There was an interval a few years before Lucy when they felt more prominent in number. Ms. Balli was always shocked how students would openly talk about the practice and make light of it, as if it was just another experimentation along the road of adolescence. They would laugh it off and say that someone was 'emo', as if cutting was a normal behaviour if one was part of that particular clique. Then it was if the fashion changed and the act fell out of favour with the emo crowd. When Lucy appeared in Ms. Balli's class, no one seemed to be speaking about cutting anymore. Apparently, it had fallen out of vogue.

Despite waves of popularity for the practice and the manner in which kids tried to shake it off casually, any evidence of cutting would send out alarm bells to Ms. Balli. Some cutters that she encountered actually tried to draw attention to themselves and get her to notice them. One student used to appear at her desk on a daily basis, brandishing the faintest of scratches and asking for yet another band-aid for her arm. Another girl

would take out her math set in class, extract her compass and start gouging at herself for all to see. When Ms. Balli had called the girl's parents, they shook it off and said that it was only a stage and besides, all of her friends were doing it as well. No doubt soon, they said, they'll all just get bored with it and stop.

While talking in the staff room one day, one of Ms. Balli's colleagues told her that she had a student in her class who would bring a sewing kit to school and make a production of stitching her arm. When asked why she was doing this, the girl had apparently answered that it made her look like Sally from the popular movie *A Nightmare Before Christmas*, and that she liked the way it looked. The student's teacher had also mentioned to Ms. Balli however, that the Sewer was struggling academically and it appeared that as she felt less and less able to cope with the workload in front of her, she would stitch deeper and faster. The teacher was at her wits' end and did not know how to deal with it anymore; she found the practice disturbing and distressing. She confided to Ms. Balli that she was becoming so dismayed by the behaviour, that she was worried about introducing any new material in class lest the student feel unable to handle it. Ms. Balli felt sorry for her colleague and wondered why the administration was not doing anything about the situation. It and the Sewer were never mentioned again.

Despite the chats with her colleagues reassuring her that this was popular behaviour with the students, Ms. Balli immediately became concerned whenever she would catch a glimpse of a forearm that was layered in cuts. Any form of injury on a student disquieted her of course, be it superficial or otherwise, but seeing Lucy's arms in particular sent her reeling with worry and distress over the girl's mental state. Given her dark tendencies and literary forays into death poetry, Ms. Balli was uneasy. In addition to all of this, the nighttime news had recently been filled with accounts of teenage violence and suicides. People were talking about how kids were now committing copycat acts and that suicides were dramatically increasing in number. Ms. Balli herself knew of two former students who had chosen to take their lives and like Lucy, they were quiet and withdrawn. She worried for the girl's safety.

The school's guidance counselor reassured Ms. J. that Lucy was receiving help outside of school; the family was aware of the situation and everything was being dealt with. As according to the school's policy in such matters, all information about Lucy was confidential and Ms. J. was not privy to any of it. While she understood this and respected the family's privacy, she nonetheless felt powerless to help the girl. At least, she told herself, she could take solace in knowing that the school and others were aware of Lucy's actions. She had done her duty and reported what she had seen to the administration and that was it, right? According

to the guidance counselor, everything was being handled by the professionals and Ms. Balli had nothing to concern herself about. Every day however, Lucy would walk into Ms. Balli's class, sit down, pull the cuffs of her sleeves down over her hands and stare at her teacher silently. Every afternoon, Ms. J. would pack up her books, head home and think about Lucy, wondering what was being done to help the girl.

Towards the end of the semester Ms. J. gave her English class a writing assignment intended to be fun and relaxing: the students had to write a humorous story that they would bind into an accordion book and illustrate. The class was going to display the finished books and celebrate the end of the semester with an exhibition and party. Even the most reluctant writers in the class loved the sculptural structure of the accordion books, which twisted and turned when opened up, and everyone dived into the project. The students chatted and laughed as they wrote, folded, glued and illustrated.

Upon receiving Lucy's book, Ms. Balli went numb. Lucy's pages were filled with beautifully crafted words about suicide, and her drawings indicated that the main character was in a cemetery, discussing her own death with another corpse. The two bodies were laughing and joking about how sad their friends' and families were, but how fun it was to be dead. Ms. Balli went immediately to the school guidance counselor's office to show him Lucy's work, fearful that Lucy had every intention of carrying out the act she was writing about. While he promised to speak with Lucy sometime in the next few days, he reassured Ms. J. that Lucy was receiving counseling and that everything was fine. Raising her voice, Ms. J. asked him how a student so disturbed could possibly be fine. He just smiled benevolently at her and quietly escorted her from his office. Ms. Balli went home that night, terrified that the next morning in the staff room she would hear that Lucy had killed herself. How, she wondered, would she be able to look at herself in the mirror if this came to pass, knowing that she hadn't done enough to save Lucy.

Lucy graduated a few weeks later and never returned to her old school for a visit. Ms. Balli never saw her again. When other students who knew Lucy did come back to see her, Ms. Balli would always casually direct the topic to Lucy and ask if they knew how she was doing. Apparently, she was doing fine, though no one really saw her anymore. She had moved out-of-province for university and never came home during the summers.

A couple of years later a thin, gregarious boy ended up in Ms. Balli's class, with dancing eyes and a rueful smirk. He was always wearing a knit cap that Ms. J. was continuously asking him to remove in school and he could never stay seated during class. He was an affable kid with a zest for

life and Ms. Balli liked him. She hadn't realised that he and Lucy were siblings until he pointed it out to her one day while chatting.

"She said that you were her favourite teacher," he told her. "She told me she always liked your class and that I am lucky to have you. But she said that you talk too much and drove her nuts."

"Really," Ms. Balli replied, "And did she say anything else?"

"Yeah. She said to tell you to take it easy on me and not give me too much homework," he added, walking away.

Ms. Balli chuckled to herself. She was very gladdened to hear that Lucy was doing well, though deep inside she still worried about how well dear Lucy really was doing.

### *Velvet Cuffs for the Wounded~*

These cuffs were created for all of the cutters that I have taught over the years. They are intended to be worn on the forearms, covering the wounds that may have occurred by the wearer's own hand. They are made with velvet, silk, organza and taffeta fabrics, with appliquéd images and free-hand machine embroidered text. They have been quilted using the Italian trapunto technique, with healing herbs inserted between the layers of fabrics.

The Trapunto technique is special, in that it requires a scarring of the materials in order for it to be achieved. Unlike other quilting techniques, ones in which the materials are placed between the layers of cloth and the layers are then quilted together to create the effect, Trapunto creates the shapes first and then the inner materials are inserted. In

this process, the areas to be raised are cut open on the back of the piece and then the batting is inserted from behind. The quilter slashes into the targeted area in order to insert. Once the materials are added to the desired effect, the slash is then stitched together in an elegant manner. The goal here is not to hide the slashes or stitching; it is accepted as a natural part of this process in order to allow the design to grow. For this very reason, I was immediately drawn to this technique for the velvet cuffs.

Metaphorically, I am not trying to erase the scars and experiences of my students, nor ignore their existence; I am acknowledging that they are an accepted part of the growth process for those individuals, a process of survival. It is important that I stand back and bear witness to the lives before me, not try to solve what I perceive as their problems. Trapunto therefore, was the ideal textile technique to use for this work, as it honours the scars as a natural part of the overall beauty.

The cuffs are entirely in black, with the texture and different materials delineating the designs. The olive branch comprises the central image, and is traditionally known for both its healing properties and its association with peace. Around the edges of the design is text, outlining the different herbs contained within the cuffs. Along with the names of the herbs is written the qualities associated with the particular herbs used. All of the herbs were chosen for their unique healing properties and all of them were picked from my garden. Most interestingly, I had planted these herbs a few years prior to making the cuffs for a variety of reasons: sometimes for their smell, sometimes for their taste and sometimes for their look. I did not choose to plant them for their healing properties and it wasn't until I began the research for this piece that I became aware of their powers. In every case, with the exception of the olive, which doesn't grow in this

climate, I had the herbs that I wanted to use in my very own garden. They were picked and dried and then combined for the quilting process.

The cuffs are edged in a soft velvet, which is carried over onto the backs of the pieces. This is to ensure a comfortable surface against the scars, so that they are not irritated any further. As closures, five buttons have been created for each cuff with hand beading techniques. These have a very organic feeling to them, speaking to the essence of nature and the animal that is humanity. The cuffs are closed using a lacing technique with elastic cord, so that they can be removed or applied by the wearer herself, without the need of any help. I wanted the cuffs to be a beautiful extension of the wearer, as a source of pride and healing, over which they have complete control.



Velvet Cuffs For the Wounded (2008)~

Dimensions: H 24.5cm X W 28.5cm X 2cm

Materials: Velvet, organza and silk fabrics,  
Silk and cotton threads, glass beads,  
Filled with thyme, lavender and  
Yarrow.

### **Talisman Against Hunger~**

Every year there are a few of them, the students who don't seem to eat. They spend their lunch hours avoiding the others, avoiding the activity that everyone else seems so intent on. Sometimes a student is a loner, avoiding everyone else as well as eating. Sometimes they are a couple or a triad, engaging in conversation rather than in consuming food. Each has a unique pattern and while they may cluster together, they are individuals in their motivation.

Often they hang out outside of the classroom, where teachers often aren't present during the lunch time. Occasionally, they find quiet hallways that their peers avoid, choosing neither to eat nor to talk. Never are they in the cafeteria, chatting with friends. They avoid that place, as they avoid the food eaten there.

These students are often a little quieter than the others in the class. They are never the most outgoing learners, nor are they the most gregarious people. They often present themselves as somewhat withdrawn and distanced, though there have been individual non-eaters that are extreme in these behaviours.

I know that there are numerous reasons behind this non-eating pattern. Some students' families face difficult financial circumstances and they don't have food for their children, nor the money for them to purchase lunch. While the school is able to give aid to these kids, some choose instead to skip eating rather than to admit the need. They stand alone, strong and defiant, in the face of a world of want. They choose to see

this stance as one of choice, rather than face a situation that is one of want. There are instances where parents expect their children to provide for themselves, including food for their lunches. These students are sent to school with things to sell, such as candy or gum, and are told that if they wish to eat they will have to earn the money for themselves. When unable to sell the goods they often eat the candy instead. Refined sugar does not a good lunch make. And that is on the days they are fortunate enough to have something to take to school. While I have rarely seen evidence of this myself, another teacher I know and trust has told me that it occurs. I know that she has often opened her wallet to feed her hungry students.

Parental neglect is not of course, linked to financial instability; there are many who are struggling financially who send their children to school with food, just there are many who are doing well financially who do not. Students that come from financially stable homes may have parents who neglect to purchase healthy food appropriate to lunches, or may not pack lunches for their children. While the students I deal with are in grades six to ten and old enough to make their own lunches, the supplies may not always be available to them.

Possibly, there are those who choose not to eat as a form of control. Be it image control, emotional control or control of circumstances, these students scare me the most. They may be trying to alter their image into one that society deems attractive, or they may be trying to gain a semblance of control in life. The end results of not eating however, are the same: they consciously do not nourish themselves. Students such as

these include those with eating disorders, as well as those who feel overwhelmed and lost. Their behaviour is influenced by a variety of motivations.

If our primary function as teachers is to nourish the mind, then the lack of physical nourishment demonstrated by these students is interfering with our task. If the body is not fed, then the brain, a part of the body, is also not fed. Learning becomes difficult when one is hungry, as concentration, focus and memory all begin to lag. A lack of fuel to the body means a lack of fuel to the brain, and as I am faced with these students every day, I find myself worrying about how they will function and learn well in the classroom that afternoon, when they have gone so long without food.

When I see these students in the halls, even those who look as if they are trying to become invisible, I always try to speak with them. I have invited them into my classroom and have shared soups and fruit with them on many occasions. Sometimes I lie and say that my young daughter packed my lunch and must think that I am an elephant, that there is way too much food for one person and that they would be helping me out by eating some. This works when a student is not eating due to financial crises, or if they are socially excluded by their peers and fear being in the cafeteria. Sometimes my classroom is a haven away from the chaos of school, though I recognize that I often represent an establishment that is distressing to them. Some students have a very real fear that if the system discovers the lack of food situation in their homes, it will pry deeper and discover neglect and even abuse that may exist. They lie to protect their parents and guardians, and to protect their home life. They genuinely fear removal from their homes, and thus keep quiet about the state of want and need that they live in. For

those who do not eat by choice however, all of the instant soups in the world will not help. And when the guidance counselors and other support networks are unable to make any in-roads, there appears little that any of us in the school system can do to help these students.

I have had students whose non-eating has been coupled with other issues, such as those who are selectively mute. Capable of speaking, they choose to isolate themselves from others with silence. Some also have truancy issues and they magnify issues that they are facing in the classroom. Not eating, not speaking and not attending school all serve to insulate these students from the outer world; eating is but another example of this cutting off. My heart breaks when I see people struggling with the inner issues that they must face, as I understand that they may be deeply unhappy. Creating a talisman for those who are hungry, for those who are isolated, is my way of dealing with the pain and mayhem of those who are self-alienated, students that I encounter every day.

### *Obi Against Hunger~*

This talismanic piece is meant to nourish and support all types of hungers that the students may feel: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Just as hunger is a physical experience, this talisman is a physical object that surrounds and envelopes the body, touching the outer body and protecting the inner self. It is a stiff piece that is very supportive, holding the body upright and strong. It is intended to be worn over clothing, as a Japanese obi is, and is adjustable, dependent on the size of the wearer. The

adjustability of the piece is crucial, as it is intended for the many non-eaters that I have seen over the years who have varied greatly in size and shape. As well, the adjustability allows the piece to grow with the wearer, in the hopes that change is possible.

This linen, obi-like sash, is embroidered with imagery and text. Three bowls have been drawn, created with layers of free-range embroidery in silk threads. The bowls can be interpreted as empty or full, depending on the perception of the viewer. They are each different in design, and intended to represent many cultures and traditions. Between the bowls are hand embroidered small shafts of wheat, representing the idea of simplicity and nourishment. Between the verses of text are embroidered small grains of rice, to remind of the many traditions and the variety of bounty found on the earth. Around the edges of the piece, along the borders, are hand embroidered very simple waves, to represent water. The water unifies both the inner and outer body, as it is the fundamental element of our planet, the essence of physical life.

The text is machine embroidered around edges in silk. I looked at the act of eating, of consuming, and extended that metaphorically by the use of different verbs and different objects to those traditionally associated with eating. I am looking at the needs of the individual and while those may include physically nourishing the body, they may also include feeding the spirit of the individual. The text reads:

Nourish the Body  
Nurture Pleasures  
Feed the Soul  
Feast on Strength  
Consume the Love  
Satisfy Hungers  
Harvest the Bounty  
Cultivate Dreams

The piece closes in the back with a sculpted 'stick' made from brass. It is detailed with sterling silver and coco bola pierce work. The imagery on the top end of the stick is double-layered, each layer created from a material and is in the style of flames of fire. This imagery reinforces the idea of the importance of physical and spiritual nourishment; a fire must be fed in order for it to grow, it must consume in order to survive. And like a fire, the individual will extinguish herself without nourishment; the soul will cease to exist if it is not given attention and care.



Obi Against Hunger (2007)~

Dimensions: Obi~ H 22cm X W 90.2cm  
Closure~ H 28.7cm X W 5.3cm

Materials: Linen fabrics, cotton fabrics,  
Cotton, rayon and silk threads,  
Thread, copper, maple and  
Paduak woods.

### Small Wishes for Openness~

It is hard to stay open. I get tired of people wanting my attention, my ideas, my support and my strength. Every day, several times a day, I look up to see someone hovering by me, wanting to talk to me about something. Often it is nothing in particular, but rather anything in general. And quite frequently I don't even need to lift my head to know that they are there, as their energy pulses outward, cutting into my quiet space.

I secretly want to ignore them; to stay quiet and focused and calm. I would love to stay mute and to have everyone around me mute, as words often seem excessive and filled with nothingness. Speech is so very often purposeless; this, coming from a woman who constantly suffers from excessive verbage. But the older I become, the more I yearn for silence in my life. Unfortunately, I have a career that rarely permits me such a luxury.

I feel extremely guilty about wanting this quiet space. Those who come to me often do so because I take an interest in them and encourage them to express their thoughts. I know that for some of these students, I am the only adult who listens attentively when they speak, who wants to hear what they have to say, who cherishes their words and ideas. I know that many of them have parents and guardians who care and listen, but for those selective few, I am it: the audience they crave, who gives value to their inner self.

So I fight this inner desire for silence. I try to stay 'open', 'caring' and 'accepting' to who they are and what they want to say. Like many teachers I forgo lunches in the

staffroom with colleagues for discussions in my classroom with students. I make myself available when I can for those in need. It is exhausting however and I do not always want to play.

### *The Wee Talisman~*

This talisman is a very small piece, intended to be worn on a daily basis. It is hand knit, simple in its abstract colour ways, with a pistil of silver that emerges from its centre. The pistil is the core of a scroll, wound tightly into a decorative binding. It is a flower of simple beauty, meant to adorn but not be the focal point, to enhance but not dominate.

It was hand knit with silk topstitch thread, a very fine material. The shape and techniques used in its making echo my search for focus within the smallest of tasks and moments. It has been hand beaded to highlight the flower's opening, into which the scroll sits. This serves to remind me that it is in the opening of oneself that beauty and spirit are discovered. The silver work is simple and the chain that holds it around the neck is short. The piece is small and simple and delicate, just as the moments of true discovery often are; it is in the unheralded experiences that one slowly opens up.

In this same way, I try to be as a listener. This talisman reminds me to stay simple and humble before my students; to listen to them as they need me to, and to be present in the moment. I want to be receptive and open to them and to their words, rather than focused on myself or on another matter at hand.

I once met an elderly woman who affected me greatly; when one spoke to her she made you feel as if you were, at that moment, the most important person in her world. She was a phenomenal listener, commenting when asked to do so, but otherwise attentive and respectful to the one speaking to her. When I met her I was a youngster, a mere 26 years old, filled with the self-righteousness and assuredness that only the young can possess. It was a time before the worry and doubt that came with adulthood crept into me. This woman listened to me and told me that she loved my energy and enthusiasm and that I was a gift. She touched me intimately and while our conversation was a mere hour in my lifetime, to this day I remember what a vital gift a good listener can be.

I would like to be just such a listener to my students, as well as to the others around me. The Wee Talisman is to remind me that true power lies in the smallest of gestures, not the grandest of intentions. Indeed, beauty rises amidst the most simple and humble of situations and one never knows when those touches of richness may appear. It is my prayer to find the inner peace and the strength required, so that I can be receptive to all and not place barriers around myself. This is a hard battle for me, as I sometimes find that in giving I become drained. This talisman is to keep me strong and whole and open to my students. It is also to keep me from emptying myself, so that there is a 'me' to bring home to my family.



Wee Talisman (2007)~

Dimensions: H 18cm X W 14cm X D 3cm

Materials: Silver, silk threads,  
Japanese paper, glass beads.



Wee Talisman (2007)~ Detail #1

Dimensions: H 18cm X W 14cm X D 3cm

Materials: Silver, silk threads,  
Japanese paper, glass beads.

### **Talisman for the Future: Hope**

The youth of our society often feel powerless. They complain that they have no voice and are incapable of affecting an impact on the world around them. They become complacent about the influence that they might have, seeing themselves instead as controlled and told what to think and do. They see rebellion as a response to the constructs of community and society, feeling disenfranchised and jaded. Perhaps this is as it has always been.

Yet they have power beyond their imaginings: as citizens, as ‘the future’ that society is always reminding them that they are, or simply in their sheer purchase power as consumers. Instead however, I see many of them following blindly behind the consumption wagon, rarely questioning what they are told to like and want. When someone in their teens does stand up and publicly protest what they are supposedly craving as consumers, they make the news and are applauded for their efforts.

A large component of my teaching focuses on the human voice. I talk with students about how important it is to express oneself, both privately and publicly. We talk about the need we all have to bring the inner self out and the power that individuals have to evoke change. We talk about protest and those who challenge societies and what such voices mean. I explain to them that as educated people, they have an even stronger foundation upon which to voice their concerns and protests than most and I encourage them to express themselves publicly and often. We have written letters to MPs and newspapers and persuasive pieces to the school’s administration about changes that they

would like to see transpire. We have made art that is personal and expressive and have hung it in the hallways of the school. Together we have looked at the influence of mass-media and the importance of thinking critically when confronted with its messages. I am always amazed to see looks of incredulity on some of the students' faces when they realize that they are being carefully manipulated by forces expressly designed to attract their desires and money. For some, this is something that they really hadn't ever considered.

At one of the schools at which I have taught they have an Language Arts activity each term that aims to strength the persuasive writing skills of the student-body. During these writing activities, students are presented with a topic and must write a letter to a fictional editor of a newspaper, persuading them of their opinion on that topic. They must choose a side to debate and then craft a letter which will clearly outline their ideas and supports for such. Marks are given not only for the persuasiveness of the argument presented, but also for the skill and craftspersonship of the writing. Traits such as voice are carefully considered.

One term the topic presented to the students explored the idea of whether youth can have an impact upon the environment. After having spent a great deal of time already that year working with my students to help them feel like they can create change, I was certain that the letters I received would be filled with positive, pro-active ideas, ones that spoke to their power as people in an interconnected world. As I sat down to mark them, I was shocked to find that instead of dynamic letters filled with hope, I was reading pessimistic ones that felt destruction was imminent. Upon discussing these results with

the other classroom teachers, it became apparent that this stance had been taken by the vast majority of the students at the school. From this experience, the Talisman for the Future: Hope was born, one in which students were asked to look positively at the future and consider possibility rather than the lack there of.

### *A Hopeful Future~*

The future is often perceived as filled with uncertainty, with problems and worry and fear of the unknown. *Talisman for the Future: Hope* is a piece that grew from a different view of tomorrow. It evolved from wishes and dreams and a positive outlook on what the future may hold. It took the voices of some of society's youth and raised them in a celebratory manner, one that spoke to the joy and promise that their lives might bring. It seems only fitting that today's youth should have hope for a happy tomorrow, despite the woes that today's societies may have burdened them with, and this piece sought to focus upon that hope.

The piece was composed of five large panels made from unbleached cotton, that were each embroidered in a decorative manner , both by machine as well as by hand. Once the embroidery was completed, the panels were stitched together at the sides, leaving the top 40% of each unsecured. Finally, the willow branches that I cut for this project were inserted in the side pockets that I had created in each panel, and they were tied into place. Tension was placed on the branches as they were tied, resulting in a bowing

outward of the branches, to create a flower-like shape. This shape was carefully planned ahead of time using small-scale models and was achieved through both the tension of the branches and the shape of the panels.

The decision to create the skeletal structure of the piece from materials collected in nature (the willow), came from a position of hope. For many youth it is the future of the environment which fills them with the greatest fear. One of my wishes is for them to see the natural world as a strong and beautiful foundation upon which to build their dreams, not simply the vulnerable and depleting planet whose doom is continually being prophesied; hence the choice of materials for the strength and structure of the work.

Beyond the conceptual parallel that existed between the piece, the future, and the environment, there was a physical one: it was not until the very end of the process, when all of the separate pieces were being assembled, that I knew if the piece was going to be successful or not. In this way, I planned and hoped as I went about the creating of the work, but I knew that in the end, it simply might not succeed. There came a point when it was necessary to relinquish the perceived control that I felt as an artist and allow the spirit to take over; I had to have faith. In the talisman became what I believe to be one of the most successful and poignant pieces that I have created as an artist, and I believe that a great deal of that opinion derives from the stepping back process that I had to accept in its making.

This talisman was a collective piece, in that it was created with the assistance of many young people. I provided the various classes at my middle school with pieces of hand dyed rice paper, upon which each student wrote a hope or wish that they had for

the future. In all, I received over 400 wishes and hopes. The rice paper sheets were then shaped into a leaf form and a hole was punched at one end. Through the hole a piece of linen cord was threaded and bundles of three leaves were created. During the assembling of the piece, the bundles were attached to seven long linen cords, creating the effect of roots. This visually echoed the idea that children are the future and that hope is intertwined within them.

It must be said that the process of preparing the leaves, the rice paper hopes and wishes of the students, was arduous. Physically, the work took several hours and was completely easy, but emotionally it was most difficult. Many of the students wished for cures for diseases and spoke of personal loss. Many spoke of solving problems in the world, such as poverty, hunger and child labour. Many were dreams of being famous and having a career in movies, television or professional sports. All of these were enjoyable to read, yet touched the heart. What was difficult however, were the students whose messages bespoke personal struggle and pain, such as the student who wished for food, the one who wished to lose 30 pounds before starting high school, and the one who hoped that his father would come back. Another student wished that the native reservation he lived on didn't have drugs or alcohol and another that his mother would stop drinking. These personal, anonymous insights left me wanting to sooth away the pain and 'make it all better'. For three days after reading and preparing the wishes, I felt hollow and empty inside. I found those candid words of our youth that were filled sadness consumed me, and as in the classroom, they eclipsed the happier messages of hope. Finally, I had to refocus and see the project in its bigger picture, which was extremely poignant. This re-focusing drove home the idea that the pain of those in need

in my classes so easily became the consuming factor for me, when in the bigger picture there was also a great deal of hope within the classroom as well. In many ways, this epiphany so succinctly spoke of that which I was searching for in this thesis: inner peace, positivity and hope.

This piece was also intended as an interactive work, one in which the viewers also contributed to help build a hopeful future. Dyed, leaf shape pieces of rice paper, such as the students used for their wishes, were provided for exhibition visitors to write their hopes upon. These were then cast into the vessel and as the show progressed, the vessel filled. When I went to take down the show I had a whole new insight into the future, for I no longer saw it as resting on the shoulders of today's youth. Instead, I saw the youth's wishes and hopes as being supported, encouraged and nurtured by the adults around them, and realised that together, we would all create a hopeful future filled with peace. This was an extremely moving realisation for me, as I no longer viewed myself as alone and so desperately trying to save the world; the spiritual world and I, with the interconnectedness and energies of those around me, were all working together to help our young and our future.

The piece was large, one of the largest pieces that I have made to date, and reflected the strong presence and large 'voice' that I wanted to give to the youth. It was intended as a vehicle for hope for a population that often feels excluded from decision-making. Hope is a concept that I rarely hear our young discuss, one which I feel that as a society we do not stress enough. This piece therefore, is a prayer for tomorrow, for our planet and for its citizens. It speaks of change that grows from a spirit of peace, rather than

from a plea of despair. It also speaks of a united support system which can work together to create hope within us all.



A Hopeful Future (2008)~

Dimensions: H 2.1m X W 3m X L 7.5m

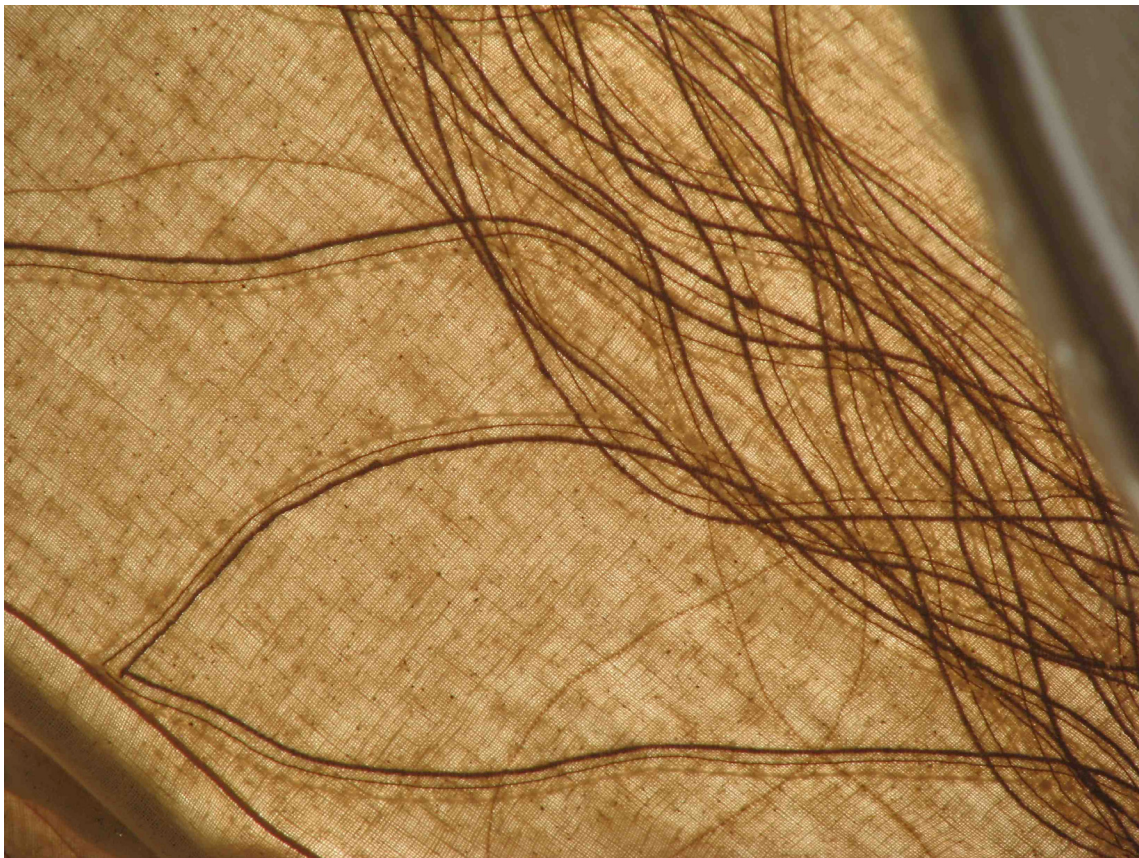
Materials: Cotton fabric, cotton, rayon and silk threads,  
Linen thread, willow, tea-dyed Japanese  
Paper, velcro.



A Hopeful Future (2008)~ (Detail #1)

Dimensions: H 2.1m X W 3m X L 7.5m

Materials: Cotton fabric, cotton, rayon and silk threads,  
Linen thread, willow, tea-dyed Japanese  
Paper, velcro.



A Hopeful Future (2008)~ (Detail #2)

Dimensions: H 2.1m X W 3m X L 7.5m

Materials: Cotton fabric, cotton, rayon and silk threads,  
Linen thread, willow, tea-dyed Japanese  
Paper, velcro



A Hopeful Future (2008)~ (Detail #3)

Dimensions: H 2.1m X W 3m X L 7.5m

Materials: Cotton fabric, cotton, rayon and silk threads,  
Linen thread, willow, tea-dyed Japanese  
Paper, velcro

## **Chapter Five**

### **Narrative Analyses~**

In this section, I will analyse the narratives in chapter four. In the narrative pieces, Owen and Lucy, each teacher is presented in the third person. In the pieces that are written from my own, personal perspective as a teacher, I will be referring to myself in the third person, as 'the teacher'. In the analysis of Getting to This Place, I will be referring to myself in the first person, as 'I'.

#### **Owen**

The story of Owen is one of acceptance; it speaks to the acceptance of life, of the painful realities that many live with, of the limitations of individuals, and of the roles that we fulfill within the lives of others. Most importantly, the story of Owen is about the acceptance of others for who they are, and the blessings and joys that can be found in discovering what the Dalai Lama calls "the deeper nature of the person". (Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p. 102)

In her dealings with Owen, Ms. Jones tried hard to help him learn how to better interact with his peers, and to behave in a more acceptable manner within the class. She perceived the difficulties that Owen had in dealing with his classmates and recognised

his inability to create healthy sustainable relationships. His aggressive manner left him alone and often confused as to why he didn't have friends, yet he lacked the skills to create the friendships that he wanted. In an attempt to help Owen, Ms. Jones tried to teach him good communication skills and to explain to him how his behaviour alienated others. She tried to help him fit in.

There is no doubt that Ms. Jones was a caring teacher, one who saw in Owen a student in need. She spent great energy and time trying to help him, and when her efforts failed, she was left frustrated and feeling defeated. She was a compassionate teacher who saw in this student pain and suffering. The Dalai Lama says that “in looking at various means of developing compassion, I think that empathy is an important factor. The ability to appreciate another's suffering.” (The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p. 88). While Ms. Jones' concern for her student was sincere and heartfelt, perhaps it obscured her vision of Owen; she was so emotionally engaged with Owen's situation, that she believed herself to be feeling Owen's pain. In this instance, her compassion for another lead her to assume Owen's issues onto herself, in that she was unable to distinguish his issues and pain from her own; she was unable to step back from the situations he faced to consider him as a person, rather than only seeing the pain that he held within him. Subsequently, Ms. Jones was also unable to deal with the pain that she had assumed, and that she was holding within herself. This inability to attain perspective was leading Ms. Jones down the path of secondary victimization.

Having given so much of herself to Owen, Ms. Jones eventually began resenting his suffering and what she perceived as his neediness. When he was unable to behave and

interact as she had taught him to, she resented him. She mistakenly perceived Owen as the behaviours that he exhibited, rather than seeing the person within. She could not “embrace the spiritual dimensions of the traumatized person(s)” (Meyer and Lansell (1996) as cited in Gabarino, 1996, p.474), but instead saw only the effects of the trauma.

When Ms. Jones was able to change her perspective on the situation, was able to see Owen from a new angle, as that of the victim rather than the attacker, she was freed. She was now able to see what Nel Noddings calls the “fundamental relatedness” (Noddings, 2003, p.51) between herself and Owen, and understood that together they shared a spiritual link. In so doing, Ms. Jones was able to integrate the caring, spiritual core of herself into her encounters with Owen, as she moved beyond circumstance towards a deeper understanding that “we are irrevocably linked to intimate others.” (Noddings, 2003, p.51) Relating to Owen on this new, deeper level, allowed Ms. Jones to see his true spirit.

Ms. Jones discovered that she could have a caring and compassionate relationship with Owen, by accepting him for who he is. She was able to see the spirit within him rather than being stuck on the behaviours he exhibited and the circumstances that surrounded him. The Dalai Lama says that, “if one is seeking a truly satisfying relationship, the best way of bringing this about is to get to know the deeper nature of the person and relate to her or him on that level, instead of merely on the basis of superficial characteristics. And in this type of relationship there is a role for genuine compassion.” (The Dalai Lama as cited in Cutler, 1998, p. 102) Through her

relationship with Owen, Ms. Jones not only discovered the deeper person within the child, but the deeper person within herself. She discovered the spirit within us all.

### Lucy

In the crises of the present day, those of us who work in society, who confront power and injustice on a regular basis, get beaten down and exhausted.... Spiritual matters are like springs of fresh water. We who work in society need to carry that pure water to flood the banks and fertilize the land, the trees, in order to be of use to the plants and animals, so that they can taste something fresh and be revitalized. If we do not go back to the spring, our minds will get polluted, just as the water becomes polluted, and we will not be of much use to the plants, the trees, or the earth. (Sivaraksa as cited in Garbarino, 1996, p.476)

In the stressful business of contemporary society, it can be very difficult to find a sense of calm and peace. When faced with the neediness and demands that can be found in the classroom, the pace and wants can prove draining to the teacher. Add to these stresses students who are displaying signs of crisis and instability, and staying grounded and whole can seem almost beyond many teachers' reach.

Ms. Balli just wanted to teach. She loved learning and exploration and wanted to share that love with her students. A caring and giving person, she wanted to think of her classroom as a safe place where everyone could feel capable, cared-for and confident. She came from a loving and supportive family herself and grew up relatively unaware of the crises and traumas that those around her faced. To her, school was a haven of

learning, where possibilities seemed endless and a teacher's dreams could transform unfortunate circumstance. Unfortunately for her, reality and its chaos found its way into her classroom sanctuary.

Ms. Balli was used to the attitude that sometimes came with adolescence, where teenage angst and rebellion would question and challenge her authority. She encouraged just such questioning in fact, and tried to instill in her students the idea of critical thinking. She quietly applauded herself when they respectfully challenged her in class and she liked to think that her classroom was a place where deep learning was happening. Ms. Balli organised her classes so that topics were presented, explored and discussed. She steered as clear as possible from lecturing and note taking, and instead tried to engage her students with their own learning. She wanted her students to feel empowered, so that they understood that the world was waiting right outside of their door; that anything, if they tried hard enough, was possible.

In no way was Ms. Balli prepared for Lucy and her issues. Upon seeing the physical signs of the girl's inner distress, Ms. Balli was sent spinning. These outward signs of trauma told her that here, in the form of Lucy, was a student who had deep and difficult needs. She feared that with her dark and despairing outlook, Lucy was a student who had the power to empty Ms. Balli's emotional reserves. The scars on Lucy's arms signified to Ms. Balli a deep well of need that would pull her in if she got too close. Yet despite her attempts to distance herself, her desire to get free of those suffering (Hart, 2004 and Cutler, 1998), she could not escape the emotional and mental stress that she experienced

around Lucy. She found herself getting too personally involved, getting too close, despite her desire to remain 'professional'.

Ms. Balli was beginning to display the signs of what Debra Zellmer calls Compassion Fatigue. She felt an "acute sense of helplessness" (Zellmer, 2003, p.19), and sought to control a situation which was beyond her reach. This attempt at control became what Epstein identified as an obstacle (Epstein, 2001, p.56) to helping Lucy, leaving Ms. Balli feeling both powerless and panicked. Lucy's situation seemed to her a crisis of immense proportion, one that had potentially dire consequences, and one that could explode at any moment. She was an empathetic teacher who was suffering by getting too close to one in need (Naylor, Lambert and Scott, 2009). She was emotionally embroiled in a situation she was witnessing from a distance.

Ms. Balli needed desperately to find a sense of inner peace, despite dealing with a student such as Lucy who appeared in crisis. She needed, as Palmer said, to "deal with conflict from a place of peace, to advocate for change from a place of hope" (Palmer, 1998). Instead, she saw only the pain and suffering of someone in her class, and was unable to get past her sense of distress. She took Lucy's pain on as her own, leaving herself helpless to help.

Ms. Balli needed to change her perspective and see the larger picture beyond the trauma; she needed to transcend the external and focus on what Epstein calls going on being (Epstein, 2001). By making a deeper connection and drawing on her inner spirit,

she would have been able to separate Lucy's pain and distress from her own experience; she could have been more open to the moment and aware of the deeper needs of those around her. Ms. Balli might have developed what Cutler calls a "supple quality of mind" (Cutler, 1998, p.187), and perhaps could have come to discover that caring need not drain her. Noddings discusses how in staying true to the caring spirit within, the caregiver can be nourished; that the act of caring in and of itself can be replenishing. (Noddings, 2003) Instead, Ms. Balli allowed Lucy's neediness to drain her, and she perceived herself as giving beyond her capacity to do so.

If Ms. Balli could have recognised that "each of us is spirit" (Dillard, 2002, p.385), she might have been able to gain a more peaceful perspective on Lucy and her situation. By recognising that through a greater, deeper shared connection, her classroom could become a place of spirit where a greater understanding of life in community could be achieved (Bel hooks as cited in Shahjahan, 2004). Instead, she drained herself until she was forced to distance herself for what she perceived as reasons of self-preservation.

In the end, Lucy's life continued and Ms. Balli's worry achieved very little. The remnants of that painful and difficult period for Ms. Balli, however, with the affects that it had on her mental, psychological and emotional well-being, stayed with her for many years. Over time, her experiences with Lucy became but a few among the many she had with her students, as Lucy became but one of the numerous cutters she met.

### **Talisman Against Hunger**

Teachers often see themselves as part of a process of transformation; that learning is inherently a path towards growth and change. This idea of change is a powerful one, as it brings with it hope and excitement. Just as a plant beginning to sprout and bloom in the springtime is energising to behold, so too is a student learning to read, or discovering an ability that she didn't know she had. Change however, can be a deceptive trap, one that can ensnarl the optimistic and hopeful teacher. When faced with troubling and difficult situations, it can be tempting as a teacher to try to solve the problems and change the world, even when the problems and situations do not belong to us.

Palmer states that, "the soul wants simply to be witnessed, attended to, heard" (Palmer, 2003/04, p.383). In many instances, when teachers are faced with students in difficult situations, that is what those students are seeking. Many do not want the teacher to change their circumstance, but rather, to acknowledge it. The teacher needs to assist when assistance is requested, and not try to change what is beyond her reach.

The teacher in *Obi Against Hunger* is aware that there are students around her who are not eating. She knows that there are various reasons behind the behaviour and tries to respect the circumstance and privacy of her students. She cannot, however, simply walk by them in the halls. She feels a personal sense of obligation to acknowledge them, speak to them, and let them know that they are being witnessed, attended to and heard (Palmer, 2003/04, p.383). Epstein talks about mindfulness (Epstein, 2001, p.79); how simply being aware involves accepting and not holding on. It can be difficult to bear witness to

those students potentially in crisis, yet refrain from trying to resolve their problems or unburden them of their pain. The teacher in the story finds it difficult not to impose a solution to the issues of non-eating that she sees; not to go to the guidance counsellor, the principal, call the parents, and insist that something be done. She fights the instinct to ‘fix’ what is not working, to tackle the immediate problem, focusing instead on the fact there are reasons behind the behaviour that may be complex and unfixable by her. Instead, she tries to open herself up to these students, making herself available to them if they choose to confide in her.

Hart’s idea of the *contemplative mind* (Hart, 2004, p. 34) is one that allows the opening up to the self, others, the spirit and the universe, yet permits a detachment from “the contents of our consciousness” (Hart, 2004, p.33). This detachment allows a perspective from which to consider and experience, one that permits a deeper contemplation that extends beyond the immediate. This echoes Richard Brown’s *contemplative observation* (Brown as cited in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.61), during which things simply exist and we bear witness to that existence. During these observational periods, there is no need to act or to change what we see, but simply to acknowledge. Unlike the person who seeks to solve the world’s problems, the awareness of the problems is the goal.

Nonetheless, the teacher finds it difficult not to extend a hand to these students. She invites them into her classroom, offers them food, communion and company. Beyond bearing witness, she also feels the need to open the door for them; to provide them with

emotional and physical support if they choose to accept it. She does this, not so much for the students as for herself; she needs to do so in order to honour the caring core of who she is. The teacher is striving to embrace what Nel Nodding calls an ethical life (Nodding, 2003), one rooted in respect, compassion and caring for those around her. She realises that she is receiving something in the caring process; that by caring she is nurturing her own true self. To care or not to care are not options for her; not to care would be denying who she is.

The teacher acknowledges that everyone must travel his or her own spiritual path, and that each person must be free to determine what path he or she must take. She is able to accept the inevitability of suffering, and to recognise that suffering can bring with it great positives. The Dalai Lama presents the idea that it is through our own fear and suffering that we are led to the re-examination of our lives; through this process, a change in perspective can occur and the individual can find enlightenment (Cutler, 1998). The teacher knows that if she were able to change the world and its problems, were able to resolve all of the crises that her students face, she would be denying them their own path to self-discovery. Garbarino speaks of how through trauma spiritual freedom can be attained, saying,

Each of these individuals began seeking answers to psychological challenges of traumatic experiences in the development of human consciousness, and discovered a path that led to and through the unconscious to the spiritual, and ultimately from the darkness to the light of spiritual freedom.

(Garbarino, 1996, p.474)

The teacher is able to accept that she cannot have control over the universe. She is able to bear witness to, and acknowledge the pain that people face, yet not try to alleviate it. She is able to support those around her in need, a support that is rooted in a deeper spiritual understanding of how we all suffer. She exists beyond what Winnicott calls reactivity (in Epstein, 2001, p.136-7), which can zap awareness. Instead, she seeks a state of existence that is based within awareness. Yet within all of this, she is able to stay true to her caring self.

### **Small Wishes for Openness~**

It can be easy to give in to fear, particularly when feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable. The teacher in this piece is struggling; when faced with students who may be in crisis, her natural instinct is fear~ fear of getting too close to their pain, fear of being affected by what Danieli (1996) calls “secondary victimization” (as cited in Garbarino, 1996, p.475), fear of losing herself to another’s trauma. She tries hard to be attentive and receptive to her students’ needs, all the while finding herself slowly disconnecting from the neediness of those around her. She is unable to listen to her inner self and trust that she will stay whole amidst the chaos.

Compassion fatigue is a potential issue for teachers who are caring and involved with their students. As the teacher internalises the distress and pain that she feels around her, she develops feelings of helplessness that feel debilitating. Instinct tells her to shut down, detach, disconnect from the students, in order to protect herself. In reality

however, perhaps it is a deeper opening up that is required, if she wishes to remain whole.

Parker Palmer warns against disconnecting from the self, and discusses how there is a need to face one's fears if one wishes to find the "teacher within" (Palmer, 1998, p.30). By living a connected life, the teacher could become mindful, and hear her authentic voice within. It takes courage, Palmer says, to look deep within (Palmer, 1998). Yet in doing so, one can find strength and self-awareness. Instead of pulling away from her students, the teacher needs to create a deeper, more open connection with them, and with herself. Epstein describes this discovery of the inner self as going on being (Epstein, 2001), and describes the process as "speaking from the inside". By listening to the inner voice, the teacher would be able to establish an awareness of the self, one that has deep, spiritual, inner roots. These roots could anchor her spirit and keep it whole, even when she is faced with the pain of others.

The teacher needs to be reminded of how important it is to stay connected and mindful. She needs to know how important it is to go on being, to remember that she need not be consumed by the pain of others, but rather, that she is capable of staying whole and strong in the face of another's pain. She needs to stay open to all possibilities and to recognise that great good can come from pain and suffering. She needs to centre herself spiritually, and bear witness to the lives of others without assuming their lives.

Being open and receptive is part of what bell hooks calls "engaged pedagogy" (hooks as cited in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.54), where the teacher "must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being." This

idea that the teacher must be striving for self-actualization “if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks as cited in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.54), highlights the idea of the teacher as a leader by example. By questing for inner strength and an authentic voice, she is able to help those around her in their own quests; she is able to stay open in the face of pain, despite the fear of losing herself within the trauma of others.

### **Talisman for the Future: Hope**

The teacher in this piece is searching for hope; she is trying to find strength in the whole and recognise the interconnectivity of us all. She recognises that together, we are one, and the future lies in one direction. She looks to speak to the collective future that she believes we share. She sees her voice as but one of the many that make up her classroom, and sees the power of the future, the hope for the future, in the collective voice.

The teacher sees an interconnectedness between the individual and the universal whole (Palmer, 1998). Dillard speaks of people being “unified through breath” (Dillard, 2002, p.385), in which each individual draws its strength and spirit from the greater collective. Looking to spirit, bell hooks sees the bringing of the spiritual into the classroom as means through which we can “realise (the) passion, interconnectivity, (and)

possibilities” (bell hooks as cited in Shahjahan, p.308). The ability to look beyond trauma and pain towards growth and community is a powerful one rooted in hope.

Seeing herself as a leader within the classroom, what bell hooks calls a leader by example (hooks as cited in Bergsgaard and Ellis, 2002, p.54), the teacher wants to present to her students alternatives. Instead of focusing upon the environmental woes and news reports that fill the public with fear, she chooses, instead, to present nature as a source of strength. This echoes back to the concept of the universal whole (Palmer, 1998), and the idea that we are all connected spiritually. The teacher explores the concept of spirituality from a holistic perspective, one that speaks of hope and faith within the whole. Parker Palmer (1998) defines the idea of spirituality, saying,

[It is] the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos~ with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive. (p.6)

It is this idea of the greater whole that the teacher chooses to present to her students; the perspective that the collective whole is greater than the sum of its parts, greater than individual egos. This focus allows her to maintain a perspective on the larger picture. She is not insnarled in the despair that she sometimes sees around her. Instead, the teacher looks to the future with hope, seeing change and possibility as coming from a place of peace. She knows that in the unified voice, the unified breath, we are strong.

### Getting To This Place

I was driven to art from need: the need to connect with my inner self, the need to heal. That desire to go within, to find my own, authentic voice, to face my fears (Palmer, 1998, p.37), has also been one of the reasons why I continue to return to art making.

The art works I created that speak to my family, to my past, are deeply personal, and often speak to pain and suffering. They acknowledge that all suffering is universal, eternal, and that it is through acceptance, and the understanding of the roots of suffering, that peace can be achieved. The Dalai Lama speaks of the need to explore the causes of our suffering, saying,

Within a Buddhist context, when one reflects on the fact that one's ordinary day-to-day existence is characterized by suffering, this serves to encourage one to engage in the practices that will eliminate the root causes of one's suffering. Otherwise, if there was no hope, or no possibility of freedom from suffering, mere reflection on suffering just becomes morbid thinking, and would be quite negative. ( The Dalai Lama in Cutler, 1998, p.143)

In creating the hymnal piece, I went into the roots of my suffering and was better able to understand it. I recognised that my suffering came from the loss I had experienced: the loss of my parents, the loss of my foundation of self, and the loss of my faith. I had not celebrated my faith since my parents' deaths, and other than their funeral had not gone back to church. Focusing my attention on creating a work of art that spoke directly to my father's faith, that spoke of his spiritual core, allowed me to go deeper into myself, listen to my inner voice, and deal with my own suffering. I recognised that my suffering

did not stem from my parents' deaths, but rather, from my own sense of loss. Working with the hymnal, in a deeply personal way, allowed me to explore and express my suffering, and ultimately, begin to heal from it. I was able to find a sense of peace. As Gerber stated, "peace between people is not possible until peace has been attained within" (Gerber, 1991, p.10). I soon found that I was able to reconcile my place within the outer world, by reconciling within myself.

Reconciling with myself also meant acknowledging and honouring my gifts. By using my artistic skills to create the hymnal piece, I felt that I was speaking with my own voice, and using it to celebrate my love for my parents. Suddenly, art making was no longer a vehicle through which only coping occurred; it was a mechanism with which I was able to honour what was important to me: my past and my present. Art making enabled me to recognise my past through my artistic present, yet also allowed me to accept that my present existed because of my past. This idea of going deeper within to face my own suffering also allowed me to see myself as part of the universal whole. My awareness of my inner spirit allowed me to feel interconnected (Cutler, 1998, p.90), and allowed me to feel supported by the greater universal strength. It grounded me and provided me with a new perspective and focus.

Creating my grandfather's talisman was a direct continuation of the inner exploration that I began with my father's hymnal. Here I found the means through which to express all that was going to go unsaid. In my father's case, what was left unsaid occurred due to a sudden death. In my grandfather's case, those unsaid words occurred due to the nature

of our relationship. While I was able to accept the relationship that my grandfather and I had both created, the talisman gave me a manner in which to also express my deeper, inner voice. It was freeing. My prayer for him had become my prayer for myself~

May your God give you strength and comfort.  
May you look back on a long life filled with pleasure,  
pride and love.  
May you find happiness today in those around you  
and joy in the thought of  
joining those you have loved and lost.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion~**

This project has been a long undertaking. It began many years ago with feelings of angst over how to help students in crisis. Students would come into my classroom and with them the traumas and stresses that were part of their lives. I saw pain and struggles around me, and felt overwhelmed by what I perceived as suffering. I focused on teaching the curriculum, but sensed an emptiness within me and within my classroom.

By no means did this sense of emptiness dominate my classroom; it was a visiting presence that recurringly entered and left. My teaching career to this point has been filled with much joy, as together my students and I have explored and learned together. I have worked very hard to celebrate the attempts and successes that have happened within my classroom, and have found pleasure in sharing those experiences with others. Teaching is such a challenging task that indeed, if I had not had such excitement, sense of achievement, and delight over the years, I would no longer be teaching.

As my confidence and competence as a teacher developed, and the successes buoyed me up with joy, I was able to turn my attention to the less tangible qualities of my classroom practice, such as the caring and compassion I wanted to infuse in my work. I

wanted learning in my classroom to be more about the self within the whole, and began to see the curriculum as the vehicle through which to explore those ideas. I discovered that the curriculum was not my destination, but instead, it was the mode of transportation to go somewhere new. When, as a group, the students and I were traveling together, the learning environment was happy and grounded. When, however, a student with strong needs was part of the class, this presence affected us all as well.

Caring soon began to take a toll on me. From the reading that I have done throughout this project, I now realise that compassion fatigue was starting to take hold. I was becoming drained, felt helpless, sometimes could not face another student in need. I took mental health days when I could manage them, but as I could only take so many, I usually just went to work hoping that no one would ask me for anything. I sensed that I was slowly detaching, from my students, my colleagues, my family and myself, and knew that part of who I am was fading away.

I am not an artist for whom drawing and sculpting came innately. As a child, I studied dance and 'made things' for pleasure, though if you had asked me, I would only have considered my dancing as art. I recently found a few old report cards from my elementary school, and was shocked to discover that Art was the only subject I had ever received 'A's' in; I had always thought of my young self as a mediocre visual artist, and perceived that I was so much better in the world of words. Perhaps those early teachers of mine saw something within me that I was unable to see.

As a teenager, I discovered the theatre and drama, and spent all of my leisure time rehearsing and performing. When on the stage, I felt that I was coming alive. In retrospect, I think that it was a relief to assume the guise of another: to feel someone else's emotions, speak someone else's words and think someone else's thoughts. Theatre was an escape from the inner self for me. After high school I went on to do a Bachelor of Arts degree in Drama at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and while I eventually discovered the world of set and costume design, I always loved being on stage.

My personal trauma, in the form of my parents' deaths, was what led me to the visual arts. I associate art making with release~ of the inner voice, inner thoughts, emotions and problems and stresses. I came to see art making as a salvation, one that brought peace to chaos and conflict. I recently expressed this idea to a student who was struggling with making deep, meaningful marks on paper. The student, like so many of us, was afraid to let the inner darkness out, for fear that she would not be able to handle what she saw, and would finally have to deal with her past. Instead, she told me, she had to this point chosen to keep all of the experiences, the secrets, anger, pain and shame balled up inside of her. She felt that she could not face what might exist within. We began talking about the power of art making and my philosophy about its healing powers. I summed up my ideas to her in this way~

Making art is like a purging of the soul. When inside there are things that are eating away at you, munching down on your mind, your strength and your spirit, these

negatives release toxins that pollute. Making art is like vomiting up all of the toxins and the negativity; like ridding yourself of what is eating you from the inside out. Once outside of you, you can step back and consider them, walk around them, deal with them. You can box them up and put them on a shelf, maybe take them out and re-visit them when you need to. But once outside of you, they can no longer eat you. It is not that the inner turmoil ceases to exist; it is still very much a part of your universe. What it is not doing anymore however, is destroying you. It is not consuming you. It cannot drain you and leave you empty. Once you face the turmoil, you can deal with it. It is the essence of freedom.

After our conversation that day, I thought long and hard about what I had said to that student. My present day beliefs about art making have been very much informed by my work on this thesis, and my belief that art has the power to liberate the soul is a fundamental part of who I now am. This thesis has been a vital part of getting me to this new place. Art making allowed me to face the pain that I saw in front of me in the form of my students and deal with it. It allowed me to rid myself of the emotionally, psychologically and spiritually draining angst that I was experiencing due to the very nature of my work as a teacher. It liberated me and allowed me to rediscover the caring nature within me that lead me to become a teacher in the first place. In effect, through this project I rediscovered the passion and joy that I found in teaching and within myself, and I know that I have transmitted that passion and joy into my classroom and my teaching. During the course of this project, in fact, I changed jobs and became a

full-time art teacher. I am now transmitting my passions and beliefs, and my faith in the power of art, to others.

The research within this thesis outlines that the process was therapeutic to me. I hope that somehow this information will be transmitted to others in my profession. Whether it is I who continues this work, or it is picked up by another, somehow I would like it to communicate to those in the teaching profession the benefits of being mindful to the professional and personal selves. It has made me aware of the issues that we as teachers face, as well as the possibilities to dealing with those issues; I would like that awareness to be passed on to others.

My reading on Buddhism, Nel Nodding's ideas of caring, the nature of trauma and the very real existence of Compassion Fatigue were invaluable in this process. In many ways they not only informed my research, but also confirmed what I knew innately. Expanding my awareness of the work being done in these areas was invaluable.

When faced with a student in distress I am now able to step back and consider the situation and the person involved, and not get drawn in by the consuming nature of the crisis. My ego can be set aside and I do not feel the need to change the person or take over the situation, but instead allow them to exist. I am able to see past situations and behaviours, into a deeper connection that I share with another spirit. While I am now usually able to do this, it must be said that it has taken practice to get here. Indeed, there

are days when I have trouble going on being, and my ego still gets in the way. But this is a journey, and I feel that I am on the right path.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

At this time, I foresee a few possible extensions of this research. Some involve students, some teachers, and other communities; both educational communities and greater public communities.

In working with youth, Garbarino (1996) discusses the need for the individual to make a spiritual connection if healing is going to happen. “Using models of spirituality in the healing practice permit[s] the trauma victims to make peace with the physical loss of relatives, and enhance[e] efforts to intervene psychologically.” (p.474) It would be an interesting research extension to work artistically with counselors and their young clients in creating personal talismans to facilitate deeper spiritual connections and meaning about the self and the healing process. This work would need to be done in close proximity with the counseling process, with professionals trained in this field assuming the counseling role with their clients. In no way would the artist-researcher be assuming a counseling role, but instead would be focusing on the artistic side of a joint project. Reflective writings, such as those contained within this body of work, would be part of the aesthetic exploration. An Art Therapy research project could also assume this work, looking at the role of art making in the therapeutic process.

Another research possibility would be to work with teachers to create a sense of spiritual connectedness within their classrooms. This action research-based project would encourage teachers to explore the nature of their teaching, and the manner in which they view themselves and their work within the classroom. This exploration could take a variety of forms, could include talisman making by the teachers, could look at creating a spiritual connection between the curriculum and the learners (including the teacher), or could explore group dynamics within the classroom, and include meaningful, purposeful activities that might serve to bond the class together as a spiritual community.

Staying with teachers, a project centered on teaching skills to identify and cope with the stresses discussed in this thesis would potentially prove worthwhile. A project that worked with teachers to expose, identify and highlight the issues of trauma and crisis-based stress within the learning environment and then worked with them to face and alleviate such stresses could prove valuable. It is to be emphasized again that while others working in the caregiving professions receive the necessary training to separate the professional and personal selves, and the skills with which to deal with the stresses that their professions present, teachers are given no such training. Public discourse around this topic and a research project that focuses on giving a voice to teachers facing these issues could be most exciting. A further extension of this idea, a project in which a group of teachers are encouraged and taught methods with which to handle such work-related stresses, could prove particularly interesting and potentially beneficial. These

methods could vary depending on the focus of the project, from yoga and meditation, relaxation and exercise, to arts-based work that focuses on the making process. In the case of the arts-based approach, a subsequent exhibition of the works created might provide the participants with a deeper sense of validity surrounding the issues they are struggling with, as well as giving the issues a broader public audience.

For those interested in doing gender analysis research, case studies that explored the differing ways in which female and male teachers perceive and handle work-related stress would be valuable. There is already research being done in this area, and continued development of this research may prove insightful. In particular, it would be of interest to see analysed the subsequent affects of different methods of stress reduction techniques upon male and female teachers.

The large-scale 'Hope' talisman could have the potential to be a vehicle towards spiritual connection for communities. This piece could be shared with communities in crisis, as a focal point from which healing and growth could occur. Each participant in a given community would write down their hopes and wishes for the future, and would cast those into a community vessel. In this way, one unified voice would become visibly noted. This piece could be exhibited in different communities, with the wishes later displayed, or ceremonially 'freed' (perhaps burned), to represent the unleashing of hope for the future. Alternatively, communities could place their negative feelings and thoughts on paper, and those could be 'freed', akin to a freeing from the past. Another alternative to this idea would be for group projects where the communities would create

their own talismanic sculptures, ones which represented each unique community. The act of self-definition through the creation of the talisman, as well as the writing process, could be an empowering one, particularly if spiritual struggles and crises exist within a group.

### **Last Words~**

It want to reiterate that I was not drawn to the visual arts as a child or young adult. This is crucial for a very fundamental reason~ the abilities and techniques that I use in this project's art making were all learned as an adult, and were not simply 'gifts' that I was born with. These techniques, the understanding of art and art making, the strategies to express externally what is happening internally, can be taught. I truly believe that anyone, with the proper exposure, can learn to do what I do. They may not end up an exhibiting artist or an art teacher, but anyone can develop the abilities to express their ideas and emotions in an artistic manner. If knowledge is power, then the knowledge of self and how to access the inner spirit must be the greatest power that anyone could ever possess. I believe that this can be learned.

Given the stresses that teachers experience within the contemporary classroom, I believe that they need positive, tangible skills with which to face and effectively deal with what they encounter. For me, art making and this thesis have given me those skills.

With each piece of artwork that I created for this project, I felt a release~ A release from the worry and angst over students I have taught; stresses that I had been carrying around within me for years. A release from the feelings of helplessness I had felt over being unable to solve those students' problems. A release from being afraid of getting too close to my students' spirits for fear of being consumed by their pain. A release of my own spirit, knowing that I was stronger and replenished simply through the act of caring. Once each of the art works were made, I was able to walk around them, consider them, face them and what they represented; I was able to void myself of the stresses I had internalised over working with so many with so much pain. With each new work, I was purging; making more room for my inner spirit to stretch.

I would like to conclude this project with a story~

He was angry now. Really angry. He stood up and started yelling at Ms. Patil, telling her to "shut up" and "go away". He was pacing up and down the classroom, shaking his hands in an agitated way, swearing under his breath. She was grateful that no one else was in the room; she did not have to worry about anyone else's safety.

When she looked at him, she found herself thinking about what he must have been like as a young child. When had he heard his first words of criticism? How many had mocked him over the years? Did his parents tell him that they loved him before Social Services took him away? Did he know the siblings she had heard rumours about? What factors had lead to creating this angry young man in front of her?

Suddenly, she no longer saw an angry man; she saw a very lovely, broken spirit screaming for help. She realised that he had been wounded so many times over the years that what he was doing now, lashing out, was what the world had taught him to do. People had manipulated him and taken advantage of him to the point where he trusted no one. He did not trust the administration. He did not trust his peers. He did not trust Ms. Patil. Perhaps he did not even trust himself anymore.

Ms. Patil felt calm, a deep, peaceful calm, well up inside of her. She knew that they were connected, she and he; his spirit was her own. While he was lost to the pain that he was feeling, she was privileged; she could stand back and consider it, acknowledge it, face it. She knew that she was not part of the inner turmoil, even if she was present for it. She could bring to the situation her own strength by bearing witness and by caring. She could simply go on being.

He eventually calmed down and chose to sit in the chair facing her. They did not speak. From time to time, he would mumble something, but as the moments passed the anger slowly ebbed from him. Soon his breathing had returned to normal and his hand no longer shook. Ms. Patil found that while she was very much present with him, she was also thinking about making an artwork that reflected this young man. She was composing.

It needed to be a star book, one that had many layers that were deep and overlapping. When opened up it would be able to create a complete circle, one that could stand on its own. As a sculpture, it could be read and viewed, all of it, when it was displayed, though to get into the crevices would take some work on the viewer's part.

The outer layer would be made of metal~ something hard, like brass, she thought. The pierce work would be simple yet beautiful, and it would allow the viewer various glimpses of what lay inside. The tough, strong outer skin would seem impenetrable, and would protect what lay beneath.

The middle layers were undetermined, and would have to unfold as she worked. There would be text and images, but what they would be was uncertain to her. They would make themselves known when the time was right. Quiet and breath would bring them. She was not worried.

The innermost layer had to be very fine and delicate. Perhaps layers of quilted silk that were transparent and fragile. Perhaps a single layer of silk, hand painted with delicate colours. No text. No imagery. Simple. Essential. Beautiful. She felt this.

Perhaps the work would be displayed with a light at its centre she thought, one that shone through the silk, through the layers, through the cuts in the metal. Just to remind. The spark, the spirit, the power within. Just to remind.

The bell rang and he quietly got up to go. They said goodbye. He was calm. She felt at peace. They had connected. They could move forward.

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Retrieved from the David Suzuki Foundation website, a site dedicated to examining environmental issues and options. The quote was retrieved from [www.davidsuzuki.org/Climate\\_Change/Science/IPCC/TAR/WGII.asp#4](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Climate_Change/Science/IPCC/TAR/WGII.asp#4) on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008
- <sup>2</sup> Retrieved from the David Suzuki Foundation website, a site dedicated to examining environmental issues and options. The quote was retrieved from [www.davidsuzuki.org/Climate\\_Change/Science/IPCC/TAR/WGII.asp#4](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Climate_Change/Science/IPCC/TAR/WGII.asp#4) on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008
- <sup>3</sup> Retrieved from the Statistics Canada website. Taken from an article entitled Study: Factors associated with patterns of psychological distress over 10 years, found within the Daily on Wednesday, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The Daily is a column released by Statistics Canada, focusing on issues that they consider to be relevant to the Canadian public. The quote was retrieved from [www.statcan.gc.ca/daily/quotidien/080813/dq080813a-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily/quotidien/080813/dq080813a-eng.htm) on March 10th, 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Retrieved from the United Nations Environment Programme website, [www.unep.org/climatechange/](http://www.unep.org/climatechange/), on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> Retrieved from the Guardian News and Media website, an electronic site for the British-based Guardian Newspaper. The quote was retrieved from [www.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/jan/26/uknews.sciencenews](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/jan/26/uknews.sciencenews) on October 24th, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Retrieved from the official World Trade Organization website. The WTO is a multilateral organization comprised of 153 trading countries. The information was retrieved from [www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/pres00\\_e/pr181\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres00_e/pr181_e.htm) on September 21st, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Retrieved from Statistics Canada website. Taken from an article entitled Study: Impact of Neighbourhood Income on Child Obesity, found within the Daily on Monday, Beruary 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The Daily is a column released by Statistics Canada, focusing on issues that they consider to be relevant to the Canadian public. The quote was retrieved from [www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080218/080218a-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080218/080218a-eng.htm) on March 10th, 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> Retrieved from the Government of Nova Scotia's website. The information was retrieved from [www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/healthy\\_development/children-breakfast-program.asp](http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/healthy_development/children-breakfast-program.asp) on March 10th, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Retrieved from the official Campaign 2000 website. Campaign 2000 is "a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000." The quote was retrieved from [www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc06/06\\_C2000NationalReportCard.pdf](http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc06/06_C2000NationalReportCard.pdf) on October 9th, 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> Retrieved from the official Campaign 2000 website. Campaign 2000 is "a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000." The quote was retrieved from [www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc06/06\\_C2000NationalReportCard.pdf](http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc06/06_C2000NationalReportCard.pdf) on October 9th, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Retrieved from the Wikipedia online encyclopedia, an open public encyclopedia. The information was retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_of\\_fear](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_fear) on September 21st, 2008.

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- <sup>12</sup> Retrieved from the Penn State Milton S. Medical Center, Penn State College of Medicine and Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital website. These three institutions, located in Hershey, Pennsylvania, comprise a premier academic center in the Northeastern United States. The information was retrieved from [www.pennstatehershey.psu.edu/healthinfo/hie/1/001950.htm](http://www.pennstatehershey.psu.edu/healthinfo/hie/1/001950.htm) on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> Retrieved from the Penn State Milton S. Medical Center, Penn State College of Medicine and Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital website. These three institutions, located in Hershey, Pennsylvania, comprise a premier academic center in the Northeastern United States. The information was retrieved from [www.pennstatehershey.psu.edu/healthinfo/hie/1/001950.htm](http://www.pennstatehershey.psu.edu/healthinfo/hie/1/001950.htm) on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- <sup>14</sup> Retrieved from the official Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus website. This electronic site was created and is maintained by the Merriam-Webster publishing company, an American publisher of language-reference works. The information was retrieved from [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma) on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> Retrieved from the official website for the Public Health Association of Australia. The PHAA is an association that advocates for public health policy, development, research and training in Australia. Information was retrieved from [www.phaa.net.au/documents/int\\_health\\_sig\\_child\\_detention.pdf](http://www.phaa.net.au/documents/int_health_sig_child_detention.pdf) on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> Montgomery in The PHAA Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report, p.16. Retrieved from the official website for the Public Health Association of Australia. The PHAA is an association that advocates for public health policy, development, research and training in Australia. Information was retrieved from [www.phaa.net.au/documents/int\\_health\\_sig\\_child\\_detention.pdf](http://www.phaa.net.au/documents/int_health_sig_child_detention.pdf) on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> Retrieved from [www.school-teacher-student-motivation-resourcescourses.com/inspirationalteacherquotes.html](http://www.school-teacher-student-motivation-resourcescourses.com/inspirationalteacherquotes.html) on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> Retrieved from [www.ka-gold-jewellery.com](http://www.ka-gold-jewellery.com) on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada. Authorized by General Synod and general Council, 1 February, 1971. Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada, 1971.

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