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## The Parallels Between Art Therapy and Christianity: Integrating Identities as a Christian and an Art Therapist

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The Parallels Between Art Therapy and Christianity: Integrating Identities as a Christian and an  
Art Therapist  
Capstone Thesis  
Lesley University

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Specialization: Art Therapy

Thesis Instructor: Krystal Demaine, PhD, MT-BC, REAT, RYT

### Abstract

Therapists knowledge of their personal beliefs is extremely beneficial to individual's working in the field of art therapy. Therapists are better able to serve their clients when they have a clear understanding of themselves and their biases. The writer of this thesis identifies strongly as an art therapist and as a Christian. To better understand how the two strongest parts of her identity integrated, this thesis explored the parallels between Christianity and art therapy by reviewing the literature and facilitating an arts-based qualitative study. The literature suggested that art therapy can be effective with various populations within the Christian category. One Christian participant engaged in collaborative art making with the author/facilitator surrounding topics connected to the Christian faith. The facilitator, a white American 25-year-old female and the participant, a Hispanic American 24-year-old female. The topics explored included; collaboration and the creative process, trusting the process, parallels between the role of an art therapist and the role of a Christian, and co-facilitating with God. The creation of visual art was an essential element throughout this explorative process and is discussed in the methods; some of the writer's artwork is intermixed throughout this presentation along with personal reflections. In result, numerous parallels between the principles of art therapy and the principles of Christianity were discovered. This research may help art therapists further understand how the two strongest components of their identity integrate and feel more confident approaching the work they do with clients.

*Keywords:* art therapy, Christianity, identity, open studio, response art

The Parallels Between Art Therapy and Christianity: Integrating Identities as a Christian and an  
Art Therapist

This thesis describes the parallels between the values of the profession of art therapy and the practice of the Christian faith. Justice, relationship/rapport, inclusivity, service, love and faith are the six values the writer extensively explored through the lens of art therapy and Christianity. The writer found that the available literature on the topic of art therapy and Christianity was limited. Of the studies the writer was able to review, the majority suggested the effectiveness of incorporating the topic of faith into an art therapy approach and vice versa (Cheong & DiBlasio, 2007; Garland, Carlson, Cook, Landsell & Specca, 2007; Koepfer, 2000; Linesch, 2017; McMurtary, 2007). The literature also suggested the importance of the therapist's personal religious/spiritual beliefs and sensitivity (Koepfer, 2000). In 2012, the Washington Times reported 84 percent of the world population as having faith of some kind, a third of them Christian (Harper, 2012). This speaks to the relevance of faith in people's lives, emphasizing the importance of art therapist's preparedness to allow the space for faith in sessions.

The purpose of this thesis project was to explore the value parallels in an open studio, collaborative art making model. The goal was that this would assist in the further integration of the writer's identities as a Christian and an art therapist so that she would further understand her role in her profession and better serve her clients. It was also intended to provide examples of how art therapy can be effective with Christian clients and encourage other therapists to explore how their beliefs integrate with their profession. The methodologies of arts-based research and autoethnography, provided the structure for this exploration accompanied by visual art journals, photographs, discussions and response art.

The intent is for this thesis to present insight into the role of Christian's in the field of art therapy. To stay true to one's values while also meeting the needs of a client can be a challenging task, one that requires continuous self-reflection and evaluation. The writer hopes that by providing the example of her personal process of integration, it will inspire other art therapists to do the same.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Perspectives on Art and Spirituality**

Art has played a significant role across religious cultures throughout history. In the same way, religion, has greatly impacted the arts. Many religious and indigenous cultures have used art as an instrument for prayer in their individual practices and traditions (Jordan-Bastow, 1998; Villasenor, 1963). For centuries, the Navajo Native Americans have created sand paintings as a ritual to heal and cleanse them of any evil spirits. Interestingly enough, the Native American word for art in most of their languages is a synonym for the word prayer (Jordan-Bastow, 1998; Villaseanor, 1963). The Aborigines of Australia created dot paintings and sand paintings as a ritual to reproduce and pass on spiritual power and sacred knowledge (Crumlin & Knight, 1991; West 1988). Tibetan Buddhists created sand paintings as well, along with paintings, sculpture and music as a means of prayer. They replicated visions and sacred objects which operated as instruments to reach their Creator (Patry Leidy & Thurman, 1998). The ancient Japanese practice of Zen Calligraphy, *Shodo*, is an active meditation that allows the artist to relinquish control of the ego, self, desire and personal will in order to permit the art flow through them (Van Ghelue, 2000). In Mexican tradition, ex-voto paintings, meaning dedicated gifts, were created by the people and offered as protection from infirmities or thanksgiving for miracles that had taken place (Durand & Massey, 1995). Within these particular traditions, art has been utilized as an

instrument for prayer and spiritual relationship with the Creator (Crumlin & Knight, 1991; Patry Leify & Thurman, 1998; Villasenor, 1963).

Throughout history, art has played an iconic role within the Christian faith. The emergence of Christian art in the early church has been attributed to the important role of images in the Greco-Roman culture. As the faith grew, these new Christians gave great value to images due to the teachings of their previous culture and desired to continue this in their practice of Christianity (Farber, 2015). An example of the early integration of art into the faith is connected to the change in the Roman burial practices. Rather than cremate the dead, the Romans dug catacombs into the ground to bury them. The families arranged for chambers or “cubicula” to be dug to place the deceased members in. The wealthier Roman families had marble tombs or “sarcophagi” carved for the burial. Individuals who had converted to the Christian faith wanted the same, therefore Christian catacombs were frequently neighboring the non-Christian catacombs. It was common for the wealthier people to adorn their catacombs with imagery, therefore the wealthy Christians adorned their member’s tomb with Christian imagery (Farber, 2015).

The Roman impressionism style art, used to decorate the tombs, continued to be seen throughout the fourth century. The earliest traces of Christian iconography was often symbolic. For example: what we know today as the Jesus fish, the universal symbol for Christianity. This simple rendering of a fish was sufficient enough to allude to Christ (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). Christian art was not widely spread until after 313 A.D., when Constantine the Great, Christian emperor, ordered official toleration of Christianity. Such imperial sponsorship gained riches and popularity for the faith. People from all social classes were converting to Christianity which demanded the production of architecture and art on a grander scale. Christian

art served to accommodate and educate the new members and represented its new social importance.

### **Tip-toeing Around Religion**

Although Christianity is still currently of the largest world religions, there has been a decreased tolerance of discussion of faith in numerous settings. To even mention the words prayer or spirituality in many environments, specifically in educational settings, is so controversial that many people avoid doing so at all. We live in a society containing many different religious and spiritual beliefs. Rather than allow the space to discuss them openly with each other, the topic is instead avoided to keep from being offensive to one another. Henderson and Hutchinson (1994) explained how the definitions created to define spirituality, aimed to be universally acceptable while simultaneously exclusive to religion by removing the concepts of prayer, religion and God. If the opportunities for genuine discussion of beliefs are removed, it decreases the chances of individuals learning how to have true tolerance for beliefs that differ from theirs. The definition of tolerance is “a tolerating or being tolerant, especially of views, beliefs, practices, etc. of others that differ from one’s own; freedom from bigotry or prejudice” (Guralnik, 1979, p.1495). As therapists, we are taught not to impose our personal beliefs on our clients which is why it is important to be able to discuss and share these various beliefs in an educational setting. There is an overall agreement among many theorists and educators that the best way to discover religious and spiritual beliefs is through personal experience and sharing one’s story (Kesson, 1999; Kesson, 2000). By allowing and promoting these discussions and stories, we can begin to learn how to form appropriate boundaries with our clients surrounding the topic of faith. Utilizing the creative arts can be effective in facilitating the expansion of

interfaith dialogue, decreasing participants' defensiveness and allowing for the discovery of new ways of knowing their faith and spirituality (Linesch, 2017).

Part of the reason such faith-based discussions may be avoided, specifically around the topic of Christianity, is the lack of authentic practice of the faith in Western society (Transformation Church, 2018). More often than not, believers within the Christian faith, do not practice what they preach. Sadly, the examples of Christians who are accurately representing the faith, are not highlighted in the news. The news channels have a tendency to focus on the negative events that take place in the world. Just as there are extreme examples of radical Islam in the news, some denominations of the Christian church are known for their cruel treatment and lack of tolerance from those who hold different beliefs than them. Of the most popular examples, the Westboro Baptist Church, has made themselves known for their use of hate speech against LGBTQ people, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, U.S soldiers and politicians. (Hill, 2017). Simply typing Westboro Baptist Church into google brings up news report after news report of the cruel protests facilitated by this church. For someone who has no education or understanding of the Christian faith, they may see examples of people who claim to be Christian's, such as this, and have a false perception of the true values and beliefs of Christianity. The Christian faith is based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, all of which are documented in the Bible. Christians are called to model themselves after Jesus Christ, the son of God, who showed love to everyone. There are countless verses in the Bible that clearly set the standard for how Christians are to treat people. The book of John stated "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8, New



International Version). The Bible even clearly defined what love is and is not so that there is no confusion on how we are supposed to show God's love.

1 Corinthians stated, Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Cor. 13:4-7, New International Version).

There are also the extreme examples of Christians refusing to serve people in the professional world. One of the most well-known examples of this is the Christian clerk in Kentucky who refused to issue marriage licenses for several same-sex couples despite the Supreme Court's decision to allow this constitutional right. Her discrimination caused great emotional distress for the couples whom she denied this privilege (Kentucky clerk opposed to gay marriage to run for 2018 re-election). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines religious accommodation under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination based on religion. "This includes refusing to accommodate an employee's sincerely held religious beliefs or practices unless the accommodation would impose an undue hardship (more than a minimal burden on operation of the business) (Civil Rights Act, 1964). The Kentucky clerk's decision to deny the same-sex couples their rights, although said to be based on her Christian beliefs, would be considered more than just a burden to the operation of the business because it is going against constitutional law. The Bible states in Romans, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever is rebelling against the authority is rebelling against what God

has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Rom. 13:1-2 New International Version). The Kentucky clerk and the Westboro Baptist community are just a couple examples of how the corruption of human beings has reflected poorly on the faith. Their efforts to justify their actions based on the teachings of Christianity are flawed and an inaccurate representation of the faith (Kentucky clerk opposed to gay marriage to run for 2018 re-election).

### **Parallels of the Values of Art Therapy and Christianity**

#### **Justice**

The values statement of the American Art Therapy Association announces their commitment to uphold social justice. It states, “We uphold social justice and sustainability through inclusion, awareness, practice, and affirmation that all people deserve equal economic, environmental, healthcare, political and social rights and opportunities” (Values Statement, 2017). In order to ensure that practicing art therapists are upholding the values of the statement, they must be infused into the academic training. The importance of including justice in our practice as individual therapists was highly stressed during the course of the writer’s undergraduate and master’s level training. Courses such as *Ethics in Art Therapy and Clinical Mental Health Counseling*, *Power Privilege and Oppression in Clinical Counseling* and *Cross-Cultural Communications in Counseling*, are specifically for the purpose of ensuring that therapists are continuously striving towards cultural competence. By being culturally aware, therapists are better able to recognize and understand the various social justice issues that impact different populations. The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) has an Ethics Committee that is responsible for maintaining updated ethical principles for art therapists to abide by in order to ensure the values of the practice of art therapy are maintained (Ethics, n.d.).

As mentioned above, the entire Christian belief system is documented and described in the Bible. Within this sacred text, the topic of justice is addressed numerous times. The word justice actually appears in scripture 28 different times, providing evidence of the importance of Christian's involvement in social justice issues. The Bible shows examples of how historically, people have continuously redefined good and evil in order to benefit themselves, even at the expense of others. Such injustice took place in families, communities and even entire civilizations, most commonly directed towards the vulnerable (The Bible Project, 2017). The book of Isaiah says, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isa. 1:17). The Hebrew word for justice is "mishpat" which can refer to retributive justice i.e. having to pay the consequence for your actions. In the Bible, "mishpat" most commonly refers to restorative justice, intentionally seeking out people who are vulnerable and being taken advantage of to assist them. An example of this would be advocating for those whose voices are not heard and being involved in the changing of social structures that would prevent such injustices (The Bible Project, 2017). The book of Proverbs says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Pro. 31:8-9). Just as art therapists are held to an ethical standard of justice created by the AATA, Christians are expected to abide by the Biblical standard of justice, which appears to be the same.

### **Relationship/Rapport**

The American Art Therapy Association has defined art therapy as "an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychology theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic *relationship*" (AATA, 2017). In a therapeutic

relationship, establishing a healthy rapport or therapeutic alliance is said to be the key to successful therapy outcomes (Pomerantz, 2011). A therapeutic relationship or rapport refers to the positive, empathic, relaxed relationship between the client and the therapist. “It is the development of interactions that are trusting, accepting, respectful and helpful (Matthews & Matthews, 2015, p. 42). Establishing rapport is an essential part of deepening the therapeutic experience and allowing steps to be taken towards reaching the client’s goals (Nugent, 2015). It is the role of the therapist to utilize the client-therapist relationship to help clients thrive in their interpersonal relationships outside of therapy (DeLucia, 2006). Potash and Ho (2011) facilitated a study which showed that art-making and viewing can activate empathy by stimulating the imagination and cultivating authentic relationships (Potash & Ho, 2011). For centuries, art has been used, like religion, to promote fellowship or community between people (Coleman, 1998). Art therapists have the privilege of utilizing the client’s art expressions to aid in establishing rapport with the client. Gregoire (1990) explained that the art can be explored as language, which is art resulting from the therapeutic process and the interpersonal relationship of the client and the therapist. “The client in art therapy not only describes his/her inner world, but experiences it also in terms of the contextual factors of the relationship with the therapist” (Gregoire, 1990, p.130). Art therapy occurs in the context of relationship (Moon, 2001). One cannot participate in art therapy without the art therapist present. The client could utilize art mediums and attain therapeutic benefits from the process, however, it is not technically art therapy without the art therapist present. Thus, a healthy client-therapist relationship is a core value in the profession and practice of art therapy.

When talking about relationship within the context of Christianity, it is often said that Christians are “called to community” or are in need of fellowship. One can refer to multiple

places throughout scripture that emphasize the importance of community or fellowship for people. Genesis tells us that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). The book of Ecclesiastes says that “two are better than one”, because they are able to accomplish more and help each other if one were to fall down (Ecc. 4:9-10). The Bible actually explains, in many different ways, that God created human beings to be in relationship with one another. The book of Acts tells us that true fellowship is needed in order for the church and the individual to thrive (Act. 2:42). Not only does it emphasize the importance of meeting with others but that they should do so consistently. The book of Hebrews reiterates this when instructing people to pursue relationship where they are consistently present in each other’s lives. Jesus was the prime example of how to engage in community. He spent almost every day of his life building community. The first thing Jesus did when he began his earthly ministry was start a community. He traveled with the twelve disciples with whom he had created fellowship and/or community. Jesus made sure that his life on earth was an example of how we should seek community. In fact, one of the last things Jesus prayed before he died on the cross was for people to not be alone (Life\_Church, 2011; John 17:20-21). He also promised that he is present where two or more are gathered in his name, further encouraging Christians to seek relationship (Matt. 18:20). To be a Christian means to be a follower of Christ and therefore strive to be like Christ. Since Jesus made community a priority, Christians are to mirror him by implementing this in their own lives.

### **Inclusivity**

In the AATA values statement, there is an affirmed commitment to being inclusive of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, religious or spiritual beliefs, ancestry, age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, identity, socioeconomic status, marital status, citizen or immigrant, political stance and new identities as they emerge (AATA, 2017). It is extremely important for those

serving in the profession of art therapy to strive to make their services available for people of all identities. The arts are multicultural, showing no bias, allowing art therapists to work with people of many races, creeds and religious beliefs (Moon, 2008). The inclusive nature of the profession closely parallels the role of the Christian. “As members of a helping profession, art therapists often find themselves working with people whom the rest of society is uncomfortable” (Moon, 2008, p.101). Jesus spent the duration of his ministry on earth ministering to the lame, the maimed, the blind, the sick, the outcasts, the poor and the oppressed. The New Testament has countless stories of Jesus spending time with the marginalized and disenfranchised. Jesus was able to see people through the eyes of his culture. He had the aptitude to communicate in the cultural language of his time so that people could understand his message (Sjogren, 2014). He was inclusive in his approach, making his message available for all. According to the book of 1 Peter, Christians are to honor all people and love everyone (1 Pet. 2:17). It does not say love everyone except..., it says love everyone, a very inclusive statement.

### **Service**

Art therapy falls under the category of a mental health and human services profession. Art therapists utilize their training in psychology and the creative arts to serve people in all walks of life. The very essence of the profession is service based. Many individuals who are drawn to the profession have experienced a great deal of hurt and suffering in their own lives and hope to use their education, partnered with their life experience to alleviate the suffering of others.

We are not merely praying passively for the end of suffering and abuse; we are acting on it, changing the face of oppression one person at a time through the very ordinary, very miraculous act of making art (Moon, 2001, p. 37).

The way in which art therapists serve their clients and the community is an example of how Christians are called by God to serve. Christians are often called servants of God. Jesus, being the ultimate example of how to live, spent his human life serving others. The book of Matthew says, "...the son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). He was incredibly humble, never expecting anything in return from those whom he served. Christians are to model a life of serving others, just as Jesus did.

### **Love**

To say that love is a core value of a profession can sound a little odd and to some, may seem unprofessional. The word love is not regularly utilized to describe the values of a profession. Love is a word that is often abused by the way it is casually thrown around in conversation in Western culture. Love is something that has no concrete or scientific way of measuring it. You will not find the word love explicitly stated anywhere in the mission, ethics or values statement of AATA, however, it is absolutely a driving force of the profession. According to Moon (2008), "...our source as art therapists is love" (p.8). Moon, a seasoned art therapist, believes "love is the motivating force for art therapists" (Moon, 2008, p.8). He views art making, of all kinds, as an act of love. Moon brings to our attention the various art mediums that have been utilized to express love throughout history. Poetry, songs, dances, plays, and paintings have all been created to express love (Moon, 2008). Themes of love are still riddled throughout the arts in modern day culture, however; not all facets of love are captured. Love has been defined in various ways but pertaining to art therapy, Moon (2008) defines love as "the will to attend to the self and to others" (p. 9). He explains that his decision to include the word *will* into his definition is key. It integrates 'intent and action' (Moon, 2008, p.9). Love is more than just a feeling, it is

expressed through actions towards the self and others (Moon, 2008). This definition of love connects to the Christian definition of love.

The Bible states that God is love, love is in his character. God's love is eternal, it is more than a feeling or a sentiment, it is something he does, an action (The Bible Project, 2017). There are endless verses in the Bible that highlight the importance of love and tell Christians how to show love. The book of John tells Christians to love with their actions. Jesus told the disciples to love one another and by this all would know they were his disciples (John 13:35). Christians believe that God is all knowing and all powerful. God would be completely okay had he not decided to create human beings. Hufford (2009) poses the question and answer, 'Why did God create us?', his answer, 'Because love requires expression' (p.72). Art therapists have the privilege of providing their clients with the space and materials to create and express love. They are able to engage in the creative process with clients and experience love on two levels; through serving and creating. One can show love through their actions no matter the work they find themselves doing. Art therapy is a profession that directly serves human beings, an action that expresses love.

### **Faith**

Faith, like love, is another word that is not commonly found in the description of a profession. The Bible defines faith as "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). Although faith is most commonly heard of in the context of religion, it has a significant role in the art therapy setting. The four elements; focus, discipline, patience and mastery are essential components in art therapy, all of which, depend on faith (Moon, 2008). "The practices of art, art therapy, and love demand faith" (Moon, 2008, p.17). Moon (2008) emphasizes that art therapists must "have faith in the goodness of life, the arts, others, and



ourselves” (p.17). Many hold the belief that in order to have faith in others, one must first have faith in his or her self. Moon (2008) strongly believes that in order for people to practice art therapy, they must have faith in the restorative abilities of art processes and products for both themselves and their clients (p. xvii). If therapists do not have faith in their own abilities, how can they be sure they can have faith in their clients’? If a client knows that the therapist has faith in him/her and the client also has faith in the therapist, true growth and healing can take place.

Naturally, humans strive to evade discomfort, suffering and embarrassment. Moon (2001) states, “To create out of the circumstances of a broken life is to make a leap of faith” (p.44). Engaging in the creative process in an art therapy session is much more than just making art. Although creating can be fun and enjoyable, it is also often quite uncomfortable. Those who partake in art therapy are usually creating from a place of pain, either physical and/or emotional. Moon (2001) states it beautifully:

I cannot guarantee that making art will make them feel better and it might even make them feel worse for a while. What I can do is make art alongside them. This is my faith statement, my belief that ultimately, we will be sustained by the act of creating out of the raw material of life as it presents itself, even when it presents as something we do not want to work with. In the sharing of our brokenness and in daring to imagine the hope within us, we are a Eucharistic community, open to encouraging the living presence of God, of Mystery, of a power greater than ourselves within and among us (p.42).

Just as the therapist must have faith in various areas, so must the Christian. Faith allows Christians to maintain confidence in their beliefs, even when emotions or circumstances around them suggest otherwise. The Bible tells Christians that faith is pleasing to God and determines their actions (Heb. 11:6; 2 Cor. 5:7). An excellent example in the Bible of Christians having to

step out in faith is in Exodus 14, when Moses crosses the red sea with the Israelites who had just been released from slavery. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, where they had been enslaved, making a large amount of progress. Though they had just been freed, they came to a huge road block, the Red Sea, which they could not cross. They became frustrated with Moses for bringing them this far and then hitting a dead end, knowing the Egyptians were marching after them. When this happened, Moses pleaded to God to save them, to which God replied “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.” Then God told Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea to divide the water. Moses trusted God and did what he was told and the sea split, so the Israelites could cross. Though God was doing all the work, he still required the faith of Moses and the Israelites to keep moving in order to cross the Red Sea. They had to have faith that God would hold the walls of the sea. Though they were likely fearful of the possibility of the sea closing in on them, they maintained faith and moved forward. Just as the Israelites had faith that God would protect them, Christians must have faith that God will do the same for them in their individual circumstances. The journey that Moses took with the Israelites parallels the journey art therapists take with their clients. Moses led by example of his faith in God which encouraged the Israelites to have faith. Art therapists lead by example of faith in the creative, therapeutic process which encourages clients to have faith in the process.

### **The Application of Art Therapy with Christianity**

#### **Quantitative Studies**

Researchers Garland, Carlson, Cook, Lansdell and Speca (2007) conducted a study comparing the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program to a healing through the creative arts (HA) program, measuring post traumatic growth, spirituality, stress, and mood disturbance in cancer patients. Participants in this quantitative research included cancer

outpatients with a range of diagnoses. Participants criteria included; ages 18 years or older, cancer diagnosis and English speaking. The majority of participants were married females who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Participants chose to attend either a six-week HA program or an eight-week MBSR program. The goal of the six-week HA program was to provide participants the opportunity of empowerment and self-discovery through the creative process. The primary creative arts therapy modalities used were drawing, creative writing, journaling and movement to music. Participants attended six weekly sessions, each for a duration of two hours, totaling to 12 hours of contact time. The goal of the eight-week MBSR program was to aid participants in achieving increased self-awareness through yoga exercises, meditation and class group discussion. Participants met weekly for 90-minute sessions and one three-hour weekend intensive silent retreat, totaling to 15 hours of contact time. All participants were assessed pre- and post-intervention for both programs. Results of the participation indicated significant improvement over time on overall post-traumatic growth in both groups. The MBSR group participants improved more than those in the HA group in measures of spirituality, anxiety, anger, mood disturbance and overall stress symptoms. The researchers concluded that both programs may improve enablement of positive progression after experienced trauma for voluntary participants (Garland, et. al., 2007).

When it came to researchers Puig, Lee, Goodwin and Sherrard (2006), they chose to investigate the effectiveness of complementary creative arts therapy interventions to improve spirituality, emotional expression and psychological well-being in recently diagnosed women with breast cancer. Among the 39 participants, criteria included being 18 years or older and diagnosed in the past 12 months with Stage I or Stage II breast cancer. Participant demographics included, majority being Caucasian, four African-American, four Hispanic-American and one

Native American. The women were randomly divided into two groups, 20 in the experimental group and 19 in the control group. The experimental group participated in creative arts therapy interventions while the control group was delayed treatment. The creative art therapy interventions were designed to enhance spirituality, emotional expression and psychological well-being. Participants were assessed pre-and post-intervention via several measures. The Emotional Approach Coping Scale (EACS) was used to assess emotional expression, the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory-Revised (ESI-R) was used to measure spirituality, the Profile of Mood States (POMS) was used to measure mood disturbance and lastly an exit questionnaire was used to determine clinical significance of all the results. The researchers concluded that the intervention was not effective in improving emotional coping, expression or level of spirituality of participants in the study. However, participants reported decreased negative emotional experiences and would recommend it to others living with health problems. Limitations of the study included, the self-reporting method, and voluntary participation (Puig, Lee, Goodwin & Sherrard, 2006).

### **Qualitative Studies on Art and Spirituality**

McMurtary (2007) explored the role of the arts in children's spiritual development highlighting applications of certain theories in practice, those being; aesthetic theory, theory of knowing, self and being, theory of instruction, creation theory and evolution theory. McMurtary was involved in lay ministry in the UK. He begins by reviewing the historical significance of the arts in various cultural societies, of which many contained religious or spiritual practices. It was noted that, various artistic expressions of these societies allowed for a better understanding of how cultures have evolved. Various religions were created according to their own unique criteria, using the arts to express and represent their spirituality. The author noted that literature

that suggests that spirituality and aesthetics are both located in the same area of our consciousness, therefore the arts may have a role in both expression of spirituality understanding. In addition, various mixed modality activities with children of various ages allowed participants to explore their spirituality as a means of expression. It was concluded that various forms of the creative process aid in the development of children's spirituality.

Cheong and DiBlasio (2007) explored the strong connection between love and forgiveness and the impact these concepts have in a counseling process rooted in Christianity. The Christian perspective of God's commandment to love shows the indivisible link between love and forgiveness. The authors highlighted a case study as an example of the effectiveness of using the Christian perspective of love and forgiveness as a guide for practicing Christian counselors. A 35-year-old, female, mature believer in Christ, presented to her counselor with chronic depression and anger towards difficulties with her husband and child. The client was participating in both individual and couple's sessions, both in which she expressed her deep-seated feelings of hatred towards her father. Her counselor recognized that her deep-rooted anger and un-forgiveness towards her father was impacting her relationship with her husband and child. After discussing it with the client, the counselor scheduled appointments for the client's father to be present. After the first session with the father, the counselor scheduled an individual session with the client to allow her to process and prepare for the following session with him. During this session, the counselor prompted the client to compare the love God demonstrates to her to the hatred she was holding against her father. This perspective allowed the client to realize that her un-forgiveness and hatred were contrary to the nature of God. The client made the decision in that moment to forgive her father. She was able to see how it was hypocritical for her to accept the love of God and hate her father for his wrongs. After offering her forgiveness to her

father and developing a plan to end the hurtful behaviors between them, her issues with her husband and child dissipated. The authors are suggesting that keeping the focus on the self fails to adequately assist in setting the stage for transforming power that comes from the unselfish love from God and love of others. Loving kindness and forgiveness play a central role in the Christian view of love and forgiveness. From a psychology perspective, being that sin is in every human relationship, one cannot love without forgiveness. From a Biblical perspective, God's love and forgiveness are connected throughout Scripture. Therefore, in applying a God-centered practice theory, love and forgiveness are essential in counseling people to love according to God's command.

### **Arts-Based Research Studies**

Linesch (2017) conducted an arts-based qualitative study exploring the role of art in interfaith dialogue. Participants in this arts-based research included seven Christian, seven Jewish, and seven Muslim women equaling a total of twenty-one individuals who met for seven monthly meetings. Participants were selected via an invitational method sent to members of progressive churches, synagogues and mosques in Los Angeles, California. Each month the participants gathered to compare and discuss selected texts from the Christian Gospels, the Jewish Torah and the Islamic Quran. After the discussion participants were invited to create simple response collages with the option of incorporating the printouts of the religious texts. The only materials provided were colored textured papers and glue. Once the participants completed their responses they gathered in triads (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) to share their art. At the end of the seven months, the art was collected, reviewed and participants were interviewed about their experience. The artwork and interview responses were analyzed for themes by qualitative content analysis protocols which examined the formal elements of the images and identified

emergent themes in the interview narratives. Three main themes emerged from the participant's artwork and dialogue; increased vulnerability, dialogue expansion and new ways of knowing about spirituality and faith. The findings indicated that incorporating art psychotherapy techniques allowed for the themes to emerge naturally and without hostility. Aside from the findings from the participants, Linesch concluded that, "my lifelong commitment to the art process as a meaning making opportunity was able to inform the spiritual practices to which I was migrating at the end of my career as an art therapist" (p. 27).

Art Therapist Stephen Koepfer (2000) explored the role of religious and spiritual beliefs of children in pediatric medicine and healing. He considered cultural variables, various methods for addressing religious and spiritual concerns in treatment, as well as the importance of the therapist's personal religious and spiritual beliefs and sensitivity. Koepfer referenced several studies that suggested active religious and/or spiritual practices have a significant influence on health maintenance and physiological regulation. He also included examples of client artwork, from his experience as a pediatric art therapist, which contain religious or spiritual content. One case study example was included, which discussed an 11-year-old Latino male whose faith played a significant role in his art therapy experience. This case study was an example of how children's beliefs, willingness of the therapist to engage them, and the therapist's understanding of their own spirituality can work together to increase the depth and significance of the session for both therapist and client. This should serve as encouragement for therapists to explore their own religious or spiritual beliefs and convictions so that they may better understand themselves and enhance service to their clients (Koepfer, 2000).

## **Methods**

The inspiration for this arts-based, qualitative, open studio, collaborative approach came from the authors experience creating art in her master's degree program. The author previously found that the open studio approach led to deep self-reflection and exploration. For the purpose of this thesis, open studio was defined as the space where the participant could come to create art in a loosely structured setting and all materials were provided.

### **Participants**

The study involved one participant, a 24-year-old, Hispanic, Christian, female and the author/facilitator, who is described as a 25-year old, white, Christian, female. The facilitator and participant attended the same church and had mutual friends. The participant was recruited because of her Christian faith, willingness to commit and relational distance to the author/facilitator. Had the dynamic of their relationship been more than acquaintances, it might have impacted the level of reverence they had for one another in this process.

### **Materials**

The materials included; magazine clippings, acrylic paint, acrylic paper, balloons, large sheets of brown paper, colored inks, photo paper, and charcoal. The materials were available on a table in the center of the studio in which the sessions took place.

### **Procedures**

The participant was also informed that they would be operating as equals as much as possible, meaning they could both share ideas and make decisions about the process together. The reason for the phrasing, "as much as possible", was because the facilitator presented the initial structure to follow but was allowing room for elaboration; meaning there were some components the facilitator wanted to keep consistent and unchanged. The pre-determined themes of focus were: Christian collaboration and the creative process and trusting the process. These pre-determined



themes were explored in each art making session. Themes that naturally emerged during the study were: parallels between the facilitator's role as an art therapist and as a Christian and co-creating/facilitating with God.

During the first session the participant and facilitator familiarized themselves with the available materials by organizing the studio space to be conducive to their creative process. There were a couple sessions where the materials were predetermined to use for the following week, but the majority of the time, materials were chosen at the beginning of the session or spontaneously throughout. Each session began with a guided prayer meditation for a minimum of two to ten minutes. After participating in the meditation, the facilitator put on a Christian music playlist and they began creating individual art pieces while in the presence of one another creating. Dialogue occurred naturally as they engaged in art making. At times the conversation lasted the duration of the art making session and other times they created in periods of quiet, other than the background music.

Two hours of each session were dedicated to art making, this was intended to allow time to be fully immersed in the creative process without feeling rushed. The time allowed for the facilitator and participant to create large pieces of artwork such as five-foot paintings and poster board collages. The last 30 minutes of the session was for displaying of the artwork for observation and discussion to process the art making experience. During this time the facilitator and participant took turns commenting on the visual components of the others artwork, highlighting the graphic components that stood out to them most. Then each individual had a chance to share about the process of creating their art piece, the thought process, their likes and dislikes about the experience and/or about the final product. During this dialogue, discussion of the predetermined and naturally

emerged themes took place. Many times, the topic of the opening meditation activity would emerge in the artwork discussion.

### **Researcher's Methods of Reflection**

The methods that were used to track themes and document the process were individual art journals, photos of the artwork made in sessions and personal response art. Throughout the course of the eight weeks the predetermined themes and naturally emerged themes were deeply explored and reflected on. At the end of each session the facilitator and participant sat down and journal about the experience. The journaling included jotting down bullet points of thoughts, drawing connections between themes and creating response art. At the end of the eight-weeks the journals were reviewed, and four main themes were extracted from the notes. Those were; Christian collaboration and the creative process, trusting the process, the parallel of the role of an art therapist and a Christian, and co-facilitating with God.

### **Results**

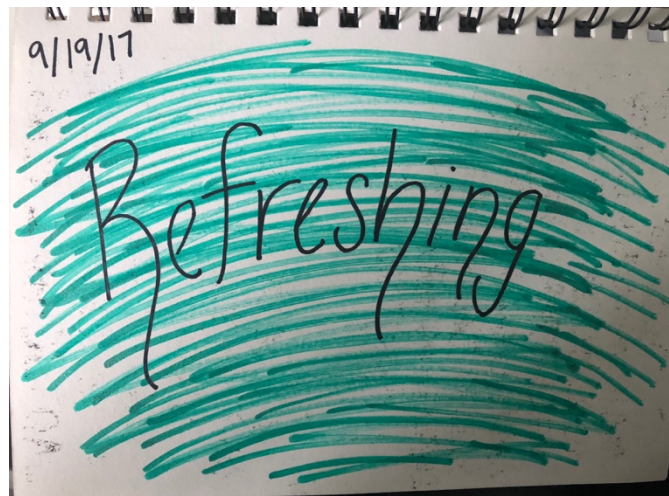
The results will be presented first with the facilitator's observations and unsolicited responses from the participant. The collected arts-based data from the participant and the facilitator as it related to the creative process and Christianity, indicated that engaging in art making with others promoted self-exploration and reflection. When specific themes were chosen to focus on, it provided a strong starting point and allowed for rich elaboration. The facilitator found the art process to unfold naturally when a topic was selected, and art materials were presented. The option for talking during the open studio sessions was left open. Some sessions were filled with dialogue and others were mostly quiet, other than the background music. During sessions when the participant and facilitator made art without engaging in conversation, the closing dialogue surrounding the art was longer and more reflective. The participant reported

appreciation of the symbiotic relationship which allowed for the natural progression of sessions and full absorption in the creative process.

### **Discussion**

Because this research has a self-reflective component, the voice will change to first person reflective voice for part of the discussion.

#### **Christian collaboration and the creative process**



*Figure 1.* Response art on collaboration

Engaging in the creative process with an individual who shared my faith allowed me to feel a sense of safety and inspiration. I felt comfortable sharing the thoughts and ideas that surfaced during the creative process, knowing I would be supported and not judged. This space allowed for authentic discussions and vulnerability. Engaging in art making while sharing thoughts and ideas provided an extra sense of comfort. Engaging with the art materials allowed me to stay alert and absorbed in the meaningful topics that arose. I was able to discuss the importance of my beliefs, the struggles we can come across as Christians, and ideas I hope to bring to life in my upcoming career.



*Figure 2.* Response art on trusting the process.

### **Trusting the process**

Trusting the process was a major focus of this arts-based exploration. Throughout the entire project, trust the process, was a phrase I kept in mind. It allowed me to have grace with myself as I facilitated this research, engaged in art-making, documented my experiences, and put the research all together. Making the decision to trust the process of each session removed the desire to over plan and control every aspect. Trusting the creative process allowed for the removal of judgment on pieces of artwork that were not visually satisfactory to myself. Trusting the process allowed me to be fully present with my collaborator as we engaged in art making and discussion. Through this process I was able to recognize an important parallel. In the same way that I choose to trust the process of art therapy, I choose to trust God's process. It is a commitment to continue trusting the process and

moving forward, even in times of confusion or uncertainty. I came to the realization that trusting the process applies to any and all processes that I encounter in my life.

### **Parallels between the role of a Christian and art therapist**

The realization of the parallels in trusting the process opened the door for further recognition of the similarities between my role as a Christian and my role as an art therapist. As an art therapist, I can plan my sessions with clients to a certain extent but must be able to remain flexible and adapt as unplanned circumstances emerge. As an art therapist, I cannot force a client to make changes or progress, they must also want it for themselves. I can lead by example for my clients, but they have to be willing to put in work as well. The same is true for my role as a Christian, sharing the gospel. I can present someone with the information or show her the love of God by the way I live my life, but I cannot force someone to become a Christian, she must choose to believe for herself.

### **Co-facilitating with God**

Co-facilitating with God is an idea that emerged when I was creating response art around the topic of trusting the process. Trusting the process of art therapy connects to my trust in God's process in my life. I believe that God has a role in all processes of my life, therefore, when I am trusting the process of art therapy, I believe that God has a role in that process. The visual that came to mind was God in each art therapy session with me, in the role of co-facilitator. Believing that God is with me in each session allows me to approach the process with an increased amount of trust.

The motivating purpose behind this study was to explore the parallels between the role of a Christian and the role of an art therapist. It was important to this thesis writer on a personal level, as an entry level, clinical art therapist. McNiff (2004) stated, "unless I explored these

practices in my own life, I knew that my work with others could not fully flourish” (p.12). An art therapist’s understanding of their own spirituality and willingness to engage their client’s beliefs can increase depth and significance of the work done in therapy sessions (Koepfer, 2000). The two strongest parts of the writer’s identity are her Christian faith and chosen profession of art therapy. The results reported above are based on the experience collaborating with an individual of the same faith in a creative space to further explore and integrate identities. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson once said, “it takes two to know one.” After engaging in this personal research journey, this statement stands true. Having the privilege of engaging in meaningful conversation surrounding the creative process allowed for the gaining of insight on a level that would not have been possible to reach alone. The literature suggested the effectiveness of art therapy with various populations who consider faith to be a significant part of their lives. Various forms of the creative process aid in the development of spirituality (McMurtary, 2007). The hope is that the above findings will help draw connections for other Christians in the field of art therapy so that they may also gain a sense of further integration.

Recommendations and future directives for this research include; recruiting more participants to create a more structured group surrounding the topic of faith exploration and increase the allowance of time to discuss the created artwork. Creating a larger group would allow for more perspectives and could expand the conversation and reflection. If the facilitator chose to play a dual role and also participate, as done in this study, they could still have time and space for self-reflection surrounding personal beliefs and values.

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**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

**Lesley University  
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
Expressive Therapies Division  
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

**Student's Name:** Kendal Hansen

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** The Parallels Between Art Therapy and Christianity:  
Integrating Identities as a Christian and an Art Therapist

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** *Dr. Krystal L. Demaine, PhD*