The Art of Forgiveness: How the Arts Helped Facilitate Forgiveness

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THE ART OF FORGIVENESS: HOW THE ARTS HELPED FACILITATE FORGIVENESS

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

DARLENE GARNER KUEHN

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for the degree of
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Approvals

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I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

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I hereby accept the recommendation of the Dissertation Committee and its Chairperson.

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Abstract

This research explored how the arts can help facilitate the process of forgiveness using a diverse methods research design. The first part of the research was a qualitative phenomenological inquiry examining the experiences of eight people who identified as having worked through a substantial process of forgiving in which the arts was an informative part of their process. The second part involved arts-based research to further investigate how art helped facilitate the participants forgiveness process. The primary investigation of the inquiry was: How did involving art effect the participants’ process of forgiving, and, did art facilitate or enrich the forgiveness process, and if so, how? Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour were held with the participants to explore the research inquiry. Art forms involved in the participants’ process included poetry, visual art, music and sound, songwriting, and performance art.

Analysis of the interviews identified several themes describing what the arts offered in the process and how creative expression was facilitative to forgiving. The interviews and thematic findings were then examined through arts-based research in a process of poetic distillation and poetic response. Poetic inquiry was followed by visual art reflection using acrylic painting on canvas to further explore the process of using art in the process of forgiveness.

Keywords: forgiveness; expressive art therapy; trauma; poetry; art therapy; music

therapy
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a considerable amount of attention paid to healing and the restoration of peace through forgiveness after an injustice, offence, or violation. Whether it be to resolve interpersonal disputes in a romantic relationship (Worthington Jr, & Sandage, 2016), or within family dynamics or generationally transmitted trauma (Hargrave, 1994), or post-oppression and conflict between groups of people (Tutu, 1999), forgiveness is seen as a way to move past acts of injustice, injury, and conflict toward healing and inner peace that can open channels toward reconciliation.

Because forgiveness can offer healing and the potential for reestablishment of feelings of internalized peace following conflict and injustice, it is important to examine what may facilitate the process of forgiveness. The forgiveness process understandably includes reflection and examination of highly emotional content. The arts are notoriously instrumental in reflection, expression and examination of emotions related to human struggle. This research undertakes examination of the forgiveness process facilitated through the inclusion of the arts. The intention is to explore the value that the arts may have offered those that worked through their forgiveness journey by involving artistic reflection. The inquiry of this research places it between two growing fields of research: the study of forgiveness, and the study of expressive arts in therapy and healing. Examining the interaction of the arts in the process of forgiveness promises to add a new dimension to forgiveness literature and will bring a new stream of focus into the expressive arts and healing literature.
My focus in undertaking this research is to explore in depth how the arts were instrumental in the forgiveness process of those who practiced art making, or who involved the arts in some substantial way their process of forgiving. There is growing recognition of how the practice of art can be an integral part of psychological healing and can augment insight in self-reflection. The arts are seen as instrumental in accessing the subconscious and in providing a tangible interaction in psycho-emotional process (Allen, 1995; McNiff, 2004, 2009). Incorporating the arts in their many forms therapeutically within helping relationships is being increasingly recognized as offering valuable contributions to wellbeing and healing. The arts therapies and arts in therapy are a growing field in counselling psychology and in clinical therapeutic practice and are being practiced in many innovated ways (Degges-White & Davis, 2011; Gladding, 2011; Kossak, 2015; Levine, 2003; Malchiodi, 2005; McNiff, 2004, 2009; Rogers, 1993; Rubin, 2005). Involving reflective experience through the arts has not been investigated in forgiveness process and may offer valuable insight into potential facilitative benefits of including art in the process. To explore the potential value of art in the process however, it is important to look at the complexities of forgiveness.

**Forgiveness: Defining a complex phenomenon**

In coming to a decision to forgive there are many concerns that need be addressed by those who may consider the possible benefits of forgiveness. Careful reflection in defining what forgiveness is, and equally importantly what forgiveness is not, are helpful reflections for a would-be forgiver. While the quest to understand the meaning of forgiveness generates important discussion, there is no easy consensus as to whether or not forgiveness is the right reaction to injustice and wrongdoing.
Forgiving is often defined as letting go of ill will or thoughts of revenge toward one’s offender while acknowledging the moral right to anger of the one harmed (Enright, 2015). In prose, forgiving has been described as avoiding “being sucked into the downward spiral of resentment” (Arnold, 2000, p. 2) or refusing to remain the victim of a tragedy (Arnold, 2000). While definitions of forgiveness are important, clarifying what forgiveness is not is consistently addressed in forgiveness literature (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Brennan, 2000; Enright, 2001; 2015; Jeffress, 2000; Karen, 2003; Monbourquette, 2000). Important distinctions include: forgiving is not forgetting (Brennan, 2000; Enright 2015; Wade et al., 2014); it is not excusing or justifying an offense or an offender (Jeffress, 2000; Enright, 2001, 2015); it is not denial of the anger and pain from the injustice (Jeffress, 2000; Karen, 2003); it is not denial of the need for justice (Jeffress, 2000); nor is it simply a way to calm down (Enright, 2015). Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) add to the list that forgiveness is not: pardon, absolving, condoning, tolerating, accepting the offender’s apology, conciliation, becoming less disappointed, balancing the scales, or “self-centering (forgiving only for one’s own benefit, focusing on oneself, and not the offender)” (p. 41). Another important addendum to the definition is that while forgiveness restores the humanity of the offender in the eyes of the victim, it does not necessitate reconciliation (Enright, 2001, 2004, 2014; Wade, et al., 2014); rather, reconciliation is seen as a separate process and a possibility, when, and if, it is desired or even possible.

Another clarification is that it is a person, or persons, being forgiven – not the offensive act or actions. The unjust act or acts are understood as indelibly wrong (Enright, 2000, 2015; Holloway, 2002). Forgiveness is not the same as exoneration nor does it mean to release an offender from judicial consequences (Jeffress, 2000). Forgiveness is an acknowledgement of
injustice that respects the full emotional impact on the victim in condemning the offense while still providing a way past the burden of anger and resentment toward the offender that can keep a victim trapped (Reed & Enright, 2006; Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, & Beckham, 2004). Similarly, an extent of emotional freedom from the past is offered by the forgiver to the offender should they choose to receive it (citation). In this manner forgiveness is considered paradoxical in its outcome in that, while it is giving a gift of emotional release to an offender, it as much, or possibly more, a gift of healing to the forgiver (Enright, 2001).

Cantacuzino, founder of ‘The Forgiveness Project’ has written a book entitled The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a vengeful age (2015) that gathers the stories of many people across the world that have chosen forgiveness following substantial injury. Cantacuzino, does not advocate for forgiveness, but rather chooses to explore it. She states her position as such that: “everyone’s response to forgiveness – or their definition of it, is valid because forgiveness is something viewed through a personal lens and every context and all content is therefore dissimilar” (2015, p.1). In gathering stories, she allows those who have chosen to forgive to speak for themselves.

Forgiveness: The controversies and the benefits

Since the late 1980’s a plethora of books and research has appeared in counselling psychology literature from theorists such as Robert D. Enright, Richard P. Fitzgibbons, Everett L. Worthington Jr. and Steven Sandage amongst others who have examined the phenomenon of forgiveness as a healing process. In recent years, Worthington Jr. and Sandage created a process model of forgiveness for interpersonal relationships (2016) and Enright and Fitzgibbons revised their therapeutic process model for forgiveness originally published as Helping Clients Forgive.
(2000), with the revised model being released as *Forgiveness Therapy: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (2015). Over the years numerous theories and models have contributed to the growing interest in forgiveness in clinical counselling work, spirituality, and in self-help literature.

Yet, there have also been those who question whether forgiveness is the most helpful response towards wrongdoing. Sharon Lamb has cautioned the use of forgiveness in psychotherapy (Lamb & Murphy, 2002) and addressed what she framed as promoting forgiveness with little criticism. She stated “Rather than neutrality there has been an almost wholesale acceptance of forgiveness as a virtue, and because of this, little concern for advocating forgiveness in psychotherapy (Lamb & Murphy, p. 3). Lamb and Murphy examine the importance of anger and resentment for those that have been wronged and point out several concerns about forgiveness in psychotherapy. Their edited book with chapters from several authors explored perceived difficulties that arise in the forgiveness process from both a psychological and philosophical perspective. Enright and Fitzgibbons responded to criticism by Lamb that their forgiveness model is ‘dismissive of the critics’ in their revised clinical manual (2015):

To date the critics seem to be criticizing something other than genuine forgiveness.

Our approach to any rebuttal will be to expose equivocation (the use of two different terms when arguing for or against something, in this case forgiveness), which seems to be the crucial logical fallacy among the skeptics. (2015, p. 281)

Enright and Fitzgibbons’ rebuttal speaks to the care taken in much of the forgiveness literature to define what is meant by forgiveness with considerably detail to what forgiveness is
not. Still the debate as to the benefits and cautionary points concerning forgiveness is echoed in many discussions.

A concerns about forgiveness is that it can create excessive vulnerability in the victim by negating anger in response to injustice, the argument being that anger could be dismissed or suppressed, and that injustice could go unabated. Lamb stated in her critique: “While forgiveness therapy as outlined by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) is specifically designed to ‘treat anger’ we are not sure why anger must be treated and why it is bad for a person.” (Lamb & Murphy, 2002, p.8). Indeed, anger is an important emotion for protection and boundary setting thus Lamb raises an important point. Properly addressing anger is central to healing after an injustice. Lamb and Murphy (2002) raised concern that there is a potential risk of dismissing the important functions of anger such as guarding self-dignity and confronting injustice. Conversely, there can also be a risk of being consumed by anger. Enright and Fitzgibbons state: “A key feature of forgiveness therapy is understanding, confronting, and reducing or even eliminating unhealthy anger” (2015, p. 17) with the operative word being ‘unhealthy’.

It stands to reason that living with the loss and pain caused by injustice is difficult. Exploring from an individual perspective what one would like to do with respect to anger is at issue. For a person who is considering forgiveness, these are the weighty issues that they live with: what constitutes healthy and unhealthy anger after they have been harmed? What would they like to do to move forward after being victimized by the actions of someone else? With the role of protective impulse and the pain of loss considered, the importance of an anger phase in forgiveness has been recognized (Enright, 2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, 2015). Enright (2001) stated: “When you are wronged or see some injustice, you have a right to be angry.
Anger becomes a problem when, instead of taking action, you let your anger settle into an ongoing resentment.” (p.104).

Exploring resentment, anger and other difficult emotions are central to the first phase of Enright’s process model of forgiveness. Exploring the complexities of working through forgiveness and examining the emotional content in the process are imperative to understanding the phenomenon of forgiving. In their ‘fourfold path to forgiveness’ Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho (2014) spoke to the importance of ‘telling the story’ and ‘nam ing the hurt’ in working through a process of forgiveness. Their four-part process model suggested creative and metaphorical reflections to assist the reader the forgiveness process. Given the difficult emotional components involved in the forgiveness process, deep reflection through art making may contribute to the process outlines given by Tutu and Tutu by providing a further tactile place to explore complex and intense emotion.

Consideration of the offender brings more controversy into the forgiveness discussion. Questioning of forgiveness was explored in Simon Wiesenthal’s renown book: The Sunflower: on the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness (1969). A collection of profound thinkers were invited to weigh in on a specific situation reiterated by Wiesenthal concerning forgiveness requested from a Nazi soldier on his deathbed from a Jew who was being held in an internment camp during World War II. Responses cover a wide range of perspectives on forgiveness, some in favor of forgiveness, with others strongly opposed to it given the situation, providing rich material for reflection on the meaning and purpose of forgiveness. Forgiveness is lauded from some perspectives and can be highly contentious from others.
Philosophers such as Margaret R. Holmgren (2012) argued that unconditional genuine forgiveness is always the correct moral position regardless of the offence or offender, while in contrast, the value of resentment has also been philosophically argued for (Murphy, 2005) with these positions representing a debate as to the correct moral response to wrongdoing and injustice in context to varying circumstances.

Moral philosophers base their arguments on the importance of respecting the victim, the offender, and the moral code in defending which position holds the highest moral integrity, forgiveness or retribution (Holmgren, 2012). In addressing the dignity of the one who was harmed, retributionists argue that holding resentment supports the self-respect of a victim after an offence until, or if, the offender makes amends. Advocates of unconditional genuine forgiveness such as Holmgren have stated that waiting for the offender to make amends before letting go of resentment keeps the offender in a continued position of power over the one that they have harmed as they become the decider of when and how forgiveness is appropriate. That the offender is the one to decide is important as this study examines how the arts can help in the process of forgiveness for those who *choose* to forgive. The concerns and well-being of the injured party are being examined in this study rather than the effect forgiveness may have on an offender.

The positions of resentment and forgiveness have been further explored through the lens of social evolution. McCollough (2008) posited that vengeance had a purpose in social evolution acting as a functional deterrent to violence and injustice that at one time may have also served to increase social co-operation based on fear of retaliation. He continued however, that vengeance is no longer necessary with the creation of systemic law and correctional institutions. He
postulated that this historical social advancement left room for forgiveness as a compassionate way for persons to move past issues of injustice without retribution as there is a system in place that addresses injustice and offers protection thus retribution does not need to be taken into the hands of the injured and they are thus more able to forgive.

Vengeance as a response to injustice has also been explored journalistically through an in-depth personal narrative by author Laura Blumenfeld (2002) who described her quest for revenge and exploration of retribution as she sought to find the man that shot at her father. Her narrative took her and her readers through an in depth look at vengeance with a journalistic inquiry. In her narrative she moved past the impulse for revenge toward finding peaceful resolution as she rehumanized the villain by eventually getting to know him. Even with the function of retribution being acknowledged, and cautions being made about the hasty or careless application of forgiveness (Lamb & Murphy, 2002), forgiveness stands as a potential intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomenon that offers healing to the forgiver and a chance to change and grow for the offender.

**Forgiveness: A complex psychological, emotional and spiritual process**

While forgiveness is a phenomenon that has been enacted graciously for centuries, the many personal accounts of forgiveness from those who have chosen to do so stand as testimony to the difficulties involved. Famous accounts such as that of Nelson Mandela have made forgiveness an important current discussion. Movements such as The Forgiveness Project founded by Marina Cantacuzino in 2004 and supported by Archbishop Desmond Tutu ([https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/our-purpose](https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/our-purpose)) explore the phenomenon of forgiveness through the personal narratives of those who have chosen forgiveness as a way to cope with
grave injustices in their lives. The Forgiveness Project website (above) states “The testimonies we collect bear witness to the resilience of the human spirit and act as a powerful antidote to narratives of hate and dehumanization, presenting alternatives to cycles of conflict, violence, crime and injustice.” Cantacuzino (2015) emphasized that neither she nor the Forgiveness Project are advocating that everyone should forgive, rather she states that her interest is in exploring forgiveness as an option. She reflected: “The more I delve into this expansive and complicated topic, the more entangled I seem to become. Not because I am ambivalent about the benefits of forgiveness but because I am reluctant to pin it down (2015, p.2).

Impacting accounts such as those of Amanda Lindhout (Lindhout & Corbett, 2013) and Debbie Morris (Morris & Lewis, 1998) who suffered kidnapping and rape; Louis Zamperini (Hillenbrand, 2010) and Eric Lomax (1995) who survived imprisonment and torture; and Anthony Thompson (2019) whose wife was murdered by a white supremacist, all found healing and meaning through forgiving those who had so deeply injured them bear witness to the importance of exploring forgiveness as an option. Their biographical or autobiographical accounts of forgiving bring readers into their difficult process of forgiveness beginning with descriptions of the impact of pain and injury committed against them, then moving on to finding resolution and meaning in their suffering.

The stories of those that have forgiven demonstrate the difficulties and illustrate the extent that forgiveness involves a deep process of emotional processing, psychological reflection, and moral and existential examination. While extending forgiveness to someone for a small transgression might require less inner work, situations of great injustice and devastating loss present a more difficult, painful process involving emotional, moral, and cognitive reflection
given that the offence and wrongdoer may have gravely injured the very self-concept or identity of the one who has been injured and shaken their sense of security in the world. Examination of these accounts reveal that while there are similarities in the processes of forgiveness, there are at the same time unique, idiosyncratic aspects to each process of forgiveness based on the severity of the offence and harm done, and the specific traits and circumstances of the forgiver. Each story and each life involved makes each act of forgiveness unique. Because of the distinctions and complexities, the arts offer a poignant potential as art is subjective to the artist and can work as a bridge between the subjective inner experience and external sentient existence.

**The Art of Forgiveness: An important exploration**

Providing qualitative understanding of how the arts can help in the process of forgiveness serves to highlight active ways to interact in a process of personal healing for those who want to forgive but are experiencing difficulties given the complexities involved in the process. Exploring through the arts the raw emotion, cognitive complications, and existential questions raised after injury not only offers potential facilitation in personal healing and resolution after suffering an injustice, but may also provide insight into effective methods of personal or community reflection and expression towards re-establishing peace and understanding after conflict.

In understanding more deeply how the arts can help in forgiveness, new ways to approach healing in interpersonal counselling following incidents of crime or outbreaks of conflict through art-based experience may be discovered. By investigating the testimonies of those who have used the arts in their own process of forgiveness, insight can be gained into how the arts can provide an active way of moving through the difficult process and where the arts may be helpful.
to assist those who would like to forgive but are struggling to do so. Within the process of forgiving, the arts may help in reconciling issues of injured self-concept and emotional upheaval after being gravely harmed by another within the process of forgiving. Insight into what the arts offers in terms of psychological process and intrapersonal actualization in the forgiveness process could begin to forge tools that could help individuals and societies actively heal from injustice and thus avoid further conflict through retaliated acts of vengeance or and continuance of harmful acts of anger.

Philosophical debates have helped explore moral ramifications of forgiveness and the importance of anger in promoting justice. Process models of forgiveness in counselling and psychotherapy offer guidelines that provide researched, well examined helpful information into the phenomenon of forgiveness from intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives. By examining how the arts have helped those who have gone through the process of forgiving, enriched possibilities may be discovered as to how the arts can benefit the process of developing the field of expressive arts in healing. How the arts have benefited others in the complex process of forgiveness may contribute important elements toward assisting those who wish to forgive yet feel stuck. Including insight as to how the arts could be integrated into the body of understanding developed in the forgiveness literature could serve to further enrich it by funneling the potentials that the arts bring into the process.

That the arts offer a powerful means to explore emotions is well recognized in the field of expressive arts therapy. Channeling the volatile elements of emotion into the arts offers relief. Understandably the desire to lash out after an injury is substantial. Anger is a valid and powerful emotion in response to injustice and exploring it rather than denying it or acting on it
impulsively, is what art offers by providing a safe receptacle of the intensity of emotion. The late Natalie Rogers spoke of the importance of exploring darker emotions safely. “To know, accept, express and release the dark side in non-hurtful ways is essential to prevent these powerful forces to be acted out in violent forms.” (Rogers, 1999, p. 126). She went on to state that in her personal experience working through her anger in the arts was empowering. “I learned that when I was aware of my rage, I could use it as rocket fuel to initiate projects. I channeled my outrage into constructive action using art journals, psychodrama, authentic movement, encounter groups, training programs, writing articles and my book *Emerging Women* (1980)” (Rogers, 1999, p. 126). The arts provide a place of exploration for emotion that is active and gives a space for transformation through discovery and serious play.

This is referred to by Steven Levine (Knill, Levine & Levine, 2005) who stated “The practice of the arts, as disciplined rituals of play in painting, sculpturing, acting, dancing, making music, writing, and storytelling is, and always was a safe container, a secure vessel to meet existential themes, pathos and mystery” (p. 45). In this space of serious play experimentation can happen leading to transformation. In describing how the arts can be helpful therapeutically, Levine referred to the work of D.W. Winnicott who spoke of a “transitional experience” in art (1971) and V. Turner (1969) who referred to a phase of “liminality.” In reference to the state of play or ‘liminality’ or ‘transitional experience’ in the arts, Levine (Knill, Levine & Levine, 2005) stated that “there is an understanding that transformation or change requires a phase in which one gives up existing structures and enters a chaotic state of being” (p. 50). Thus, the art provides a holding place for the chaos and a tangible place to explore the elements of the chaos that would be relevant in a process of forgiving.
It is in this place of art making that can, as Paulo Knill (2005) stated, increase “range of play” through the engagement of the imagination and metaphoric exploration. In this space new views and perspectives can be realized while sorting through events and the ensuing emotional impact that the would-be forgiver faces after being harmed. Knill referred to the feeling of being stuck by having exhausted all attempts to cope with a given situation as having a ‘lack of play range’ where no relief or solutions are in sight. This can be the situation of those who would like to move past an injury committed by another or would like, perhaps like to be able to forgive and find some inner peace but feel unable to manage the enormity of the emotions. Managing the overwhelm caused by a myriad of factors surrounding what happened to them could be helped by the art process through providing a place to explore them.

**Prior Inquiry and Pilot Research**

I have been interested in the topic of forgiveness since working on a project for a course in spirituality and non-violence while working on my master’s degree. I have presented several workshops on the topic highlighting the psychoeducational information that my reading had revealed. Most recently, in the fall of 2016, I did a workshop over three evenings held at a local church. In the workshop I used psychoeducation, artistic reflection and discussion to explore the topic of forgiveness while a colleague provided Christian Biblical perspectives. The group was designed to explore forgiveness conceptually and was not intended as, or framed to be, a therapy group. Artistic reflection included viewing music videos that illustrated components of forgiveness including normalization of anger and was followed by discussion that arose from the presentation of psychoeducational material and Biblical perspectives. Art viewing and art making was a substantial component offered to the group for reflection. The art projects
provided a visual exploration of what forgiveness meant to participants at the onset of the group, and provided an exploration of forgiveness through collage making after psychoeducational and Biblical discussion, and viewing music videos related to the forgiveness process. A concluding reflective piece of art was done on the last day to summarize what was learned in the group.

Discussions were held in group format; art making was done individually. A brief post-group feedback form was given to participants. While participants indicated that all aspects of the group were helpful, feedback from the group indicated that artmaking helped them to understand more about themselves in connection to their concepts of the forgiveness process. One person commented that “(the art) helps me to get into, and out of, my own head.” This type of feedback increased my interest in pursuing research on this topic. My reflective account of the group was published in an article about the ripple effect of art expression and reflection (Gombert et al., 2017).

The pilot research in preparation for my dissertation occurred after the forgiveness group described above. The pilot study also involved a diverse research design similar to the one undertaken in this study. It included interviews with three participants who self-identified that art viewing or art making had been a contributing aspect to their forgiveness process (Kuehn, unpublished, 2016). A phenomenological qualitative approach involving an approximately one hour long, semi-structured interview with each participant to explore the phenomenon of using art in the forgiveness process that was followed by arts-based research using mixed media visual arts. Art forms identified in the forgiveness process by participants were poetry writing, film viewing, drama therapy, and reading literature. Offenses being forgiven included sexual abuse, emotional abuse by a parent, and suicide of a parent.
Arts-based research (ABR) for the pilot study involved my own exploration of forgiveness in visual art. As in the present study, arts-based inquiry explored the themes that had arisen from the interviews. Reflections of the interviews were structured into four art making sessions that corresponded with the four phases of Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) process model of forgiveness: uncovering phase; decision phase; work phase; and deepening phase.

Results from the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified seven themes of how the arts facilitated and effected the forgiveness process for the participants. The themes identified were that art helped by: awakening and identifying emotions; accessing depth of emotions beneath defenses; experiencing self as emotional; personal connection to the art; identity exploration; providing a broader context of the offender; and facilitating re-storying in meaning making.

Because of the small sample size in the pilot study, these themes lacked substantial reliability. I therefore concluded that repeating this study with more participants may yield more solid support of these themes, reveal others, or perhaps question their validity. Further research will help provide important information in determining if the arts have a facilitative value in the forgiveness process and if so, how art helps, and what it offers. This information could provide a basis for further research into the value of using expressive arts in therapy for those interested in forgiving by providing insight into how others used art to work through emotional and psychological pain resulting from an injustice.

Arts-based research reflected the content of the interviews and revealed emergent images based on the participants’ experiences. Art making was also done in reflection of my own process of forgiving. My own forgiveness process was active at the time as I was working
though forgiving tenants that caused substantial damage to my home while I was on an overseas posting for two years resulting in a significant and impacting financial loss. I was actively working on my own process while researching the topic thus subjective impact was used as experiential insight.

**Results from arts-based research:** The first image explored anger and chaos in reaction to injustice. This reflected my own process and the process shared by participants. This phase resembled Enright’s ‘uncovering’ phase. As my image developed in the art making process, I noted that anger blazed in the eyes of a face caught in chaos. The mouth was not developed reflecting the difficulty in articulating the depth of emotional reaction to the injustice. Hands pressed against an invisible wall signifying shock and confusion. It appears as a stunned, frozen observation of what has happened. The figure is surrounded by confusion and ‘red’ rage that holds out the cooler peace of the blue that is pushed into the periphery (figure 1). In working on this piece, I was shocked by what materialized yet it captured the confused rage of being victimized by someone’s damaging behavior and suffering substantial injury from it. It also resembled what participants referred to as emotional numbness.
Figure 1. Impact: acrylic, paper, papier mache collage

The second image was an exploration of keys, locks, and seeking release from pain or numbness as described by participants. The intensity of the first image gives way to a perception of fatigue in the second picture. The fatigue is evident in the gloomy colors. The desire to be free from it all is symbolized in the exploration of locks and keys. This exhaustion precedes or is involved in the ‘decision’ part of the process (figure 2). It explored the process of wanting to get out of the emotional upheaval resulting from the injustice.

Figure 2. A way through: acrylic paint, collage, on paper

The third art exploration played with the victim/offender roles in one human image in a confusing mix that started in black and white then took on further complexity that involved color
and images of burdens being held by both victim and offender. Influences through image appeared in the background representing the story of the victim and the offender. This art process reflected Enright’s ‘working on forgiveness’ phase. It corresponded to participants putting context to the offender and finding empathic connection through examining the offender’s story and context influences in their lives. The explorative aspects of artmaking resulted in a merging the humanity of both the victim and the offender. The resulting figure represents both. (figure 3). Both have a history, both have struggles, and both have burdens. The work of forgiveness as revealed in the art rehumanizes the offender and symbolizes commonality in the human condition.

Figure 3. victim/offender exploration: Life’s journey (acrylic on board)
The fourth piece of art was a clay plant pot. Choosing the plant pot was random for the fourth piece of art. I painted it with an image of a curious observer looking at another figure that was sitting alone in the dark. I developed the idea of how sitting with the pain of another’s hurtful actions can create solitude and darkened despair. I then surrounded the figure with leaves symbolic of new life. The art explored life beyond the injury. The final discovery happened when I placed a live plant cutting in the pot after I had it glazed and baked. This was unexpected and for me revealed how forgiveness was the creation of potential for future growth. This captured symbolism identified by the research participants who had expressed that their forgiveness process had been facilitated by art making/viewing and had helped them in visualizing a new beginning through forgiveness (figure 4). The forgiveness and the art had helped them to revision the future without the extent of the numbness or buried anger.
Figure 4. A place for new life and growth

This initial research deepened my interest in examining the ways art can help facilitate forgiveness. Feedback from participants indicated that art provided a way of deepening their insight and their perspectives facilitating feelings of being liberated from the past through forgiveness. My own art making in reflection helped by providing a vivid metaphorical process of the felt sense of what forgiveness entailed.

**Summary of introduction**

Exploring the possible benefits of art in the process of forgiving is an important investigation for both the study of forgiveness and the study of expressive arts in healing. Whether it is forgiving a traumatic violation or an interpersonal slight, exploring what has helped the process qualitatively by analyzing the stories of those who have forgiven using the arts in their process is a starting point towards understanding the specific ways in which the arts can help in the process. Having insight into how the arts have helped people work through the complex process of forgiveness could provide therapists, social activists, clergy, and peacekeepers with new ways to approach involving people in the arts toward restoring inner peace through the arts and forgiveness.

The emphasis of this research is the convergence of the impact of using the arts in the process of forgiveness and how the arts impact and interact with the forgiveness process. While forgiveness has been widely investigated as to the healing effects it offers (McCullough, 2000; Baskin & Enright, 2004; Worthington Jr, 2005; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington Jr., 2014, Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015) and how forgiveness can be a beneficial inclusion to counselling should an injured party be open to considering it (McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Enright &
Fitzgibbons, 2000, 2015, Reed & Enright, 2006, Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell & Worthington Jr., 2014; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005; Worthington, Mazzeo, & Canter, 2005) at this time the potential benefits of including reflection through involvement of the arts and art making has not been examined.

In undertaking this research, I have come to regard forgiveness as a confrontation with injustice with a peaceful outcome. The process involves a courageous examination of all aspects of the injustice and the extent of personal harm done. Undertaking a process of genuine forgiveness can be a monumental effort that involves much more than a decision to forgive, a desire to forgive, or a desire to stop hurting. Forgiving involves layers of examination and self-reflection that includes working through difficult emotions relating to self-concept, loss, justice, iniquity, world view, and the offender.

My philosophical bias is, that when it is properly understood, the act of forgiving is restorative in that it provides a peaceful, non-violent passage from the emotional and psychological harm caused by an offence to a future where the one who has been offended against can carry on without the burden of hatred toward an offender, can let go of the need for vengeance, and can be free of the offence by not holding on to the pain of bitterness. It has been my experience and is my belief that art is a natural human way to explore emotions including ones that may be intense and extremely difficult to carry.

I wanted to explore if art might enrich the forgiveness process by providing a holding place to work through the intense emotions and complexities involved in confronting an offence and in understanding an offender. This research study takes an interpretive, constructivist approach that investigates the experience of the participants who engaged with the arts in their
process of forgiving by examining interviews with them. The arts-based research will explore how art has helped the participants in the process of forgiving.

The following literature review offers a brief summary of the recent history of forgiveness study as it relates to counselling psychology and personal healing. While literature that speaks to the process of forgiveness involving art is sparse, I examine the literature involving expressive arts as it relates to this topic.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will examine some of complexities of forgiving while examining research findings from clinical forgiveness studies that have researched forgiveness intervention outcomes. It is the intention of this study to examine the individual experience of those that chose to forgive to determine how art helped in working through their process. The focus of this review is therefore to explore various aspects of forgiveness as well as the benefits derived in doing so by examining the research and discussion in literature that relates to this study. The literature review will also examine expressive arts therapy as it relates to facets of the forgiveness process.

Forgiving after an experience of injustice could at first feel beyond the capacity of a victim who has experienced a significant personal offense yet there is considerable literature and research in the fields of psychology and counselling that indicate that forgiveness can restore a sense of peace and mental well-being in the lives of victims (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington Jr., 2014). Nelson Mandela (1995) after being unjustly imprisoned for 27 years for challenging apartheid in South Africa shared openly his reasons for forgiveness. His position was that to not forgive, and thus to hold on to bitterness and hatred toward those who imprisoned him, would mean his continued imprisonment psychologically. Mandela is remembered as one who transcended hatred to bring about positive change for South Africa (Huesing, 2014). Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, also a well-known proponent of forgiveness, has written extensively about the topic with books such as *No Future Without Forgiveness* (2000), *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path of Healing Ourselves and Our
World (Tutu & Tutu, 2014). There have been many books and articles published about forgiveness in recent years.

**A Chronology of Recent Forgiveness Research for Clinical Practice**

While religious scriptural literature written on the topic of forgiveness has existed since ancient times, it has only been since the 1990s that there has been a proliferation of forgiveness research (Williamson, Gonzales, Fernandes, & Williams, 2014). Generally, the research generated by clinical scientists has focused on studying whether there are therapeutic benefits to forgiving, and if so, what the benefits are (Worthington Jr, 2005). Worthington Jr. (2005) attributed increased interest in forgiveness process model therapy to the publishing of Lewis Smedes’ book *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts that We Don’t Deserve* (1984). Smedes, a theologian, outlined a four-stage process model of forgiveness that brought increased interest to the therapeutic benefits of forgiving. This foundational text explored forgiveness as a process and helped develop definitions of what forgiveness is and is not.

Theoretical models of forgiveness recognized by the early 1990s included: psychological theories; task processes of forgiveness; moral development frameworks; and ‘typologies’ of forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington Jr., 1994). While providing a theoretical foundation for clinical forgiveness approaches, the new interest in therapy-based forgiveness gave rise to the need for research to understand both the phenomenon of forgiving and its efficacy in practice. In preparation for the increased interest in research in forgiveness and potential links to well-being, McCullough (2000) summarized four directions for future research: better measures (including alternatives to self-report); “more longitudinal and experimental studies on the precursors of
forgiving” (p. 52); “examinations of the links between forgiving and human health and well-being” (p. 52); and “focus on particular offenses, offenders, or victims” (p. 52). Since then, a plethora of academic literature and research on forgiveness therapy and the potential psychological benefits of forgiving has ensued.

While there have been several theories and process models of forgiveness advanced for clinical work, the most widely recognized ones were developed by Robert Enright and Everett Worthington Jr. (Wade et al., 2014), who have published prolifically over the last few decades. Enright and colleagues identified a four-phase model *(uncovering your anger; deciding to forgive; working on forgiveness; and discovery and release from emotional prison)* with 20 guideposts of awareness in forgiving (Enright and Fitzgibbons 2000; Enright, 2001). Enright and Fitzgibbons produced a clinical manual *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Enright & Fitzgibbons 2000) that was revised in 2015 with a new main title *Forgiveness Therapy: An Empirical Guide for resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (2015). Enright has also published self-help material (Enright, 2001; 2015). Worthington and colleagues developed an interpersonal process model with the acronym R.E.A.C.H. *(recall; empathize; altruism; commit; and hold)* that was first developed for work with couples (Worthington, Mazzzeo, & Canter, 2005). The Enright model and the Worthington model have often been cited in research that has tested the efficacy of process model therapy in forgiving (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Hanke & Fischer, 2013; Wade et al. (2014); Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005).
Forgiveness Research in Meta-Analytic Studies

There have been several meta-analyses of forgiveness research over the years that have gathered data from multiple studies and attempted to distill components of these investigations to test efficacy and outcome benefits of the forgiveness process in psychotherapy and counselling. An early meta-analysis (Baskin & Enright, 2004) examined nine studies ($N = 330$) for efficacy of forgiveness interventions in increasing levels of forgiveness and to determine impact on decreasing levels of anxiety and/or depression. Three basic categories of forgiveness interventions were identified: interventions that focused on the decision to forgive; process-based interventions in individual client sessions; and process-based interventions in a group format. Testing was done for study homogeneity requiring three groups be divided according to method: individual interventions; group process models; and group decision-based modes.

Effect size was measured using the Hedges and Olkin method (1985). Indications were that ‘individual’ process interventions in one to one therapy had large significant results with the effect size showing that 92% of the intervention participants in the experimental groups did as well or better than the control groups in terms of improved emotional health measures. ‘Group’ process models also indicated significant beneficial outcome effects. Outcomes also indicated that while process models (individual or group) had significant outcomes, models that highlighted ‘decision-based interventions’ (simply deciding to forgive without examining the process) had no effect of improvement on mental health measures thereby indicating that just deciding to forgive is not enough to create positive change.

Making a decision to forgive is a cognitive construct and may be part of the forgiveness process yet, interventions that focus on the decision to forgive appear not to allow for processing
the magnitude of emotional and experiential components that are part of addressing an offense and forgiving an offender. In this meta-analysis Baskin and Enright’s findings supported process models over interventions that address a basic decision to forgive. This finding indicated that working through forgiveness as a process may allow more attention to the impact of an injustice and the emotional effects experienced by a victim. Indeed, the length or duration of the interventions in terms of hours in therapy between the modalities may also have been a factor in efficacy as decision-based interventions ranged from one to eight sessions, group process interventions from six to eight sessions, and individual process interventions ranged from 12 to 60 sessions. The effect of the process interventions was 0.59 on emotional health constructs; thus, participants in the forgiveness group did at least as well or better than 65% of the control group. With this outcome, this study advanced forgiveness interventions from a moral framework to a viable therapeutic model for improved mental health.

A later meta-analysis (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005) focused solely on forgiveness group interventions. Inclusion criteria were that studies include a group program designed to help people forgive and provide outcome data that measured forgiveness outcomes. A distinction was made between two types of forgiveness outcomes with one being a decision-based intervention that focused on behavioral intention toward reduced negative intent toward an offender (reducing unforgiveness), while the other focused on emotional forgiveness that replaces negative emotions with positive ones (increasing forgiveness). With the intention of analyzing efficacy of interventions this meta-analysis included examining published and unpublished studies, conference presentations, and doctoral dissertations completed by July 2004. Several measures were used in the studies in the meta-analysis: the Enright Forgiveness
Inventory (EFI); the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM); the Rye Forgiveness Scale (RFS); the Wade Forgiveness Scale (WFS) and the Interpersonal Distance Scale (IDA).

Problems in the comparison of studies in Wade et al. (2005) included that pretest groups were both untreated test-retest and comparison groups; thus, two forms of effect size were calculated: the first for the between group effect size, the second for the within group effect size using the standardized mean gain score. Comparison of effect sizes for each intervention required that groups had to be further coded into four groups: forgiveness treatment (FT); comparison forgiveness treatment (FC); alternate comparison treatment not based on forgiveness (AT); and no treatment (NT). Further comparison between full, partial, and no intervention delineations showed a mean weighted effect size of .77 for full forgiveness intervention outcomes, .28 for partial intervention and .10 for no intervention indicating that full process interventions had more effect.

Full process interventions examined in the Wade et al analysis (2005) used many of the same components in the forgiveness process models such as defining forgiveness (87%), recalling the hurt (95%), and empathizing with the offender (89%). Less frequently used were holding on to or maintaining forgiveness (53%) and overcoming unforgiveness (37%). Similar to the Baskin and Enright meta-analysis of 2004, a problem in comparison was that the mean time duration spent on each component in the interventions varied. To adjust for time duration of interventions in this analysis, bivariate correlations were calculated that reflected that dosage was significantly correlated with outcome effect size.
While the conclusions of the Wade et al. (2005) meta-analysis indicated the efficacy of forgiveness interventions was significant in achieving forgiveness when compared to non-treatment groups, there was ambiguity as to how much more effective they are than other forms of therapy. Recommendations for further research was that forgiveness process interventions be tested against other strong alternative interventions and that results look at effects on psychological symptoms and well-being as well as forgiveness outcomes.

A more recent meta-analysis from a total of 54 published and unpublished reports with a combined subject total of 2,323 posttreatment effect sizes, and 1,716 follow-up effect sizes, again looked at the efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions used in forgiveness process interventions (Wade et al., 2014). The volume of research included in this study occurred between 2000 and 2012, representing increased interest in research on the topic of forgiving. This study represents an ongoing analysis of research conducted since the previous meta-analysis of Wade et al. in 2005. The majority of the studies included in Wade et al. (2014) were group format interventions with a small minority involving couple dyad or individual interventions.

The primary purpose of this meta-analysis (Wade et al. 2014) was to examine studies that compared treatment groups (forgiveness process interventions) with control groups (other treatment or wait list group) using pre- and post-treatment and follow up measures, as well as to examine potential moderators of treatment efficacy not yet included in meta-analytic studies to determine clinical relevance. Inclusion criteria for this study were: quantitative studies that were therapist-led forgiveness interventions; that they used measures of forgiveness for a specific offense; that the studies were written in English; and that they were completed by 2012.
Moderators that were examined and isolated were: severity of offense using the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment (a scale originally used to rate life events severe enough to cause illness); duration of treatment (in hours); treatment model [Enright (2001), Worthington (2001), or other]; and treatment modality (group, couple, individual). Methodological quality of the studies was assessed using the following ratings: whether it was peer reviewed; whether participants were randomly assigned; and retention rate. Severity of offense was coded using the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment scale and given a rating from 1 to 100 then averaged to produce a single index. Wait list and no-treatment groups were analyzed in a separate analysis from alternative treatments.

Conclusions from the Wade et al. (2014) analysis were that forgiveness interventions are an evidence-based treatment that can increase levels of forgiveness with participants in the forgiveness treatment showing improvement over 71% of those in the control groups in forgiveness measures. There was an increased advantage of forgiveness treatment (T) over alternate treatments (AT) or no treatment (NT) as the severity of what was being forgiven increased. Forgiveness interventions also positively impacted mental health as shown by statistically significant reductions in anxiety, reductions in depression, and increased hope as determined by outcomes measures over control group outcomes. Forgiveness process treatment model used in interventions (Enright, Worthington, or other) was not significant in terms of outcome when duration in hours of treatment was factored in; indications were that the longer the treatment, the more robust the outcome. Beneficial outcomes from forgiveness treatment were enduring as indicated by follow up measures.
The chronology of research in forgiveness as encapsulated in these meta-analyses evidenced the efficacy and potential of forgiveness process models as therapeutically relevant. They outlined the significance of seeing forgiveness as a cognitive, emotional, and moral process rather than solely related to a decision to forgive. Indications are that deciding to forgive is only a step in what is otherwise a complex, multifaceted process, and that there are many influences and considerations in understanding that process.

**Relationship, Attachment and Forgiveness**

Forgiveness has been examined under the lens of attachment to understand how these two phenomena may influence each other. The ability of an individual to differentiate from others is an indicator of psychological health that has been developed in attachment theory. Sandage and Jankowski (2010) correlated *differentiation of self* (DoS), a construct from Bowenian attachment theory, to levels of forgiveness, along with factoring for spiritual instability, mental health symptoms, and psychological well-being. Participants were a homogeneous convenience sample of 213 masters-level students from an American protestant-affiliated university. Results were as anticipated that DoS did mediate a relationship between forgiveness and well-being. There were significant associations between dispositional forgiveness and lower spiritual instability, fewer mental health symptoms, and higher levels of psychological well-being. This was consistent with prior research supporting forgiveness as predicting well-being (Baskin & Enright, 2004). An important factor discussed was that forgiveness promotes well-being as it is thought to help modulate the affective state, which helps with relating to others in prosocial ways. This
contributed to empirical support that defines forgiveness as resolving negative emotions through differentiation.

Attachment styles have also been examined as they relate to forgiveness. Secure attachment was correlated to dispositional readiness to forgive, whereas insecure attachment seems to be more frequent among individuals who are inclined toward angry rumination that inhibits the ability to forgive (Burnette, Taylor, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2007). The role of angry rumination was illuminated as mediating the attachment-forgiveness link as shown in this research, which combined two studies that explored attachment, trait forgiveness, and angry rumination (Burnette et al. 2007). Indications were that further examination of angry rumination as it relates to insecure attachment is warranted. Securely attached individuals are more likely to forgive, while angry rumination in insecurely attached individuals is correlated to being less likely to forgive. Insecurely attached people also struggle with empathy in forgiving (Burnette, Davis, Green, Worthington Jr., & Bradfield, 2009). Processing anger and the ability to empathize are both salient in the forgiveness process (Enright, 2001; Greenburg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2008); thus, attention to attachment is indicated in forgiveness process therapy.

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a disorder marked by insecure attachment (Jellema, 2000). People diagnosed with BPD demonstrate affective and behavioral dysregulation and volatile relational styles that oscillate from idealization to devaluation of significant others, especially when there is perceived rejection (Gunderson, 1984). According to Sandage et al. (2015), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT, Linehan, 1993) had the most empirical support yet it did not have a strong impact on interpersonal problems experienced by people with BPD; therefore, a pilot study examined the effects of including a forgiveness process module in the
treatment of BPD as a component of a DBT treatment program. The intervention involved 40 participants diagnosed with BPD who were enrolled in a DBT program that consisted of several modules. An eight-hour forgiveness process model module was included in the treatment where clients worked on forgiving a non-abusive person for a moderate level offense.

A quasi-experimental double pre-test design was used with participants completing measures of forgiveness, attachment anxiety, and psychiatric symptoms at four points during treatment: prior to a module that measured standard distress levels; after the distress tolerance module (prior to the forgiveness module); right after the forgiveness module; and six weeks after the forgiveness module was completed (Sandage et al., 2015). The study was not a randomized clinical trial; however, the researchers found statistically significant increases in forgiveness and decreased attachment insecurity and psychiatric symptoms after the forgiveness model and at the six-week follow-up based on the two prior test levels. The hypothesis that trait forgiveness would be negatively correlated with anxious and avoidant attachment and psychiatric symptoms was also supported.

A qualitative analysis of feedback from participants indicated several helpful themes based on a better understanding of what it means to forgive (i.e., does not mean reconciliation or forgetting). Participants expressed difficulty in self-forgiveness however, which highlights the importance of further research. Sandage et al. (2015) suggested that there may be protective elements in the unforgiveness of others that may be self-protective in dealing with shame or self-blame thus dialectical balance that includes self-compassion and self-forgiveness in working with BPD is further indicated. This finding has heightened importance in light of high levels of suicidality in clients with BPD and in context of other research that suggests that difficulty in
self-forgiveness may be linked to suicidality (Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2012). Care in addressing forgiveness in this population is necessary.

**Forgiveness: Emotional Process, and Clinical Approach**

There has been discussion among personality theorists indicating that the capacity to forgive may be a trait or personal disposition that predisposes some people to forgive more than others (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; McCollough, 2001). However, Kim and Enright (2016), compared analyses of forgiveness trait theories with virtue theories, and cautioned that viewing forgiveness as a personality trait removes it from the actual practice of forgiving by ignoring context. Moreover, if a person does not see themselves as possessing the trait of forgiveness, he or she may not ultimately achieve forgiveness. Further criticism was that a trait devoid of a state (or an actual situation in reality) was not possible; rather it is a favorable view of forgiveness with an intention to practice thereby making it an ideal rather than an actual practice.

Kim and Enright (2016) argued for a more developmental perspective of forgiving that saw the decision to forgive as a personal choice that often involves a difficult process. This being the case, they did not recommend that forgiveness be suggested as a coping strategy in a clinical setting as doing so can diminish the meaning of forgiving and confound outcomes; thus, they suggested that anger reduction is a healthier clinical start point. They forwarded that developing forgiveness as a virtue or practice may then become a personal choice rather than a goal in therapy as the forgiveness process is explained and understood over time. According to the authors, this reframed process shifts therapy toward helping the client understand what
forgiveness may involve if, and when, it may be chosen, and does not force forgiveness as an agenda of therapy.

Process forgiveness approaches acknowledged the importance of working with salient emotions related to the offense (Enright, 2001, Monbourquette, 2000; Smedes, 1984; Worthington Jr., 2005). Reduction of anger and rumination were important outcomes in forgiving, given that rumination has been associated with intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and revenge motivations (McCullough, 2001), as well as increased anger and aggression (Peled & Moretti, 2009). In process forgiveness therapy, anger was a substantial emotional complex that must be addressed effectively and compassionately before the decision to forgive may even be considered (Enright, 2001, 2015; Karen, 2001; Monbourquette, 2000). Dealing with anger through validation, exploration, and reflection may be part of productively forgiving in contrast to pseudo forgiveness that may move too quickly past resentment (Murphey, 2005). Bypassing, negating, or disowning anger and “negative passions” risks allowing them to take control (Karen, 2001). Karen stated in doing so there “is no self-knowledge, no self-forgiveness, no growth” (p. 30). Thus, exploring associated anger as a healthy, productive, component of addressing an injustice or offense was considered more productive than minimizing or attempting to contain it without exploration of how anger may help bring about positive change. Moreover, aversion to forgiveness and risks associated with forgiving such as: exposure to further aggression; threats to the self-concepts of a victim; and a victim’s beliefs about what forgiveness entails (Williamson, Gonzales, Fernandez, & Williams, 2014) were important explorations in the process.

While anger reduction and validation of anger are important parts of the forgiving process, alone they do not seem to address problems that result from debilitating resentment as
forgiveness therapy does, according to research by Reed and Enright (2006). Their study involved inquiry for best practices in treating psychologically abused women. Participants were women who had been separated from their partners for at least two years. They were assigned to either forgiveness therapy ($n = 10$) or an anger validation therapy ($n = 10$) using a matched, yoked, and randomized design for individual treatment with each therapeutic process being dictated by protocols. Treatment was sought to facilitate the ability to move past harm caused by abuse toward feeling restored. Reed and Enright (2006) posited that forgiveness therapy promotes recovery of “the reclamation of valued personal qualities, such as compassion without neglecting the injustice of the abuse or encouraging interactions with the former partner, which may result in further abuse” (p. 921). Ethical care was taken in this study to ensure participants were sufficiently distanced from their former spouses so as not to “mistakenly encourage a woman to feel empathy and compassion for her abusive former partner in a way that would foster old patterns of reuniting, including inappropriate dependence on the part of the former partner and subsequent harm and further abuse” (Reed & Enright, 2006, p. 922).

Reed and Enright (2006) used pre- and post-tests to measure levels of forgiveness; self-esteem; state anxiety; trait anxiety; depression; environmental mastery; finding meaning; posttraumatic stress; and story measures. Measures used were: the Psychological Abuse Survey; The Enright Forgiveness Inventory; Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory CSEI; Depression Inventory-II; Environmental Mastery Scale; Finding Meaning in Suffering; PTSS checklist; and story measure. The treatments were therapeutic, matched for time span, and had the same trained intervener and had matched pairs. Results showed a statistically significant improvement using matched pair t-tests on all dependent variables measured except for state anxiety. All
probability levels were set at $p < .05$ except for: forgiveness measure ($p < .001$); new story (survivor) measure ($p < .01$); old stories (victim status) measure ($p < .001$). The forgiveness therapy group showed lower levels of depression compared to the anger validation group in the post test measure using the Beck depression inventory (1996) showing them to be in the minimal to non-depressed range of depression while the anger validation group remained in the moderate range of depression on the same scale. Outcomes supported that under the right conditions, forgiveness therapy is a viable treatment for women who have been psychologically abused and want to move on with their lives over anger validation alone. Forgiveness therapy both supported clients in expressing anger that results from an abusive relationship, addressed the pain and grief associated with the injustice while it also addressed the potential rumination and resentment toward the previous partner that may prevent moving on and letting go of the pain from past abuse.

While working through anger and rumination was effective in reducing difficult emotions and is part of the process of forgiving, empathy was another recognized component of the process (McCullough, 2001). Developing empathy toward an offender and thereby seeing them in a greater context than just the offense can potentially help the forgiveness process and is thought to reduce the negative impact of the offense on the victim. Using a mixed experimental design Witvliet, Hofelich, Hinman, & Knoll, (2015) researched the effects of using compassionate reappraisal rather than emotional suppression in moving past angry ruminations about past offenses. The findings showed that attention to the full humanity of the offender and viewing the offense as the offender’s opportunity to learn and grow can activate empathy and compassion that can change angry ruminations. (Witvliet et al., 2015). This study focused on
past interpersonal offenses that were considerable yet not traumatic thus it could be argued that transforming rumination through compassion and empathy may not apply to grievous injury. There are case studies however, involving devastating offenses that point to compassion and empathy as components of healing after an offense (Lindhout & Corbett, 2013; Porterfield & Lindhout, 2014, Kamara & McClelland, 2008). Of course, as stated earlier, compassion does not amount to exoneration, or releasing the offender from the consequences of their actions which may include anything ending a relationship for the safety of the victim, or when applicable legal and judicial actions.

In a qualitative case study empathy was indicated as part of the forgiveness process cited by abused children of a Vietnam veteran. Meaning making and empathy for the experience of their father as victim of war himself was identified as a pathway to healing. “Through understanding and acceptance, the participants came to the recognition that their father didn’t deliberately set out to hurt and neglect them” (McCormack & Sly, 2013, p. 308). Helping clients through compassionate reflection of an offender, not to excuse the actions of the offender, but to create greater awareness and understanding of their humanity, appeared to be an effective component of healing and forgiveness. As Wade et al. (2005) wrote, “Again, however, caution and sound clinical judgment are needed to determine how and when one seeks to promote empathy for an offender such that a client is not victimized further by a perception of being judged or a misunderstanding that the client should reconcile with the offender” (p. 436). Thus, clarity around the difference between forgiving and reconciliation is an important distinction. Recognizing this, Tutu and Tutu’s final phase in the fourfold path of forgiving (2014) is to decide
whether or not to renew a relationship when it is safe and desired to do so after forgiving, or to completely release the relationship when it is not.

**Self-forgiveness**

Forgiveness of self was an important area of research in restoring psychological well-being and is included in Enright and the Human Development Study Group’s formulation of the forgiveness triad that includes examination of forgiving others, receiving forgiveness, and forgiveness of self (Enright et al., 1996), offering a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon. Research in self-forgiveness indicated the importance of this phenomenon. Self-forgiveness was investigated in association to inward and outward-directed anger as related to suicidal behavior (Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2012) using a sample of 372 racially diverse college students with an average age of 19.6 years who volunteered for this study in exchange for extra credit. The measure of forgiveness was the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (Fetzer Institute, 2003); for depression, the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996); and to measure expressions of anger, two subscales of the Multidimensional Anger Inventory (MAI; Siegel, 1986). The Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire, a self-report measure which includes four direct questions using a Likert-scale measuring suicidal ideation, showed that 23% of respondents showed some suicidal ideation in the last year and that 22 respondents had made an attempt at suicide in their lifetime. Inward anger was significantly positively related, and outward-anger was significantly negatively related to suicidal behavior.

A major finding in this study was that self-forgiveness moderated the relationship between inward anger and suicidal behavior, supporting historical theoretical perspectives. This
study indicated a link between self-forgiveness and mental health, yet limitations were depth in measurement of what was meant by self-forgiveness in that the measure used was simplistic, using a four-point Likert scale. More development in process and definition of self-forgiveness is needed.

Moreover, difficulty in self-forgiveness was highlighted as problematic in male military veterans diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A study looked at forgiving and self-forgiving in relation to posttraumatic mental and physical health in male military veterans \( (N = 213) \) (Witvliet et al., 2004). Results showed that problems with self-forgiving were positively related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) using the Mississippi Scale, a 35-item self-report used to measure combat-related PTSD. Difficulty with self-forgiving was also positively related to “depression, state anxiety, and trait anxiety scores” (Witvliet et al., 2004, p. 272). These studies indicated the importance of understanding self-forgiveness and how it effects mental health.

Self-forgiveness was part of an enactment captured in an edited account of a drama therapy process with veterans entitled: ‘Soldiers Performing Self in Contact!Unload’ (Belliveau & Westwood). In the narrative, the primary character in the dramatic enactment, Tim, undergoes a process of self-forgiveness for an incident where a stressful decision resulted in someone’s death. The veterans received facilitative support from a therapist and a drama theater professional to write the script and perform it. The presentation travelled across Canada and included a question answer discussion after the performance

http://menshealthresearch.ubc.ca/contact-unload. The veterans involved reported that the process was extremely helpful in dealing with the psychological injuries of combat and tours of
duty. This project demonstrated the healing potentials of both self-forgiveness and drama therapy with military personnel.

While this present study does not examine self-forgiveness, the Contact Unload program that used drama therapy with veterans demonstrated that the use of dramatic arts was helpful in healing including working through a process of self-forgiveness as described in the script (Belliveau & Westwood, pp. 200-201). Research that looks at art modalities as potentially effective treatment given the dire importance of self-forgiveness as outlined in Witvliet et al., (2004) may offer more support for veterans and others working through self-forgiveness.

**Expressive Arts and Forgiveness**

While there is considerable research to support forgiveness, few studies have been conducted using expressive arts in therapeutic forgiveness models. There are however autobiographical and biographical accounts of people who have found the arts to be helpful in facilitating their own process of forgiveness (Arnold, 2000; Kamara & McClelland, 2008; Lowenstein, 2014). Art offers a rich emotional, experiential exploration of the complexities of being human through “self-expression, active participation, imagination, and mind body connection” (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 9). Historically, using the arts in therapy was based on psychoanalytic concepts including projection, externalization, and abreaction (Johnson, Lahad, & Gray, 2009).

More recently, components of expressive arts for trauma interventions such as imaginal exposure, cognitive restructuring, and narrative therapies have received more empirical support (Johnson et al., 2009). While not all forgiveness involves offenses that are traumatizing, including expressive arts in forgiveness process treatments may provide similar benefits in
moving past an offence. According to Gladding (2011), “The arts sensitize clients to untapped aspects of themselves and promote an awareness of uniqueness and universality” (p. 18). Thus, exploring the arts as a possible facilitator to the process of the forgiveness may provide enriched ways of working through, and understanding the emotions involved in healing after an injustice.

How art can facilitate the process of forgiving is exemplified in the following accounts. Poetic reflections were highlighted as turning points in forgiveness in an autobiographical reflection of marital infidelity that examines a personal process of forgiveness (Lowenstein, 2014). Dickens’ classic novel *David Copperfield* was parsed through a lens of forgiveness commentary, and demonstrated how fiction is a rich place to explore the intricacies of forgiveness (Lafarge, 2009). Lafarge juxtaposed the novel to Dicken’s life in examining how the fictional account explores injustice and forgiveness from his lived experience. These articles demonstrated how story and poetry may provide a richer reflection of what it means to forgive while deepening the exploration of what is involved in a personal process of forgiving. In doing so, they point to how the arts may be beneficial to exploring the emotional components of the forgiveness process.

McCullough, Root, and Cohen (2006) evaluated the effects of writing in promoting forgiveness with 304 undergraduate students (213 women, 91 men). Participants were: Caucasian (*n* = 56); Hispanic (*n* = 72); Black/African American (*n* = 44); and other ethnic groups (*n* = 32). Participants completed a questionnaire about an offense they had experienced, engaged in a 20-min writing task, then completed a final questionnaire about their current feelings about the offender. For the writing component, one group wrote about the benefits gained after interpersonal offenses (*n* = 102), another group (*n* = 101) focused on the trauma of the offense,
and a control group \((n = 101)\) wrote about what they planned to do the next day. Qualitative analysis of questionnaires and writing indicated that the following benefits were found by those who participated in the ‘benefit finding’ writing exercise: 55% of participants wrote that they had grown stronger; 44% wrote that they had grown wiser; and 29% noted benefits in allowing for new life experiences. While writing about the benefits was considered efficacious to forgiving, outcomes from writing about the trauma and from the control group did not show positive change toward forgiving. Thus, while writing may be helpful in the forgiveness process, outcome is more dependent on what is being written about than just the act of writing. Further studies that include expressive or poetic writing may provide interesting outcomes.

Essay writing about forgiveness was tested as a variable in a quantitative study using a 4 x 3 repeated measures design in a Christian college (Stratton et al., 2008). The study compared four groups: a psychoeducational workshop group (W); an essay writing only group (E); a combination of the two (WE); and a control group. A pretest, which consisted of four forgiveness inventories, was conducted at week one after participants wrote a brief description of an offense. Post-tests were taken at week four after interventions and at week 10 for follow-up that measured for reduction of negative emotions. While participants from the WE group were expected to have higher levels of forgiveness than the W or E groups, this hypothesis was only partially supported in that there were positive changes (feelings, behaviors, thoughts) toward the offender over the other groups as measured by the Forgiveness-Positive Responses to the Offender scale (PRO), but not decreases in the negative motivations (revenge and avoidance) as measured by the Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM). The inclusion of writing in the workshop may not have been as efficacious in the forgiveness process.
as hoped because the writing assignment was quite structured in that it did not encourage an emotional exploration of the process. Again, a more creative and open approach to writing to explore the story and emotional content of the forgiveness process with an emphasis on benefits gained as an outcome as in the McCullough et al. (2006) study, could possibly have more value.

There are biographical anecdotal works that have indicated that the arts have an impact on the forgiveness process. Mariatu Kamara, a victim of child soldiers in Sierra Leone experienced horrible injustices including being raped and having both of her hands cut off as a child (Kamara & McClelland, 2008). Kamara described how she became a part of a theatre group that brought her to a place of healing through dramatic enactment and psychodrama. She shared that the dramatic interventions were instrumental in helping her to forgive and move forward by empathically rehumanizing the child soldiers in her mind. The use of artistic re-enactment was helpful in providing an experiential opportunity to explore the injustice in a way that provided a bigger picture of her own story and the story of the child soldiers who had committed the offences.

Another testimonial of how the arts facilitate forgiveness and healing is the story of the Derksen’s whose daughter Candace was murdered in 1984 (Pruden, 2017). Having been told early on by another parent how devastated his life had become after his child was murdered, they decided they would choose to forgive to survive the process and pain of moving forward. Both Cliff Derksen and his surviving daughter Oida point to art as grounding process through the trial of Candace’s murderer. Cliff would sketch to ward off his rage and Oida would crochet circles during the trial using different colored yarn to represent her emotions. She used the circles to create a gallery installation art piece entitled “Evidence of a Trial”. The family has continued to
produce art that helps them to work through their grief and forgiveness process. The family credits art making as a way to work through powerful emotions related to the murder (Falloon, 2014).

In the aftermath of traumatic violence in places such as Somalia, West Africa, Columbia and others, pioneer peace builder John Paul Lederach and his daughter Angela Lederach identified art as a healer in societies that had been devastated by violence and war (Lederach & Lederach, 2010). In their book *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journey Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (2010) they relayed stories of how music, poetry and dance had been instrumental in forgiveness, healing, social change and reconciliation. They described how in their work they are interested in a phenomenological approach to peace and reconciliation. “Through exploration of metaphor-phenomenon like sound, music, poetry and mothering, we watch for ideas, suggestions and qualities that stimulate the imagination about the challenges and mechanisms by which social healing may be observed and perhaps understood” (loc. 319). Lederach and Lederach’s book indicated many accounts from various regions of conflict and post-conflict where the arts have been instrumental in creating connection and have contributed to stories of forgiveness and reconciliation.

While there are great volumes of research addressing various aspects of forgiveness, there is a gap in research that explores using art in facilitating the process of forgiveness. Both forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others have been indicated as being helpful in therapeutic practice with process models that include exploration of emotions and meaning being the most effective; thus, research on forgiveness using the expressive arts to facilitate exploration of emotions and meaning may be a valuable contribution to the field of forgiveness research. The
individual examples addressed above indicate that the arts have been helpful for some in the process of forgiveness. Using the arts to explore complicated emotions in the forgiveness process, to engage in meaning making, and to promote compassion and empathy may help in developing valued clinical options for populations working through issues of injustice toward forgiveness or working through self-condemnation towards self-forgiveness and self-acceptance. Moreover, understanding how the arts may be able to help in healing though forgiveness and reduction of retaliation may prove helpful in post conflict peace keeping initiative.

Summary

As revealed the review of forgiveness studies, research on the psychological benefits of forgiveness interventions are quite substantiated. Moreover, the convergence of art and forgiveness are elements that have been observed in restoration of peace post-conflict (Lederach & Lederach, 2010) thus findings from the proposed study may indicate the functional ways that art can be helpful in the forgiveness process toward healing after conflict, offence, and injustice. Because of the prevalence of global conflicts, and the myriad of ways human beings hurt one another, understanding how to move past injustice and offence toward healing and peace is an important inquiry. The exploration of art as a potential facilitator may contribute to the volumes of forgiveness research by including insight into how arts-based ways of working through the forgiveness process may facilitate healing.

My pilot research has given some preliminary indication that the arts can help facilitate healing through the complexities of forgiving. Further investigation may substantiate those themes or introduce further questions to the hypothesis that art can be helpful in the forgiveness process by investigating the experience of those who have done so.
Chapter 3

METHODS

This study used a diverse methods design combining a qualitative phenomenological process of inquiry (Creswell, 2007) with arts-based research (Leavy, 2015, 2017, McNiff, 1998). Semi-structured interviews were used in the qualitative component of the research which included six opened ended questions to prompt and guide reflection. Interviews were conducted with adult participants who self-identified as having forgiven someone where some art making was a part of their process. The questions were designed to prompt reflection around the primary research inquiry: “How did using art effect their process of forgiving? Did art facilitate or enrich the forgiveness process, and if so, how?”

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to investigate the experience of using art in the process of forgiving to explore and identify the mechanisms of using art in actual instances of forgiving. Creswell (2007) by referencing educator van Manen, explained that hermeneutical phenomenology in research inquiry provides researchers with an approach to both describes and interpret the lived experience of a phenomenon. Examining the experiences of those who have used art in their forgiveness process was undertaken to understand the interaction between the process of forgiveness and the potential facilitative aspects of using art as a way of knowing through self reflection (Allen, 1995). The inquiry was to determine how the art may have helped within the process. Interviews with the participants were focused on the unique and collective experiences of the participants to access insight into the interaction of art within the
phenomenon of forgiveness. Arts-based research was then used to deepen the exploration of the topic through reflective art making that further explored the interaction of art and forgiving by using my own artistic reflection of the participants’ stories to explore an arts-based understanding of the interplay between art making and forgiving.

**Qualitative Phenomenological Inquiry**

A call for participants was sent to organizations that engaged in the arts or were interested in the process of forgiveness. Several direct invitations were also sent to individuals who have publicly identified using art in forgiveness. Organizations selected for distribution of the call for participants were the Canadian Association of Music Therapists (CAMT), The Toronto Art Therapy Institute (TADI), Concordia University’s Department of Creative Arts Therapies (Montreal), The F-You Forgiveness Project (Toronto), and the researcher’s Creative Quest Studio (Ottawa) Facebook page. Five direct invitations were sent and of these, three accepted the invitation, one declined, and one did not reply. Criteria for inclusion in this study was: that participants self-identified as having undergone a significant injustice or offense that had a substantial impact on their life; that they had reached some level of resolution concerning their offender through forgiveness; that the participant identified that either art making, art viewing, or involvement with the arts was a significant part of their forgiveness process; and that the participant felt resolved and healed adequately enough that sharing the process with the researchers would not feel like a risk to their mental health or well-being.

Prospective participants replied to the researcher by email to indicate their interest as was requested on the call for participants. Emails were followed up by the researcher with a short phone conversation to explain the research, arrange an interview, and to answer any questions
that participants may have had. The researcher also checked with participants in advance to assure that being interviewed would not be a risk to the participant by triggering painful memories.

The participants interviewed for the qualitative phenomenological component of this study were seven women and one man all who self-identified as having forgiven an offense or offenses that had had a significant impact on their lives. Their age range was from mid 20s to older adult (60s) with each adult stage of life represented except for the elderly. Three participants identified as Christian, two identified as Muslim, and three did not indicate a specific religious faith. All participants were Canadian and came from various racial backgrounds; five were Caucasian and three were people of color.

Eight participants were interviewed. Six of the eight interviews were conducted over Skype as participants were some distance away. This presented some technical problems when the system froze in several cases. In some instances, the interview had to be completed by phone at least in part. One participant indicated at the onset that she preferred a phone interview over Skype. In the case where Skype interviews encountered technology problems where the conversation was disrupted, once the connection was re-established I was careful to have the participant pick up where they left off once a reconnection was established by reminding the participant what they were saying when the call had dropped. The other two interviews were held in person, one at the participant’s home and one at the researcher’s office.

The semi-structured interview consisted of three open ended questions to set the context of the inquiry and three questions directly related to the research investigation. Contextual questions were: *What is your understanding of what it means to forgive?*; *What motivated you to
forgive?; Briefly describe the nature of the offence committed against you and your relationship to the one, or those, that you forgave (no identifying information is required). Questions to directly address the research inquiry were: Describe your process of forgiving and how the arts played a part in it; How would you describe the function of the art in your process of forgiving the offender?; and after having gone through this process, do you believe that art has something to offer those who would like to forgive but may be struggling in the process, and if so what? These questions structured the interview which was conducted in a conversational manner around the flow and process of the participants.

Once the interviews were completed and audio recorded, the audio taping was transcribed through an e-program (Sonix https://sonix.ai/) then groomed for accuracy manually by the interviewer/researcher who reviewed the audio interviews while making corrections on the transcript wherever the program had erred. When transcriptions were completed, the data was manually analysed thoroughly using Nvivo and values coding (Leavy, 2017). Details relevant to the research question in each interview were highlighted to identify themes. Themes were then logged in a book by hand to capture interview highlights and to allow for reflective interaction by the researcher. The themes and highlights were again reviewed and summarized and parsed through observation of context and process of the participants’ experience. Results were written up in two sections: the context of the study (understanding of forgiveness; motives for forgiving; specific offence being addressed in the process) and how the art helped in the process. Although there was overlap and layers in the themes that were identified, the themes indicated in the results were the most poignant categorical markers of what art offered in the process of forgiving.
The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were protected using codes that represented each interview. Any information specific to participants was kept in a locked file or password protected computer. Results were written carefully in a way to protect any identifying information in the accounts of the participants to ensure confidentiality.

**Arts-Based Inquiry**

Once themes were established and encoded for the qualitative component of the research, I began the arts-based research (ABR) inquiry. I began by exploring, describing and interpreting the interviews and the themes that arose through an artistical lens. Regarding the epistemological relevance for method of inquiry McNiff (1998) poses, “Does the language of inquiry correspond to the expression of the phenomena being studied?” (p.40). Therefore, the arts-based research was undertaken with openness to the process of discovering and implementing approaches that would best capture what the participants had shared. Leavy (2017) described arts-based research practice as highly individualistic. She stated, “a cornerstone of ABR practice is that it follows a generative and emergent process, open to the unexpected- to surprises, new insight, and new bends in the road” (p.191). In keeping with this, I allowed the art-based inquiry to unfold in a process of creative discovery.

Because I was interested in understanding the interview transcripts through an artistic lens and began to reduce them through a poetic distillation process to capture the main highlights that related to the phenomenon of using art in the forgiveness process. The process of analyzing the poetic elements of the interviews that spoke directly to the research inquiry resembled *poetic transcription* described by Leavy (2015) as being based in grounded theory “where code categories develop inductively out of the data” (p.83). Leavy (2015) described several
approaches to poetic inquiry citing Monica Prendergast (2009) who named three categories of perspective: researcher-voiced, participant-voiced, and literature-voiced poetic inquiry. The method I used combined participant-voiced aspects with researcher-voiced aspects. I first looked at each account separately. I then compiled the combined experiences of the participants in the final work of poetry in a more researcher-voiced overview of the phenomenon of using art in the process of forgiving based on the individual distillations.

I hand wrote the artistic/poetic aspects of what the participants had shared in their interviews with the sensory process of handwriting allowing deeper artistic reflection on each process. I then typed them into a final version that captured the essence of their process as described in the interviews. These accounts were then combined into one poetic representation of the process of using art in forgiving. I then reflected on the poetry as inspiration for an acrylic painting that further explored the use of art in forgiving through visual imagery. This was somewhat unexpected in that, although I am a visual artist, I had not planned to do this. McNiff states, “The process of inquiry can be likened to an environment which continuously acts upon the researcher and shapes ideas” (p. 147). I was compelled by the metaphoric imagery in the poetry to paint what I felt was happening artistically for the participants in their process of forgiving. McNiff (1998) refers to dialoguing with images. I then sat with the images that arose in the painting and allowed them to speak to what I had learned about how the participants had used art in their process of forgiving.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

While general details about the demographics of the participants are given in these results, specific details are not provided to ensure privacy and confidentiality of all participants thus the accounts are intermingled according to thematic findings. Although all participants volunteered to be interviewed and expressed enthusiasm for sharing their process, several expressed reasons for being cautious about how they spoke about their stories of forgiveness. Reasons included concern for family members’ feelings; not wanting to divulge information about the offender; and frequent misunderstandings of what is meant by forgiving. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in this process.

While it was the phenomenon of forgiveness using the arts that was explored in the interviews not the details of the offences, the extent of the pain and the difficulties experienced by participants in their journey toward forgiveness was a poignant part of their stories. It was clear in each interview that the process of forgiving was neither easy nor straightforward and for some, took many years. In some cases the process was still being worked through. All participants reported feeling ‘resolved enough’ in their process of forgiving and healing that they could be interviewed without being excessively or detrimentally affected by talking about their process. Each felt that they had achieved forgiveness to some extent and felt more healed as a result, and that using art was a valued part of the process. The emphasis of the interviews was on the process of forgiveness and the role that art played in it for the participants. Care was taken in the interviewing process to avoid triggering painful memories. The participants are frequently quoted to accurately represent their process as much as possible.
Offences involved in the forgiveness process

Participants were asked about the injustices acted against them to provide context to their process of forgiving. Offenses included rape, murder of a family member, various forms of abuse (financial, emotional, physical, sexual), infidelity, and partner abandonment. While there was a significant primary offender and offense that participants referred to in the interview, most participants also referred to other offences and offenders and discussed forgiveness in general. Some offences were clearly defined while others were more difficult to describe and had happened over a period of time. Given the gravity and traumatic content of the offences, it was apparent how deeply affected participants had been in terms of personal loss, emotional pain, life adjustment, and healing from trauma.

Some referred directly to forgiving the primary offender, while others spoke in more general terms about forgiveness. Participants who had worked through forgiveness concerning someone with whom they had a romantic or familial relationship referred to a complex of offences, or pattern of abuse that had occurred over a period of time in the context of the relationship.

Participants’ understanding of what it means to forgive

To set up the interview with context and to bring to mind their experience of forgiveness each participant was asked how they understood the meaning of what it is to forgive. Some participants responded quickly, cogently, and with confidence and had clear ideas about what forgiveness meant to them. Others described being less certain as they were still working on understanding what it meant to forgive during their process.
A young woman who had endured many injustices including being raped at different times in her life had a ready, well-formulated idea of what forgiveness meant to her and presented several key understandings without hesitation.

I think that forgiveness for me is an understanding of putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes sometimes - to think things from a different perspective. (It’s) letting go and not letting bitterness come over you. Not holding on to things. Maybe not necessarily forgetting but coming to a peaceful solution within yourself.

When asked about her concise and ready answer, she shared that she had spent a lot of time thinking about forgiveness and what it means. Another participant who had been abused by her partner indicated less certainty about what forgiveness meant to her and was still formulating her thoughts on it. When I asked for her understanding of what forgiveness means she replied: “That is something that I am currently investigating for myself”. She went on to explain “My current understanding is coming to a place in your life where you are able to move on with someone having wronged you.”

While the question was asked at the onset of the interview, the meaning of what it is to forgive was also revisited throughout the interviews by the participants at times. At the conclusion of her interview a participant shared that she wanted to be part of the research to reflect on forgiveness. She had wondered if she really had forgiven, then decided out loud that she believed that she had as she was no longer thinking about it every day. Thus, there was variance in the development of understanding of what was meant by forgiveness in definition and in practice. Even so, there were strong themes as to the meaning of forgiveness that
appeared in all of the interviews and certain aspects of what was understood by forgiveness that were quite apparent in all of the accounts.

**Themes describing forgiveness**

The primary overarching understanding of forgiveness was that it was a means to personal healing and personal well-being. The concepts of personal healing, self-preservation, and inner peace were the emphasis of what was understood in forgiveness overall. The five specific themes identified in what forgiveness meant and how it healed included: *letting go; achieving autonomy and freedom; that it was a spiritual practice; it meant coming to a place of acceptance;* and *involved seeing the offender differently*. While there was considerable overlap in these themes each was also distinctive in some ways.

**Letting Go.** The strongest most prevalent theme in describing forgiveness was the theme of *letting go*. Participants described letting go of bitterness, angry rumination, and expectations that the offender would either care or try to repair the damage. They also described letting go of preoccupation with the offence and the offender. The theme of letting go was both what forgiveness meant and how forgiveness progressed. It was described as releasing the past and enabling moving on or moving forward. Letting go of the past included coming to a place of acceptance that the offence could not be undone, and that healing had to happen to improve quality of life for the one who had been harmed.

A woman who identified as Christian who had been abused by her mother as a child and who had also experienced partner abuse as an adult described forgiving as letting go of the offender and the offence. She worded it metaphorically as “… letting go of the chains that bind me to the person that injured me.” This same participant shared that forgiveness was for self-
healing and that to forgive for her was “letting go of the burden and not carrying someone else’s crime.” This overlaps with the theme of forgiveness involving movement toward freedom and autonomy.

Forgiveness was defined as a way of finding freedom from the offender and the offence and therefor restoring their ability to make autonomous decisions for the future. The autonomy to decide not to harbor anger, to not retaliate, and to be autonomous and free of the offender meant forgiveness included taking their power back. One participant stated, “(forgiveness means) taking responsibility for the issue and not giving the responsibility away to the offender.” For her having freedom from the offence and the offender came from forgiveness in that she could determine for herself how she would deal with what happened and how she would carry it into the future.

A key part of that freedom for several participants was to address the label of victim which meant being defined by the offender and the offence. One participant who had been emotionally abused and abandoned put it this way: “Forgiveness is about acceptance of the situation. I don’t feel like a victim of the situation any longer. I am empowered to make my own decisions as is the other person.” This touches on the next theme identified, that forgiveness involved a process of acceptance.

Acceptance. Acceptance was about the realization that the past could not be changed, but the future could be. Acceptance also was used to describe the need for boundaries concerning the relationship in which offences occurred to prevent further harm or abuse. Another form of acceptance was recognizing and accepting the limitations of the offender’s ability to be in a healthy relationship. Coming to acceptance helped with letting go of the relationship and
forgiving the offender and moving on. For others who wanted to forgive and reconcile, acceptance meant that the relationship would be suspended until the offender proved trustworthiness, yet regardless, forgiveness was a personal choice, not dependent on the actions of the offender. Acceptance was also a part of self-compassion in learning to accept the vestiges of pain and loss that remained even after forgiving. As one participant said “there may be residual feelings. These feelings are an indication of the deepness of the wound that was done. It may take a while for the feelings to subside.”

**Spiritual practice.** Spiritual practice was another repeated theme that came up. Participants that ascribed to a specific faith structure described that forgiveness was a part of their spiritual practice. This practice was focused on love for self and for others. A Muslim participant stated: “You want to create harmony for yourself in the world, and for others”. Another who described himself as a spiritual person and a Muslim said, “there was moving from not even caring about forgiveness at first then recognizing how forgiveness can help you to get to the other side of spiritual growth and emotional and mental healing”. A participant who identified as Christian shared that forgiveness was an important part of her faith: “It is what is expected of me as a believer.” Another Christian participant shared that “it is putting love first and justice second”. This participant went on to describe her faith perspective as prioritizing love of all humanity. She expressed that for her it was a balance. “Love without justice is permissive, justice without love is abusive.” She described it as living in a certain tension. “Forgiveness means I’m going to put away the justice issue enough for me to see you as a person.” She was clear that this was not letting the offender off the hook, it was rather the
spiritual practice of keeping an element of love in the equation if only to see the offender’s humanity.

**Consideration of the offender’s perspective.** Consideration of the offender’s perspective or shifting in their initial perspective of the offender was a more tentative yet important aspect of the process. Most participants were emphatic that forgiveness was a very difficult and slow process that involved a lot of raw emotion in sorting through the memories related to the offender and offence. In context to the offender, a participant who was forgiving a family member said that forgiveness included finding “ways to understand where she (the offender) was coming from.” This aspect of forgiving did not mean for her that the relationship would continue as it had been. It meant that she cared enough to understand elements in the offender’s life that brought her to the place of being so hurtful.

Another participant who had processed her thoughts and feelings after multiple offenses described an important aspect of forgiveness for her was a desire to see things from the perspective of the offender in order to figure out how he may have felt and how he could do the things that he did to her. She described that entering his story through her poetic conjecture helped her to move forward in her process of forgiving. “Maybe the person is not bad. Maybe it’s just this one situation. Maybe they are bad but maybe something happened in their younger years that lead to this.” Thus, to varying extents, forgiveness included gaining understanding of the offender’s story, or seeing their humanity in order to be able to let go of the anger.

**Participants’ motivations to forgive**

The turning point in choosing forgiveness for most participants was described as feeling exhausted by their own reactions to, and preoccupations with, the offender(s) and the offence(s).
The emotions and despair that resulted from the offenders’ actions eventually became an excessive burden and relief was sought. There were four main themes as to what motivated participants toward forgiveness. The themes were similar to the definitions of forgiveness. Motivations were: wanting to ‘let go of the anger, pain, and bitterness’ to enable moving on; a desire for freedom and autonomy from the offence and the offender; the alternatives to forgiving were undesirable; and, for reasons of faith or spirituality.

**Letting go of negative emotions.** Motivation to let go of negative emotions for most came from feeling exhausted after a substantial period of hurting and/or feeling angry. Many described a turning point where they wanted to release the pain or anger in some productive way as they were tired of carrying it. A middle-aged woman referred to her motivation as coming from “the unacceptable situation of living with pain”. She went on to say she had recognized that she had adopted ‘a holding pattern of dysfunctional thinking’ and emphasized that she really didn’t like that. Another shared that it was a realization that after many years of thinking about what had happened, she had reached a point where something had to change. “Enough is enough! It had affected my life for so many years.” She described coming to a decision where she had to engage in some kind of movement. She said that she had wanted to get “through this to a point where it no longer needs to affect my life in the same way.” She decided that forgiveness was the way to move on and get past the painful preoccupation.

Similarly, another participant expressed wanting autonomy and freedom from negative emotions and pain. The young woman who had endured rape at several points in her life stated: “I was tired of being bitter … tired of being angry and hopeless within myself over situations that could not be changed.” She referred to wanting autonomy in her decision making. “Being
tired of being angry led me to look for peace within myself.” Finding peace within herself gave her freedom to decide her own future and enabled her to be unrestricted by her past. The desire for freedom and autonomy was a consistent theme. Ruminating on the past was described as an unhealthy connection to the pain, the offence, and the offender in many cases. Motivation to forgive was a desire to be free of that bondage.

**Needing an alternate to not forgiving:** This was another reason given in choosing forgiveness. Referring to herself and her husband, one participant whose daughter had been murdered stated, “We were afraid of the aftermath and realized that’s as deadly as the murder itself.” Soon after the loss of her daughter she had heard from another parent of a murdered child about the devastating aftermath he had experienced. She shared that she wanted to survive the pain differently. “I was afraid. I thought, I’m not going to do whatever (it is) that you are doing. I’ve got to find an alternative. I’ve got to survive this”. She was motivated by love and concern for the wellbeing of her family as she had other children and she wanted to be free of bitterness and anger to be able to care for them following the horrific trauma. This determined her decision to forgive. This sentiment was echoed in various ways by most participants who grew weary of the alternatives to forgiveness that meant holding on to the anger toward the offender and becoming controlled by them and the past.

**Faith.** Faith was also an important motivation for several participants. A woman who had been devastated by the murder of her father and who had also been abused and neglected as a child shared that she had gone through a very long, very dark period as a result. “I used to feel restless, worried, unsure and depressed because of unresolved issues in my life.” She went on to share, “I learned more about what forgiveness is and what it can bring to you. It was a plan to
recover.” She referred to her faith as a Muslim and shared that she had found inspiration to forgive in ‘the Holy Book’ (the Koran) and that her faith was a big motivator. She used the metaphor of ‘deleting’ unhelpful preoccupations in describing forgiveness. “I always refer to it like when you are scanning your mobile device, and that you are just deleting junk … it feels like so much memory is being used up and then you’ll say ‘clean now’ and it cleans it.” Motivation to forgive was inspired by her faith and was a way to attain freedom from the pain that she had been experiencing.

Another woman who had endured abuse by her mother and her ex-husband shared that forgiving was part of her religious upbringing as a Christian and was for her a way to heal and to get through the difficulties in her life. “I wasn’t going to survive unless I dealt with serious things.” She said she attributed her understanding of forgiveness to her faith and that it helped. Spiritual motivations related to love – love for self, for others, and as a spiritual attitude toward humanity. Faith or spirituality were not only an aspect of their motivation but were also included in descriptions of the forgiveness process as having given direction, strength, and a goal in learning how to forgive.

There was an exception however as one participant described that she was discovering forgiveness outside of religion. She shared that she had a difficult church experience that was associated with having been subjected to hypocrisy between what was taught by the church she had attended with her parents as a child, and the abuse experienced in her family by her father. That had affected her deeply necessitating distance from the church leaving her to discover forgiveness in a new context outside of religion.
While motivations were primarily about letting go of pain and anger and becoming autonomous, they also included thoughts concerning the offender. In relation to her sibling who had been cruel and unfeeling during her time of need, one participant said that forgiveness would be “beneficial if ever the relationship were to start again.” She was open to reconciliation if trust could be re-established and new boundaries laid. Generally, thoughts of forgiveness in context to the offender took time. As a participant who had been betrayed by a partner stated emphatically that “forgiveness was not even in the stratosphere of what I was considering at first.” While all sought relief from the pain related to the offence, future relationship with the offender was a different consideration. For some, the offender was a stranger and there was no pre-existing relationship. For others freedom from the offender was not always sought and working through a process of reconciliation and regaining trust was a part of their process.

Whether reconciliation was a factor or not, healing involved personal integrity. The ability to let go of thoughts of revenge and angry rumination included a desire to maintain a positive self-concept. This was stated poetically by one participant who said that forgiveness provided a way ‘to allow what happened to me to refine me, not to define me’. In so saying, this participant referred to taking a proactive role in maintaining personal integrity in restoring a healthy sense of self after the offence. He wanted to do this while asserting his boundaries clearly to rebuild trust as reconciliation was also a goal. Being defined by the offence was giving it power; being refined by it was taking the power back and using it for personal growth. This participant went on to say: “I don’t want to allow it to control me for the rest of my life.”

Along with these motivations there was the consistent realization that forgiveness takes time and that it happens in increments. One participant stated that ‘forgiveness is something that
The arts used by the participants in this study were: poetry, creative writing, song writing, visual arts, music and sound, and dramatic performance. Some participants used their primary art form to work on forgiveness: i.e. a poet used poetry. Others used an alternate art form i.e. a writer used visual arts. Some used a mixture of art forms i.e. a musician used visual arts at first then later worked with soundscape while visualizing weaving. Most participants were already interested in the arts however, some were encouraged into the arts, or into a new art form in working through their process.

Participants spoke of art as a place that they could go, or as a ‘vehicle’ with which to move through the forgiveness process. Art was a place that they went or a way that they journeyed through the process. Art provided a focus for expressing and processing emotions. It held the emotions and associations related to the offence and enabled coming to terms with what had happened. Art helped to explore the impact and discover and create meaning while moving through the process. Art making was described by one participant as “a door to explore.” It was a way of entering into a state of explorative investigation using a tangible parallel process external to what was happening internally. Expanding on his idea of having a door to a place of creative exploration he expressed that:
Creativity and art expression are really magical. It allows you to explore. … and it’s your door. You can’t ignore it. It’s like this beautiful place. You go through it sometimes. You can close it back, lock and put the key away. No-one else is the key holder or the gatekeeper to that door.

He went on to describe that although ordinary life, duties and responsibilities, will call you away from your process, the art will be there when you come back, and you can then pick it up where you left off.

This concept was shared by other participants. Art was a place set aside to focus on their process of forgiving. Art was there when it was needed and it could be returned to in order to continue at a moment of readiness. It was both internal in that the forgiver created what was happening in their inner world in their art, and it was external in that the art existed outside of the forgiver and provided a place of tangible interaction with the contents of the forgiver’s mind. Art held the emotions, the beliefs, the truths, the thought process, and the journey while the forgiver worked through the forgiveness process.

For the mother whose daughter had been murdered, art and forgiveness were a ‘portal out of the madness’ that she experienced in the tragic loss of her child. She described that for her the process of letting go had created a vacuum of passion that she needed to fill with another passion that could be healing. She found personal expression in the visual arts. Her movement toward healing was to ‘step into creativity’. She described her art making as ‘desperately playing’. She shared “I am a writer. That is my mainstay. But I had lost my words. I could not explain what was happening to me. I had to let go of my desire to write. What will I fill it with?” She went on to say:
Creativity, in making something, is a way to kind of forgive without even knowing that you are forgiving. You know you’re moving, you’re saying … I am not going to sit and stew. I’m going to create something. That is already a step into forgiveness. You are moving from the issue into … a wonderful kind of very subtle portal. It’s the portal out of madness, right? The alternative, not forgiving, is to be caught up in that cycle; the cycle of the mind that is just downward. It’s a spiral downward that leads to addiction … or just death.

Her engagement in the artmaking kept her focused on forgiving by creating something positive in her art making. Using art in the process of forgiveness had given her something active to do that was soothing. She described how much life had changed since the devastating loss of her daughter. Her art was a place set aside for solace and reprieve.

Having a creative place to go for reflection, expression, and exploration was also what helped the young woman who had been raped at several points in her life. She described a newfound love of creative writing that had been encouraged by a caring mentor. She said that her creative writing helped in that “(she) could really just explore this whole other world.” The word explore came out frequently in how the arts was helpful in the process of forgiving. The art provided a parallel playing field where inhibitions were lowered to allow for exploration of the confusion and mess involved in the forgiveness process, to play with the emotions, to understand the experience, and figure out how to get through it and be OK. The important question in this research was to examine what happened within the artistic process that the participants found helpful. The first facilitating factor of what the arts provided was the artmaking itself. It was a
‘go to’ place that held the process for them. In that place of art making, there were several factors that contributed to the process and there were several themes as to how it helped.

**Themes identified in the Art Making Process**

From the data provided in the interviews the following thematic categories were established as to how the art helped to facilitate the process of forgiving. The art help in that it: 

*externalized the process*; provided symbolic *tangible interaction* with the inner contents of the participants’ process; *revealed and/or concealed truths*; facilitated *transformation*; and the art helped with the *discovery of and creation of meaning*. These aspects of how the arts helped appeared in similar yet variant ways. Like the layers of understanding and motivations of forgiveness, there was layering and overlap in how the art works within these themes.

**Art externalized the process and provided tangible interaction.** These two conjoint themes are foundational as to how the arts worked in facilitating the process, thus, they are being addressed together in this section. These foundational aspects of art making were embedded within the other three themes as well. They were the base mechanism of how the arts helped in the process. As previously stated, an important aspect of externalizing components of the inner process of forgiveness is that the art form could hold the process, most importantly, the emotional aspects of the process, and be worked on by the artist/forgiver. The art making was a symbolic representation of the emotions and meanings in the process and could be interacted with and thereby provided tangible representation to the forgiveness journey that could be observed, shifted and changed, seen or felt, or heard and experienced in a sensory way. Of considerable importance was that the art allowed an alternate access to the emotional process in that the art held the emotional content of the experience and could be worked with like a puzzle
in that the pieces could be moved around, tried in one place and then another. This process
provided an salient deepening of understanding by experiencing emotions with a sense of
control.

Another important aspect of the externalization of the process that participants said was
helpful was that the art could be kept intact when they needed to leave the process to attend to
day to day life, and the process could be resumed at another time when the forgiver was ready to
go back to it. The external tangible aspect of the art was important to the participants as it
facilitated ongoing sensorial observation of their process. One participant shared, “I was able to
do something outside of myself that I could reflect on, that I could look at, that I could see…
take a step back and analyze from a different perspective”. Another explained about her
songwriting process in forgiveness:

- It’s always where you are at in that moment. You can go back to it, revisit it, tweak it,
  build it in layers. The song evolves where I started and ends where I am, or where I
  would like to be. I can play with what I don’t want, and what I do want.

- It was the access to the internal process through the art that provided a sense of
  immediate connection to, and empowerment within, the process. It was a way to contain the
  chaos as many described it. It was there to be interacted with rather than just being engaged in a
  mental process that was confusing and unattainable for observation. The art was a translation of
  the inner process that could be worked with externally.

- There was explorative interaction with the art and the art materials that affected the inner
  process. A participant who had been depressed for years after the murder of her father and other
  painful events in her past was encouraged to work in clay. She said:
I started working in clay and I got so involved. It was therapeutic for me. Clay is a very therapeutic medium, but it’s not very easy. You need a lot of patience and time to befriended it. In the beginning I struggled and got frustrated. This material is asking something from me, and its patience. So, I started practicing that.

This participant referred often to the art materials and the art making as teaching her and helping her. It was the tangible interaction with the materials that helped provide insight into her inner experience. The clay in this case helped to soothe something inside of her and helped her with her inner process. It helped in creating a shift in coming to terms with what had happened by providing a place to explore it, interact with it, and change how it was experienced within her. The art was able to hold the internal content and provided a release into a tangible manifestation of what was happening for her.

Another woman who was working through her process in song writing described how it helped facilitate her experience of her inner process. “If I wanted to go to it and continue healing, I could practice the song or keep tweaking it a little bit and help it grow, like a baby.” Again, having an outside tangible process enabled being able to see it and get at it more concretely. “I can go back and keep modifying if I’ve changed how I feel a little.” She spoke of how she would change what was happening in her song to match her internal shifts. Referring to an example of parts of it coming from pure anger at first, she later decided to shift the piece to a place of more compassion. Regarding her anger she said she could alter the lyrics to match what she hoped for within herself. “I don’t want that (anger) to be a permanent thing if I have to sing that over and over. That becomes more like rumination.” She described it as a process of transformation using her song to work in tandem with her inner experience. She said that one
affected the other toward the shift in her healing. “The creative process allows it to be changeable and (I could) keep updating it and then allow it to grow out of me.”

This effect was spoken of by many of the participants who shared how having an external process in the art making, whether the artform was poetry, visual arts, or music, or preparing for performance, helped them move through their inner process. Involvement with their art provided a place to interact with feelings and create shifts and changes within themselves by helping them to identify what was happening internally by working on it artistically. They were able to see it, hear it, touch it, and alter it toward forgiveness.

**Release or catharsis.** Externalizing the process provided a place where the participants could safely express and release their story with all of the raw emotional content involved. There was an important element of having a place to bring the messiness of emotion to let it out to provide some relief. The pain, hurt, and anger was released and therefore was not kept held inside. One participant put it this way, “I took the unorganized, unconcrete, messy feelings and put words to it (metaphor, imagery) in song lyrics.” The importance of being able to take the pain and anger outside of the body and mind was paramount in descriptions of how art helped. It was described as *release, catharsis, or ‘an exhale’*. One participant said it was like a dam opened when she was able to express what she was feeling. Bringing it into the outside helped relieve a pressure that had built up on the inside. There was also a sense of freedom, safety, and permission to be able to explore and experience the raw unedited emotions in the safe holding place of their art. Within the art, true emotions could be expressed without judgement.

The art modality used for initial release was not necessarily their usual art form in several cases. Some described a shift in expression from their primary art expression to something
different. One young musician described initially having a ‘craving’ to paint out the intense feelings to process her anger around an abusive relationship she had been in. “It was almost like craving a bag of chips or something. I was like ‘I need a canvas and some paints! I need to do this right now.’ It felt instinctive.” She said that at that point the visual arts felt safer for her because it wasn’t her usual art form. “If I did badly, I wasn’t going to judge myself or anything. Whatever comes out is the right thing.” She described it:

...for some reason (although) I’ve been a musician my entire life, but for some reason in that moment, at the first moment of dealing with my trauma, it was oil painting that I felt that I needed. I felt that I needed something new maybe. I am not sure what I was thinking at that time, but that felt like the right thing. I went out to the art store and bought a few canvases and some really bright red, and black, and you know – angry colors. That’s how I expressed myself at the first stage.

She said that later in her process she used sound to express how she felt as that was what was needed at that time. The sound was a different kind of release for her emotions. She shared: “…my anger attached to that sound in it’s coming out. The end result was something that was angry …but at the same time I think that is part of the forgiveness.” She used the word ‘exhalation’ to describe the release of what had been inside. She said that the sound held it better than the visual arts at that later point of her process. Each modality had its own function for her in its own time.

Once the emotion was released it was interacted with in the art as the external and the internal worked together. The woman working through both childhood abuse and partner abuse in her paintings put it this way:
What I have to guide me is frustration. That becomes a gift. The gift of frustration! If something frustrates me about (the art) that means it’s not finished yet. It’s when I fall in love with the painting that I know that it’s over. The baby is out!

For her the baby was finding a resolution in her art making. Continuing with her analogy of birth she went on to describe how during the gestational period where the art is being developed from the subconscious to the conscious you have no idea what is going to come out. “There is a world there that comes out, but you still know little about it. The painting is like that. It takes a long time. It’s a bit of a puzzle.” Externalizing and playing with the pieces and getting to know each part and altering them as needed is how several of the participants described the process of working in the art to understand their internal process. The first need however was the release, getting it out.

Another participant who was working through painful family situations was also able to release her anger into her art and described it as a way to organize the chaos and to “make sense of the chaotic nature of what happened.” The art could hold whatever was needed to be to expunged emotionally; it could be ugly or terrible. She described how her music and poetry at the early stage of her process was ‘so raw’, ‘in your face’, ‘graphic’ and ‘pretty intense’. Those that used the term ‘release’ in bringing their inner process out expressed relief in having the emotion come out in the art.

There was a pleasing element to releasing the emotion into the art like something painful had been expunged. This expungement or externalization of intense emotions was a need in the early stages of forgiveness. It moved the pain and/or anger outward in an active way which helped create a shift toward a more amenable inner state. As the participant described it the raw,
graphic, intense emotion transformed when they were arranged into poetry and rhymes as it provided a structure that helped to make sense of it all. “I can put it on the page, and I can see it, and really interesting things come out. It becomes like a beautiful thing in a poem. It makes sense.”

**Revealing and/or concealing the truth.** Along with being a safe place to allow the raw emotions to be released and interacted with, was the idea that the art could be used to explore the truth of what happened and how it was being experienced. This was a very important aspect for the participant who had endured abuse both as a child, and in her marriage. “My paintings aren’t pretty paintings. They are not meant to please. They are meant to get at the truth. What is the truth and how do I access it? The art was one way of doing that.” She emphasized the importance of the truth for her in her process of forgiveness. “Once (the art) reveals the truth to me, then I can do something about it. I can choose to forgive, or not.”

She described it as a process of discovery. To manipulate or control the art process for her was to be inauthentic. She let the art process unfold to help guide her understanding. “I could not control it at all. Otherwise you are wanting people to see a story that you are fabricating. For the healing and forgiveness to occur you have to be extremely honest.” She shared how the truth revealed in her art had helped her. “I allow the art to go as deep as I want to go. What happened then is, now I am able to forgive because I know the truth.” What was revealed in her art gave her an opportunity to see what had happened and to process it. “Until I know the truth it is still on the inside. I start to see the truth when I am ready.”

By expressing their inner experience in their art, whether it was a song, painting or poem, participants were able to explore their feelings in new ways. Identifying the truth about how
they felt or how they experienced what had happened was beneficial in resolving emotions and in making decisions around relationships. The ability of the art to both reveal and conceal was helpful, sometimes within the same piece of art. The same woman who was helped by the truth revealed in her art was also helped by how the art was able to conceal the truth. “It’s my way of telling a story by not using words”. She shared the importance of this. “You are not accusing anyone. You protect yourself.” The artistic expression was cryptic enough to be understood by her but not by others – unless she chose to share the hidden meanings.

Another participant needed her art to conceal her truth while also holding it for her as a reminder of what she believed. She described hiding Bible verses behind white paint on her canvases. She shared that others around her found her faith and her desire to forgive to be offensive and objectional due to the horror of what the offender had done. Others did not believe that murderers should be forgiven. She did not want to impose her beliefs on others, so she used her art to hold and conceal her inspiration while still having it there to give her strength to forgive. “Nobody could see the words that I love behind it, so it’s not offensive and it’s just white … and there’s something important there, but its white and nobody can see it.” For her the process of concealing provided her with joy in the midst of her pain. “It’s just silly. but it’s my joke and it’s my fun. It’s my creation of joy.” She also described ‘craving’ white and felt some peace in making her art. Her white paintings were her way of coping with the despair that was ever present in her mind and they helped her focus on her goal of remaining a loving person by concealing her truth within them. She could have her inspiration for herself in plain sight in a concealed way. She did not need to explain it to those who may not agree with her beliefs. She smiled “It’s my secret.”
A poet described the need to express the truth of his anguish while still remaining cryptic about the details of what he was working through. “I wasn’t explicit. I was very metaphorical.” He did not want people to know what he was going through at that time and his art, while still getting at the emotional impact of what happened, could also conceal the specifics of what had happened and what he was going through. He could share as much as he wanted to share, and conceal what he wanted to conceal, while still implicitly expressing it. The art held his emotional truth and concealed details that he did not want to share. The ability of the art to hold the truth and conceal it was also important to others who wanted to work on their process but could not share what was happening as they did not want to deal with other people’s opinions. Some wanted to conceal what the offence was or wanted to protect the identity of the offender from others who wouldn’t understand. There was also a desire to protect others from being hurt by the truth they needed to express so it needed to also be concealed. It was important that they could both express themselves fully while at the same time being able to protect themselves within the art.

**Transformation.** The interrelation between the conscious and unconscious processes in art making has been previously discussed in these results. It is this dynamic that helped with transformation in the forgiveness process. Art helped transform inner emotional content through transformation of the external work of art through hands on conscious development of the art. Participants brought their internal struggles with forgiveness into their art and could explore it there. The art makes the invisible visible, or audible, and dynamic in the interrelationship between the art maker and the art; between what comes up in the art from the subconscious into something that is tangible. The tangible interaction helped participants to decide within the art
process what changes they needed and wanted to make in terms of their forgiveness process. Once made tangible, the process on the outside could then be internalized. There was an ‘out’ then back ‘in’ interaction between the depths of feelings and experience inside moving out to the art where it was processed then brought back in creating inner psychological and emotional shifts.

The young woman who had been deeply hurt by a family member described her transformation. She spent time reflecting on her family dynamics as she processed what had been going on. “I recognized what was happening and named it. I called it out.” She decided “No, I am not doing this anymore. I had to change. I had to become a different person. So that was part of the forgiveness (it) was the transformation of me.” She also shared that she had realized that what had been happening was not her fault, yet she could change how she interacted with it.

She described using the art to structure the chaotic nature of what had happened and, in so doing, was able to make some sense of it. Organizing the messy feelings and putting them into metaphors and imagery was related to as a birthing or nurturing process much like another participant had described it. “I could let it be outside of me and keep tweaking it and to help it grow, I guess like a baby. As I kept modifying it, I changed how I felt.” As she went through this process it strengthened her own boundaries. She said her whole process of exploration helped her to relate differently to the family member who had hurt her so deeply. It involved accessing her anger. She expressed that after reflecting on a lot of things and making some changes that “it was a little bit easier for me to empathize with her (the offender).”
The transformation within the art process was described by several as happening in editing the art and interacting with it. The process of editing the art helped with the inner transformation of the art maker. One participant described how working passionately on a poem had brought him to a place of transformation. Working on the art piece was rewarding and provided a sense of pride as he was able to form it into what he needed it to be through the editing process.

I found myself coming back to a certain poem. Reading it with the intent of memorizing it because I was proud of the writing. I was proud that I got the writing out. I edited that piece more than I did anything else. And I think that process was one that helped me to gain strength because in the writing of it, it helped me to explore the concept of ownership. Ownership and attachment. The idea of attachment …so not just between human beings, but with anything in the world. So, it was transformative in a way. It was almost like a Nirvana.

The editing and creation of the poem came with euphoria and was a spiritual process as he explored forgiving. He went on to explain “I am a spiritual person. So, I felt like I reached another spiritual understanding.” The art making helped facilitate an existential depth of understanding. The artistic process helped him work though his experience from the initial pain of the offence to finding more inner peace and meaning through forgiveness.

The inner transformation also happened in the creation of the art and allowing it to meet a need. The woman who had hidden Bible verses in her art to develop and sustain her forgiveness after the murder of her daughter said:
I was desperately playing to keep my mind from going crazy. I craved white. I craved simplicity. I created a calm mind, not the cycling dark craziness that was always lurking inside of me. I need my white. I need it to remind me of the important things that I believed in that would see me through.

She spoke of her art as being a refuge. A way through. It helped to transform her feelings of desperation and craziness by creating the calm mind that she longed for. The painting helped to meet her needs and held for her, her sense of meaning and purpose. The painting and the paintings became an extension of her in that they held parts of what she needed as she worked through the process toward internalizing what the paintings held.

The art also helped in transformation by providing a goal in imagining the future and picturing the desired outcome. The editing and performance of a piece was described like a method of positive rumination of believing in forgiveness and the healing that could come from it when the whole process became difficult. It also helped to provide a goal by believing that the forgiveness would help heal. The participant who did performance art said “…the editing, the rehearsing, the live performances of the different moments when I performed and presented were all a part of this process to help me not only just use forgiveness but to believe that it works.”

The editing, memorization and rehearsal brought the meaning revealed in the art back inward by acting as a goal and a positive cognitive rehearsal that helped him to believe the outcome would be healing.

Transformations happened in different ways and at different paces. Several participants described a sense of pride, joy, or happiness concerning the art that came from the release and
process of transformation. For the woman whose father had been murdered, the art was a new approach to her pain that shifted her depression. “I started discovering myself in a different way; expressing myself in a different way.” She described that the art making was never preplanned. It was an interactive discovery that assisted her inner shift. The art guided her as she worked on it.

The art making was often described as enjoyable and even absorbing. The completed artwork was often ‘loved’ by the art maker who found joy in the process of expression and how the art had captured what they needed. The feelings of enjoyment and love also helped create shifts toward forgiveness. While the process of forgiveness was difficult for the participants, the art provided moments of relief and a way to work through painful emotions. Having a way to work though difficult emotions by exploring them in art allowed new discoveries and insights. The discovery and new insights provided release that helped transform feelings of being stuck into a new sense of freedom from the past.

Transformation in perspectives relating to the offender was also facilitated by the art process. This was directly undertaken by a young participant who used creative writing and poetry to understand the one who had so deeply hurt her. “I was really trying to understand somebody else, as hard as it is, it gives you a little bit of insight. But a little bit of insight can lead to peace.” She went on to say:

So, the process was incredible because once I wrote it out, then I also memorized, then performed it on stage… I played both characters. So, I had to play the guy and evoke what his emotions would have been. I had to tell myself how I would have felt.
She shared that the process of performing it was ‘scary’ yet the witnessing of her art by the audience and the positive feedback that she got was ‘empowering’ she said. Her courage in exploring his perspective helped her to understand him differently enough to move on. Bringing the audience with her on the journey she shared, was also helpful.

A participant who had experienced many forms of abuse in a romantic relationship described her journey of forgiveness using visual arts and Guided Imagery in Music ® (GIM). She spoke about various points where using art helped her to recognize that she was in an unhealthy relationship, and then later when the relationship had ended, art inadvertently helped her to be able to forgive and move past it. She described how the GIM process was led by a therapist and that it created a shift in levels of consciousness in a guided musical experience. Within this experience she was able to envision the offender in a whole new light as the music brought her deep into her subconscious. “I saw him as a very lonely individual that was completely closed off, (he) had no interior at all. He was a Teflon man. I imagined him as a Teflon person. And that was the extent of his personality. He was very pathetic and sad.” This imagery helped her to shift within herself. She imagined him in a boat sitting there. “… just this very lonely person.” She described how this helped her to see things in a different way concerning him. Sometime before that, while she was still involved with him, she described how visual art had helped her to access her anger when she drew a mandala. She wanted to hold on to that piece of art as she wanted to be able to own that anger as she was recognizing that the relationship was not healthy. It took her some time to decide what to do.

Some years later in another GIM session she experienced a ‘metaphor’ of letting him go. At first, she imagined hands inside of her that at first were beautiful. Then they transformed into
gripping hands inside of her that were not welcome and that she did not like. The music and the sessions helped with the imagery and metaphor. “Different ways of feeling and seeing it helped to shift how I felt about the situation or (how I) felt about him.” It was a gradual process that helped bring her transformation toward forgiving him, letting go, and moving on. In reflection of the whole process, she said that the arts had been helpful in uncovering a lot of content and brought her to a place where she even wanted to forgive. She shared that exploring the relationship in art was not done with the intention of forgiving him:

I wasn’t ready for forgiveness in the early stages at all. I think I was in the process of saying ‘I really want to get out of this. So, I didn’t go in with the idea of forgiving the guy. Or the situation. I went in with the idea of releasing myself from the hold it had on me. And in that way the process of forgiveness happened to happen.

Another participant described how using art to work through her feelings brought her to a place of forgiveness. She spoke of externalizing the process in the art. You “take it out of yourself and look at it … and have a dialogue with it rather than just sit on it by yourself and try to make sense of it.” She described really looking at what had happened in her life through her art and then deciding what she wanted to do about it. She used a metaphor of dragging a big heavy metal ball to describe the things that happened. “You can take this heavy metal ball and sculpt it into an ugly demon thing and you can sculpt it into something really beautiful and have one of both. So, you can represent the good things you’ve gotten over the experience. Then you can stare at it all and go ‘Okay, that’s what it was!’ In her metaphor of transforming the ‘metal ball,’ using art in the process gave her an ability to look at the elements of what she was working
through and reflecting on the experience. She could ponder the lessons that have been learned from it … ‘in the process of making something out of it rather than just carrying it’ as she put it.

She also described conflicts that came up in dialoguing with the art including working through the fear of not being able to forgive. For her holding on to anger was like being strangely comfortable … “if you are right all the time, you’re righteously wrong. You are righteously right to be angry.” She shared that holding on to anger was like ‘false power’ and that it becomes a trap. She described that trap as ‘creative imperilment.’ Her art making had helped her by showing her where she was stuck; helping her to recognize what she was upset about; and what needed to be validated, acknowledged, or apologized for. Then she worked through accepting that the apology may never come.

She artistically worked through her own process of dealing with difficult dynamics and coming to a place of feeling less trapped by them. She was not dependent on the offender to free her; she could work through it on her own. She went through a process of externalizing many of the elements of the painful relationship into art and then transformed how she framed them through editing and altering the art. Regarding the whole process she said: “It is the willingness to want to go through the process of figuring out what to do with this. Otherwise you are stuck.” She summarized saying “I can spell out loud what it was in lyrics or in visual being; the good, the bad, the ugly – it’s all there.” For her putting it on the outside and working on it via her art was a way to break old patterns that allowed her to establish new boundaries and move forward.

In describing her process of healing and how the art helped her to move into forgiveness another participant said: “It’s been about engaging with those emotional parts that I had been intellectualizing over the years.” She shared how the art moved her further when she found a
way to express the emotions and looked at them differently. “Okay, what does my anger sound like? What does my grief sound like? What does a sense of calm sound like? … the more you give space to these things, the less it hurts I think.” She shared that while all of pain may not be fully resolved “it just becomes less and less important or something. I don’t know how to describe it any more than that. It feels farther and farther away. It doesn’t feel like something gnawing at me anymore.” She searched for words to describe the transformation she experienced since working artistically on the process at a retreat that she had attended. Regarding the abusive relationship she had been in she said: “(Now) it’s something that happened to me; not something that is happening to me.” She had found a way to heal enough to be able to move on. Regarding her perspectives on the one who had harmed her she said that he had less power over her, it had shifted her unhealthy connection to him and to thinking about him … or at least it “loosened the grip a little bit.”

The woman who had experienced abuse from her mother and her ex-husband said that through her art and forgiveness she was able to transform a painful past. She had explored many aspects of her past and came to understandings about it as her art revealed truths that had helped her to forgive and to heal. For her it was coming to realizations in her art that had helped.

“You’re making a painting, but you don’t know. So, there’s the unconscious coming through revealing itself.” At times the revelations were painful, and at times liberating, at times both. She shared that she was not always gifted with words but beginning to paint in her 30s opened a new form of communication. She became a skilled artist, yet it was the intrapsychic aspect of art making that she spoke about. “I could do pretty pictures but that wasn’t going to satisfy me.” She described the process as delving into mystery. She shared that she would at times listen to
music and paint deeply. The art along with counselling had helped her to come to terms with many things in her past and helped facilitate the process of forgiving both her ex-husband and her mother.

Although she had ended relationships due to the abuse, she was able to empathize with the limitations of those who had harmed her. She recognized that reconciliation and forgiveness are very different things. Concerning her abusive ex-husband, she referred to her faith and her belief in unconditional love. “He is still a child of God. I saw him as depressed. He drank a lot.” She could empathize with his struggles in his life. Her counsellor helped her to process the truths that had come up in her art. With regards to a very poignant piece of art that she created in the process of understanding what had happened in her relationship she shared: “I see it now as a picture of joy.” Exploring the truth had helped set her free from a painful past. “So now it’s possible to forgive a man who wouldn’t do this in his right mind.” Both art making and forgiveness had helped the healing process. The art made it possible as it gave her a place to explore and find understanding. The people around her she said, were not always able to understand.

Finding and creating meaning. Making meaning was also a part of the process described by the participants. Meaning either came out in the art in a process of discovery and/or was held in the art upon its completion. Meaning came from encounters with truth revealed in art making or was found in symbolism. Symbolic representations came out in the art making process.
There was meaning for one participant in the creation of lotus flowers. She described that they were a symbol of rising from the dirt and growing into something strong and beautiful. The lotus flower held symbolic meaning that provided her with inspiration through the impacting metaphor and gave deep satisfaction in the artistic representation. The represented meaning and transformation resulted in what was described as love for the art as the art represented meaning and fulfilled needs of working through a process.

Finding a place for her feelings in her art was meaningful for another participant. “After I had done it (created the paintings) I was surprised how much I loved them.” Loving her art was unintentional but because the meaning and the esthetics combined in such a satisfying way. She described being delighted with the outcome. “They were the right pieces for my house … and so I would share them with other people. It started out as a personal journey, a healing journey … then Oh! My craziness has a place!” She was delighted with having her art in her own home, and, although she stated that she was not a visual artist, the artistic concept that she developed became a series of paintings which she eventually displayed in an art show. She felt further affirmed by her creating and displaying her art when others also appreciated them and purchased them. That her art was appreciated and inspirational to others provided another layer of meaningfulness in her resolve to forgive.

Another participant referred to a poem that he wrote in his process of forgiveness as his ‘magnum opus’ as it had captured the depth of the struggle in his heart through his art as he rhymed it in the interview. He shared how the extent of his expression in the process was ‘so powerful, potent and revealing’ that the artistic process was like an obsession in achieving what he needed to express. He described the exploration in the art as the place for ‘heart-work.’
poem held deep meaning as he had gone so deep emotionally in working through his forgiveness process. Creating the poem helped carry him through a time of intense searching and helped him to discover deep meaning as he wrote it. Meaning came through his process of writing poetry as he worked toward forgiving.

The depths of where the art could take them helped participants access meaning and inspiration. They described how meaning and understanding was found in the art making process. In sharing the depth of her exploration of forgiveness in her writing and poetry, one young woman said it was a “way to dig even deeper into it, to pull up and uproot all of these emotions of hurt and anger and really transform it into something that was educational and inspiring.” For her there was empowerment in the active process that gave her hope.

Meaning was found at many stages of the process in the art making. The creative process developed understanding that was captured in the art form. Being understood by the image or expression was meaningful and could even be soothing. One participant spoke of a metaphor that kept coming up for her after a devastating loss. She said that she had felt like a bird that had hit a window. Being able to draw the bird was meaningful in understanding her own feelings. Meaning also came from the sense of pride and accomplishment that the art provided. A relationship of meaning and accomplishment with their art making resulted in their ‘loving’ the completed artwork. The soothing process of art making, what had been accomplished in the art, and what was gained in the forgiveness process was profoundly meaningful and healing.

More meaning came from the ability to share the art with others when, how, and if, they chose to do that. The effectiveness of using art and the meaning found in the journey of forgiveness prompted some to reach out to help others who may have experienced similar pain.
Sharing the art in performance or display was an exciting outcome for some. The artwork contained their process of turning painful losses and circumstances into their story of strength as it sustained their ability to cope, to be loving, to be spiritual, and to find a path out of the darkness. Moreover, the fulfillment of using art in their healing and forgiveness process for most was the reason for consenting or volunteering to participate in this study. They wanted to be able to share the healing they found in art and forgiveness with others.

**Other important findings: support, spirituality and readiness**

It was important to notice that most of the participants interviewed in this study shared that they had someone within their process of forgiveness that acted as a witness, mentor, or counsellor that offered support and engaged with their art. Examples of supportive roles that helped participants were an expressive writing mentor, music therapists who provided guided imagery with music (GIM), small groups that had suffered similar offences as the participant, a clergy who was a trained counsellor, and various caring others including audiences who affirmed performance of their work. The presence of caring others who were there as support was important given the depth of pain and loss that was being processed. As one participant who recruited the support of a pastoral counsellor said, “When I started being afraid that some of the truth would come out too strong, it was really good to have someone walk in the shadows with me.”

A fellow artist at a retreat played a special role in another participant’s process. She shared how that woman acted as a support for her. “She was working through her own trauma, I think, that was really different than mine … and she was dealing with it in a different way.” The supportive woman’s art form was weaving, and the participant was working in sound while at the
retreat. She described an interactive process between them: “I think my story and my sounds were a part of what she was doing. I feel like I was really supported by her, not just as a friend but as an artist.” Moreover, there was a group of women at the retreat who were also processing trauma who acted as a support group for one another. She described how the weaver influenced her musical process. “I thought about, how am I going to take this thread of sound, and this thread of sound, and this other thread of sound and mix it in and out, and in and out, to create a tapestry of sound?” After a period of artmaking she described a ‘first wave of a dam busting’ in her healing as she began to share her trauma with the friend and in the group of caring others. Regarding the importance of the support from the other artist she said: “she was just there for me.” Her wording then reversed “not only as an artist, but as a really good friend.” It was both the support and the art that had helped the process of forgiving and healing. This was the case for others as well.

For the woman who had experienced years of depression following the murder of her father, it was a mentor in the arts that encouraged her in her art making and in her forgiveness process. This mentor was a major inspiration as the mentor too had suffered the loss of family members to violence. The participant shared how she became very close to her as they held this common bond. It was her mentor who had encouraged her to work with clay. Up until that time, clay was not a media that she had worked with. The mentor encouraged her to ‘focus on bringing more patience with this media.’ “I actually felt that I was relieving my trauma with my hands while interacting with the medium. It was so powerful!” She shared that her mentor was someone who helped her in her process as the mentor had come out of her own trauma so strongly and positively that it was inspiring. Referring to the support and inspiration from the
mentor and a supportive group of women she shared “I greatly needed it at that time. I was going through a severe depression.” Thus it was the art making in the context of the caring others that helped her through it.

Another participant described feeling deeply alone in the process of coming to terms with what had happened to him. He did not want to share it with anyone but was deeply affirmed by his audience when he performed his piece. “Knowing that I had ears to my pain was a way to keep me sane” is how he put it. Similarly, an audience was also affirming for the young woman who wrote poetic dialogues after being inspired by her writing mentor who encouraged her to write about the things that mattered to her. When she performed her piece, she described feeling empowered by the response of the audience. Both her mentor and the audience helped her in her process.

Many aspects of the forgiveness process involved a deep sense of vulnerability. Working through the injustice, the pain, the anger, and shame, was described at times as overwhelming by the participants and having love and support was a very important part of the process of working through it. In some cases, it was the presence of others who witnessed the art as in the audience appreciation or in attendees at an art show that helped. In other cases, it was a group that understood the loss or pain and were also using art in their own process. Sometimes it was an inspiring individual or friend. The important thing that came out in the interviews was that relationship and support was an important part of the process along with the art.

Spirituality, belief and faith were also important components of the process for several participants. Convictions and inspiration that came from scripture (The Koran or The Bible) guided the process for several participants; the process had spiritual meaning and was spiritually
inspired. There were spiritual connections to the concepts of peace and love involved in forgiveness in contrast to the natural impulse of anger, rumination and pain that result from injustice. Drawing from that spiritual support was also something that was part of the journey for them.

Another important factor that came out in the interviews was ‘readiness’ in the forgiveness process. Because the offences that the participants suffered involved incredible loss and emotional pain, the process unfolded over years, and even decades. Several participants shared that it took some time to arrive at the decision to forgive. The art making enriched the process greatly for many, yet it still was a process of time and readiness. The art was very helpful with clearing the time and space to work on the process and the art provided unique ways to view and interact with the process, and to express the inner journey. The art helped with the communication to work through the process. “The art is the voice. It’s my voice. It’s a big voice” asserted on participant yet she acknowledged the process was a long one and that the fruition of much of it happened in stages over decades as she was ready.

That the art was there when it was needed was a resoundingly important aspect of what art offered. Sometimes there were years between the poignant times of art making, and sometimes the art making was obsessive and constant. How the process was paced was unique to each participant and their process of forgiveness. How each journey of forgiveness unfolded was truly individual to each participant. There were thematic consistencies in how the art worked for the participants and there were unique aspects as well to each story. Readiness and timing were personal to each person’s story as to how the forgiveness unfolded yet each participant shared that having an artistic expression was helpful in working through it.
Arts Based Research

First phase: poetic distillations

After completing the qualitative analysis of the interviews and examining the results, I reflected on the idea of artistic or poetic interpretation presented by Catherine Hyland Moon (2002). This encouraged me artistically to capture the poetry of what each participant lived and was saying about how art was involved in their process of forgiving. I reviewed my first notes taken for the qualitative process and I then reread the interviews to extract a more poetic concentration of the artistic processes as they were described to me by each participant. I wrote out the artistic highlights that I gleaned from the interviews by hand at first to allow for deep reflection. Writing it out by hand allowed for a slowed sensory reflection of what had been shared.

The following are my poetic extractions labeled from participant one to participant eight representing each participant’s artistic process of forgiving. In each account I have tried to capture the junctures between art and forgiving to create a skeletal perspective of each interview. I primarily used the words of the participants however I also worded my own interpretations of what they were saying to capture an artistic account of what they had shared.

Participant one: poetry, performance

Get it on the outside.

Art activates that other part of your brain that really bursts with joy, and even sadness

But there is a peace in the sadness.

Being able to get it outside of me

Reflect on it. To look. To see.
Step back – get a new perspective.

A mentor encouraged me, opened my eyes to the art and expanded my mind.

I explored this whole other world.

I started to open up about my story; that is how I was able to transform forgiveness.

I write in colors. I write in feelings, evoking emotions. “Heart Feeling.”

Transformations from black and red pain to light blue, yellowish light.

A softer version of the emotions.

As I transformed from victim to artist, I stepped into his shoes through my art.

Don’t tell me not to talk about it!! It’s my experience. It’s what gets me through.

“To understand somebody else, as hard as that is to do, gives you a bit of insight… But a bit of insight can lead to peace.”

Art is a way to dig deeper, to uproot all of the emotions like hurt and anger and really transform them.

With the art it’s on the outside; it doesn’t fester on the outside.

I wrote it, memorized it, performed it. I played both characters.

It was scary, and empowering; a bridge of empathy.

That is how I came to forgive. That is what helped.

Now maybe my experience can help others.

**Participant two: music**

From harmful to productive

Releasing rumination, letting this become something that is good for me
Instead of just something that can harm me
A release of denial; a shift out of stuck.
I allowed myself to be angry. I am NOT doing this anymore.
I had to become a different person.
Transformed by anger, through forgiveness.
I realized, it’s not my fault.
Forgiveness leaves the door open if ever there is to be a relationship again.
The art helped me to organize my chaos, helped me to make sense of it, to make sense of what happened by putting it into rhymes, poetry and structure until it became a beautiful thing.
I took raw, in your face, graphic and intense emotions and put them into a frame that wasn’t in me.
I sculpted it from messy rumination to organized rhythm.
Metaphors and imagery.
This is why I’m mad; this is what’s going on.
I gave birth to it. I can shift it. I can change it. Converse with it.
Leave it. Go back to it.
I can understand it anew by dialoguing with it.
It takes a willingness to see it.
The song begins where I started and can end up where I am, then where I would like to be
It’s on the outside, let go. It’s like shedding it.
I can let it be the something that came out. I don’t have to drag it around.
If you can forgive you are no longer the victim of someone else.

I think that is a huge power to be gained

**Participant three: music, visual art**

Motivated by the unacceptable situation of living with pain

At an impasse, stuck. I had vacated myself to someone else.

I got help to put it in a framework that I could understand.

Guided imagery in music ® … me, the therapist and the music.

In a musical state of awareness, I began to experience the situation in different ways.

Found different ways of looking at it.

I saw him in a completely different light; Just this lonely, hollow person.

Instead of my being a victim – I saw him as one too.

Later … a metaphor of letting him go.

I felt these hands inside of me; beautiful at first, then gripping inside of me.

Not welcomed.

Anger came out in mandalas - red, with teeth; gnarly.

He didn’t like that.

I wanted to see my anger.

It took a long time, but the images were like islands of relief.

I set an intention “What is my source?”

I am getting back to my source, to what I trust.

The art and the music… help me to find myself again.
The significance of me: I was missing in that relationship.

Everything was about him.

I wasn’t looking at forgiveness in the early stages at all.

I was in the process of ‘I really want to get out of this’.

I didn’t go in with the idea of forgiving.

I went in with the idea of releasing myself from the hold it had on me.

And in that process, forgiveness happened to happen.

**Participant four: visual art**

A place for the crazy guided by Love.

The alternative to not forgiving was not an option.

Forgiveness means I’m going to put away the justice issue enough for me to see you as a person.

I’m going to put love first.

I am going to work for the betterment of everyone.

Hold back the hand of madness and further death.

Art provided a positive passion to replace the negative ones.

I took a step into creativity.

It gave me a purpose and meaning, a preoccupation and moments of joy.

Sometimes we need divine strength to be creative.

I will have my truth, hidden in my art; I know it is there.

I was craving to make the art.
Craving white.

Craving peace. A clear space.

I wanted to create serenity.

“I was desperately playing to keep my mind from going crazy. “

I created a calm mind, not that cycling dark craziness that was always lurking inside of me.

Forgiveness is a step of creativity.

I don’t know if you can be truly creative without forgiving somewhat.

I needed to be reminded of what was important, of things that I believed in.

I hid them in my art. My secret. My peace and inspiration.

I had a desperation to live, to continue to love.

Even if I hadn’t arrived at that forgiving place, the art was my mission statement.

I didn’t want to cave to thoughts of revenge, or ugliness, or hatred.

I held back the hand of further destruction to make space for love and peace,

and a revisioned story.

Forgiveness demands creativity. You have to create your own life again.

**Participant five: visual arts**

Forgiving is letting go of the chains that bind me

To the person who injured me.

To help me and maybe even the other person.

The art was the vehicle that brought the truth to me.
When I became afraid of the truth, I needed someone to walk in the shadows with me.

The art birthed the truth.

Then I could decide what to do with it: forgive or not forgive.

Because there is a story in it, there is no way that I can control what I am painting.

Revelation. Art reveals truth. It takes time, readiness.

I dip a brush into my subconscious and paint the truth.

For healing to come you have to be very honest. I became a truth seeker

I birthed the truth in the art and uncovered mysteries.

I allowed the art to go as deep as it wanted to go.

The mysteries then get solved.

The art is not pretty. That’s not what it’s for.

So now I know the truth; so now I can forgive.

In forgiving, I wanted to do what was right.

I felt guided by God.

He is a child of God. He has the spark of God.

Forgiveness does not mean reconciliation.

It’s the truth that sets you free. Not the painting.

The painting is the vehicle, so I fall in love with the painting.

The baby is out.

It’s a world that comes out.

It’s a way of telling a story without words. Art is a voice.

There is no danger. Nobody is threatened by it.
And I can’t be hurt either.

**Participant six: music, visual art**

A place. A space

Forgiveness is coming to a place where you are able to move on

After someone having wronged you

First it was visual arts. I craved it instinctively, like you crave a bag of chips.

Visual art was safe as it was not my usual art form. I wouldn’t judge it.

I used angry colors at that time and expressed myself

I worked on it. It was soothing. When it was done, I felt pride.

Later, I was sharing my trauma with some other women.

I worked through the trauma with sound.

A dam broke open. An exhalation.

It allowed me the place and the space to communicate my raw emotion in an unfiltered way that I couldn’t do with words.

The emotion attaches somehow, to the sound.

The performance of that is a way of expressing.

There is a space that emotion needs; my anger attached to that in coming out.

The result was something angry, but at the same time, that is part of forgiveness.

That moment was a great exhalation, a cloudburst

Woven sounds and emotions releasing
Supported by the women, the woman, the artist, I could let go of those layers of voices that others have imposed on me.

I am taking ownership of my own path.

I am shedding those other unwelcomed voices.

I am coming to a place that feels more - me

There are some ways that you just can’t speak about what happened

The arts give you different ways of speaking

He doesn’t have power over me anymore.

It loosened the grip

**Participant seven: visual arts**

Interplay.

Through religion, the Holy Koran, I learned later in life that forgiveness is good for the soul.

Difficult, yet important.

Worried, unsure, depressed, it was a plan for recovery.

A way to delete unhelpful junk.

Art helps with releasing.

Art and a mentor helped with the courage I needed to let go.

When you embrace the art materials, they respond to you. It’s never preplanned

Rather it’s a process of interactivity, exploration, and discovery.

I began to discover and express myself in a different way.
I noticed my perceptions and approaches.

When you have a multiple history of traumas you can’t address them all at one time.

It came to me in stages.

I was invited to work in a new media: Clay.

It was therapeutic for me.

It asked patience of me as I befriended it.

When you are doing the work, you are dealing with a lot of feelings.

It is like you are taking them out of your body. Releasing them.

The value of forgiveness is beyond imagination.

In forgiveness and art, you develop a new focus in life.

It was very much on my mind as I was interacting with the materials.

Slowly things shifted; It was bringing me strength.

I called it ‘a celebration of life’.

The lotus flower – beauty from the dirt. So magnificent when it blooms.

The art, the people, my mentor … inspired me. I was not the only one.

That gave me hope.

I was spiritually nourished by the medium and the practice.

I learned something from it. It brings new focus and meaning to the suffering.

**Participant eight: poetry**

A door to explore.

Forgiveness is two sided: relinquishing a negative effect and allowing yourself to be soft.
I don’t want to allow what happened to control me for the rest of my life.  
I did not want to let it define me, rather, I would let it refine me.  
If I didn’t go through the process of forgiving, I wouldn’t know what was on the other side.  
I wasn’t myself for quite a while. At first forgiveness was not even in the stratosphere of what I was thinking.  
I saw it as a tool for a grander purpose “What is it that I want to be for the rest of my life?”  
When I got triggered, I had to constantly apply forgiveness like a balm.  
I had to use it as a part of who I am … especially as I created.  
I used my anger, despair and depression to fuel my writing.  
I was metaphorical, cryptic.  
It was cathartic when I performed.  
Knowing that I had ears to my pain, kept me sane. I was really alone.  
I was proud of the writing. I got out what I needed to get out without overexposing.  
I edited that piece more than I did anything else. That helped me gain strength.  
I explored ownership. I was ready to die for my art.  
The levels of expression that I was working on were so powerful, so revealing.  
It was my magnum opus.  
I went deep. I wanted healing – for us both.  
Art is about emotion. I had to get the emotions right; it had to be sharp.  
I explored myself in the performance.
My art held me when I felt like giving up.

The pace and journey toward forgiveness is a long one.

Art is ‘heart-work’ - the compulsion to explore when the heart is ready.

Its active, it’s beautiful.

You can enact parts of yourself and discover some really powerful things.

**Second phase: artistic response to the stories of forgiveness using art**

Once I completed the distillations, I sat with them for a while. I liked that they framed an account of each participant’s experience. I then reflected on the collective process of all of participants. I began to work on an artistic compilation of how the art was active in the collective phenomenon through poetry writing. I had not intended to write poetry, but it felt like a natural way of capturing the combined phenomena of what forgiving through art making entailed based on the participants’ accounts. As I was working with the images and ideas that came from the accounts of the participants it just became poetic. I was working empathically with what I heard from the participants and what had been distilled from their accounts. As I worked, I felt deeply moved empathically and emotionally. I also had insight from what I had experienced in my own art making that reflected on forgiveness in my pilot study, and what I have experienced as an artist using art to heal and forgive at times in my own life. I sensitized myself by re-reading the distillations. At times I referred to the complete transcribed accounts of the participants’ interviews to assure accuracy. I groomed the compilated poem several times over to ensure that I had captured the poetry of the art used in forgiving.
I found that I was writing in different rhythms and different moods. The flow of the writing demanded that I break it up into segments. I wondered as I did this if the segments were acts in a play, or chapters perhaps? I finally thought that they felt like ‘movements’. Because I have not been trained in music, I looked up the term to understand what was meant by movements in music to understand if it applied. I learned that a movement is a part of a symphony that while it is self-contained, is part of the whole musical performance. This seemed to fit the flow of poetry that reflected the accounts of the participants. Rather than being ‘phases’ such as were presented in the forgiveness models, given the artistry and emotion of what I was trying to capture, they felt like differences in intention and energy. There were similarities to the phases but there were subtle differences in what was being captured in terms of energy, rhythm and intent.

**First Movement:** The first movement was exploration of the impact of the offence. It looked at what the participants had said was the first painful reaction to the injury. It was about the initial raw shock of emotion that preceded consideration of forgiveness. This piece captured some of the motivation for forgiveness.

**Second Movement:** The second movement felt like a consideration; it was like brief movement of wondering what to do in response to the pain and anger. It was a shift from the agony into initial exploration. It came as a result of fatigue and exhaustion that so many of the participants had shared was a part of their forgiveness journey; that and the fear of the results of not forgiving. It was pondering options.

**Third Movement:** The third movement, the work of forgiveness became a representation of the most arduous and complex of all the movements. It felt like hammering and wrestling
with emotion and content and values and beliefs. It took on a pounding determined rhythm from a place of deep determination. This reflected the difficulties expressed by participant and the effort it took to do the work of forgiving. The length of this movement reflects the length of time that the work of forgiveness took in the lives of those who were describing their process. I wanted to capture the emotional effort and even the cognitive restructuring that took place over time in the art process.

**The Forth Movement:** The fourth movement represented the result of all the work. It was reaping after sowing; it was a harvest. What was reaped was a resolve and a release, not an easy ending. I wanted to honor that the forgiveness described by the participants was hard earned. I amplified the word ‘enough’ as the final result of forgiveness. This movement is where the person has reached a place of some resolution in the forgiveness process. I felt a deep empathic connection with the depth of what the participants had worked through. I could feel the release, resolve, and resignation and deep spiritual impact and existential growth. There was considerable vicarious grief involved in this process as I pondered the stories of the participants. I recognized that while forgiveness was healing, none of the process is easy. It is a resolve to choose to love, to heal, and to live life as fully as possible and not pass on the pain.

**Overture:** The overture is what held the identity and meaning in the process. While forgiveness itself does not necessarily have an end or finale, the final poetic response was like a tribute to the participants resolve to forgive after having been gravely injured by another person. It was a meta-perspective on their using art to choose to forgive, or in having arrived at forgiveness through deep artistic reflection. The artist identity and the art of living was explored through the lens of forgiveness. Forgiveness became like a creative process of identity formation
in choosing to love in the face of pain. The concept of wanting to remain loving and peaceful was frequently referred to by the participants. I wanted to represent the will, the motive and the drive to choose love over hate and forgiveness over resentment. While I witnessed the entire process of forgiveness as having been difficult for the participants, the overarching meaning that I wanted to capture was that of autonomy and self-determination in choosing or arriving at forgiveness.

The Art of Forgiveness: A Poetic Symphony in Four Movements (plus finale)

The following is the completed poetic response to the accounts of the participants that addressed my inquiry: How does art help in a process of forgiveness? (P = participant reference)

The imagery of chains became a central theme in moving from imprisonment to freedom. Being chained or imprisoned is a common association in reference to pre-forgiveness.

First movement: The impact of Injury

The offence, the offender had chained me with obsessions,

I felt tormented by the resounding questions:

How? Why?

I raged within in agony,

toxic pain consumed the insides of me.

Righteous anger fueled by the injustice,

No easing my burning soul, no solace.

Paralyzed feeling of being stuck in anguish,

With raw emotions that I could not extinguish.

So unwelcomed, an unfair burden,
Desire to lash out, the rage held in.

Until the turbulence became exhaustion,

wondering if this pain was my only option.

My life held back in this inward commotion,

My heart needed a real love solution.

I looked for a place to lay this crazy down.

Art lacerated the wound swollen with agony,

Expressing the emotions pent up inside of me.

To Let them out.

Bleed them out.

Out there.

In the art where I could unleash them.

Feel the relief as I released them,

where I could see them,

where I could free them,

and hear them,

and dance them,

and play them,

and say them.

The emotions released in my art
began to shape the story
that named the pain.

**Second Movement: Shifting in the Temenos**

In the artistic realm things began to shift and move.

Movement away from being imprisoned.

Movement after being held back.

Like warmth in a spring thaw.

Slowly the crystalized pain began to shift.

Images emerged from deep inside,
from my heart and mind to the outside,
opening space to breath.

Images in sound, word, line, pushed out where I could see them.

My hands could reach them.

Hold and move them.

Allowing revelation, new vision.

Loosening the chains.

As my obsession shifted from the offence and the offender
to my art.
In this artistic space I held command.

Emotions had space; I felt some control.

I had a portal out of the madness, (P4)

a door to a place where I could explore (P8)

a whole other world. (P1)

A holding place where I could view the depth of injury,

the pain of injustice.

I could leave it there,

Walk away for a time,

then come back to it at will.

When I felt ready

to do something with it,

to make something with it,

… that I could live with.

Create something that could be witnessed.

My experience took form.

Third movement: The Art-Work of Forgiveness

I took the broken shards,

Fragments of loss,

Shattered visions of the world,
and placed them in the sacred frame of art -
that holy space where a broken heart has a place
where the light can get at it.

Mind, body, and art moved
working through complexities
through anger; hurt; loss;
through the confusion;
the humiliation;
the injustice.

Working it through my heart
to find a place of peace in my soul.
The art realm gave the place and space
where I could relocate
the loving self that I long to be
and free myself from the risk of hatred
that had been imposed on me.

Art spoke truth back to me
as I dipped my brush into my subconscious wound,
into the universal wound,
caused by the chains of pain in the world.
Greater vision came as I soulfully created.
Art unfolded before my eyes
offering me merciful understanding
That quenched my thirsting soul.
My art began to reshape me
with a restored sense of love. (P 4,5, 6)

Art showed me images and visions
of myself,
of the offender,
of the human condition
of brokenness, and healing,
of us and them, me and we.

In the art place I discovered
**What** I feel, **how** I feel, and **why** I feel it
opening up dialogue with what art birthed
from the inner parts of my soul.
Art was transport that took me from the suffering helpless place
into a place of new vision.
Art drew from the deep, deep places.
It brought words from my soul,
A voice without words,
A voice beyond words.

Groanings from the depths,

Emotions pulsed through my body and discharged into the art.

Catharsis and containment in harmony.

Art held the chaos giving me space to
master the madness,
tame the tempest,
sooth the anguish.

At times in tiny bits, other times, big shifts.

Channeled through my commitment to love,

the prism of art caught the love that I struggled for
refracting it into color and form,

music and rhythm,

poetry and rhyme,

movement and dance,

shifting me out of stuck.

The art-voice birthed revelation.

Revealed truths that bled from my soul.

Art was the heart-place.

A spiritual space

that shielded precious truth.

A crucible where I could transform the pain
back into love.

Emotions in soul communication:

heart song,

heart work,

art work,

language of the heart,

language of the art,

art beat, heart beat.

Beating out the pain.

Beating out the anger.

Beating out the truth!

Allowing anger and pain the space they needed.

My art brought ears to my pain. (P8)

My story carefully told.

Received with compassion.

Unbound by truth
to be transformed
back into love,

breaking the chains that had bound me
to the evil that had harmed me. (P5)

Fourth Movement: Resolved to love
Art holds my heart goals until I am strong enough to live it. (P4, P8)
Resolved enough to give it.
To be able to let go, enough.
To be able to move on, enough.
To be able to forgive, enough.

Having had explored what happened to me,
To look at what might have happened to them, to him, to her.
The one who hurt me,
The one who abused me,
The one who wronged me.
To see that one again as human. (P1, P4, P5)
As one who, like me,
bears the scars of a broken world.
As one who has a story,
their own life-frame.
I explored that too.
Never to excuse but to,
understand, enough,
to forgive, enough,
To know …
… that that one didn’t originate that pain.
They were a **conduit**.

**I refuse to be a link in that chain!**

**Overture: Making Meaning**

**The Art of Forgiving**

The art of forgiveness is …

To explore the pain and anger at what I cannot change.

To express the change that I can make.

To move on to the future that I can create.

To create a future where I am the artist of my ways.

To be the artist who creates moments that are my story, my future, where I am free to love.

Where the motive to live in peace can transform the pain of injustice.

Where the light of love bends through me into my own freedom colors.

Free to let go.

Free to move on.

Free to love.

I will not allow a wrong against me to define me, I will allow it rather to refine me (P8).

I am the sculptor of my choices. (P2)

The singer of my own song.

I dance to the music I choose.

I am the author of the plot in this story. (P4)
The director of my mind’s eye.

Injustice, harm, injury do not decide who I am.

I do!

**Third phase: Image based exploration**

The painting process came from reflection of the accounts of the participants (phase one of the arts-based research), on the compiled poetry (phase two of the arts-based research) and on my own experience with art and forgiveness from my pilot research. The following is the explanation of my arts-based research involving acrylic painting on canvas that explored the question of how art helped in the process of forgiveness with images of the art in process.

I began to explore the content of the interviews visually using acrylic paints on canvas while contemplating how art accesses the inner, subconscious process as it was described by participants. I found myself reflecting on a segment of the compiled poem from the art-work of forgiveness as it presented a strong image. “Art spoke truth back to me as I dipped my brush into the subconscious wound, into the universal wound, caused by the chains of pain in the world”. As I reflected on this line of poetry, I played with illustrating it visually and somewhat literally by painting a brush dipping into the psyche while also staying open for discovery (figure 1). I painted intuitively while listening to music related to forgiveness from Ireland: Maire Brennan’s album: Perfect Time (1998). I explored how the art process, in this case a painting, can access the deep parts of the psyche. I realized as I viewed my unfolding art, that I had inadvertently created two points of submersion for the brush. I appreciated that it illustrated the
depth that art can reach. The brush of course also represented a poet’s pen, a musical instrument, dance movements etc. as they dip into the psyche.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 1. Title: Accessing the depths**

As the painting evolved, I worked with what came to symbolically represent ‘the mind’s eye’ in the subconscious. This resembled how the art was interacting with the emotional process of the participants: their minds eye, saw content and delivered it up through the art and into the art. (Figure 2) I worked with the eye to explore and capture the emotion and the content related to the participants interviews. The mind’s eye was going through the emotions described by the participants in their forgiveness journey viewing the harm and the injustice working it out in the art sending it up into the art, symbolically through the paintbrush. I played with that, allowing the eye to be pained, to be angry, to be sad, in turn. I realized this connected with the line of poetry from the overture: ‘I am the director of my mind’s eye’. I had not connected that at all as
I painted but it made sense when I reflected afterward. The image from my own subconscious accessed it before my conscious thoughts did. This seemed parallel to what the participants described in how the art captured symbolism that they later connected to their process. I felt forgiveness has to do with the mind’s eye and what it is focused on in the process.

Figure 2. Title: Details of the mind’s eye (process shots).

To forgive, the mind’s eye looks at the whole story emotionally as the psyche is ready: to see the damage done; to see the loss; feel the loss; too see the offender; see what they did; see how it felt. It reflected the content that emerged for participants at first as raw and chaotic as the mind’s eye is focused on the anger and pain related to the offender and the injury. At a certain point, ‘the mind’s eye’ begins to grow weary and looks for peace, for resolve as the injured party becomes exhausted by the intensity of emotion. At this stage the participants began to edit their art in response to the exhaustion and re-ingest it back into their psyche. As one participant shared, I didn’t want to keep singing that anger over and over in my song as it had become for her negative rumination. Making peaceful art for some soothed the mind’s need for solace. One participant painted white to manage the emotional turbulence while another worked with clay. In
my artwork, I allowed the eye to hold the grief in the final work as the turbulence calmed (figure 3 and 4).

My painting represented for me the ability of the art process to dip into the subconscious bringing information out to work on it for deeper comprehension. As I painted, I found myself frustrated frequently by the confusion of what I was trying to capture. (Figure 3.) I thought of the participant that said she used the ‘gift of frustration’ in her art process to figure out her truth and meaning. I could feel how frustration in the art acts as a servant as she had shared. I would ask myself ‘What does this art piece need? What is that is happening here?’ This reminded me of the poet participants who described editing repeatedly as they worked the content of their process through their heart and mind and soul to capture what they needed. They referred to it as ‘heart feeling’ or ‘heart work’. I had felt empathic connection to the participants on many levels in my poetry writing and now again in my painting. What I was trying to figure out was taking from. The confusion was part of the process. I was trying to make sense of what was coming up in my art-work as it related to art and forgiveness. I kept noticing that I was largely drawn to, and bothered by, what was beginning to look like a white egg in the center of the piece (figure 3). It needed something.
As I empathized with the processes described by the participants, I did not find resolution in my own painting for quite a while. I continued to use the frustration. I explored the idea of ‘personal subconscious wounds, the universal wounds, and the chains of pain in the world’ from the poetic compilation. I created the sphere of the mind or the head-like light that represented the individual wound, in contrast to the darker exterior of the universal wounds which was still a part of the submerged connection to humanity (figure 3). As I did, I reflected that working through our own pain and injuries connects us empathically to collective wounds and the experience of others. I felt that this was part of the exploration of forgiveness as participants shared that, in their art, they explored the humanity of the offender while still wanting to break
free from the pain that had been inflicted upon them by the offence. One poet described understanding attachment and connection to humanity as a spiritual revelation in his process.

I explored what it meant to forgive. I finally connected with the white egg or seed-like form that had been both beckoning and frustrating me as it sat near the center of the psychic face. I felt I needed to further capture the ‘in and out’ of the art-work as it related to the forgiveness process. I pondered: ‘art brought content out through the art making represented by the brush; it was worked on in an art piece; and it was then brought back in to psyche through reflection of what the art said to the art maker’. This process repeats. New insight from personal pain and consideration of human suffering was worked on in the art then brought back in. This process created new inner growth. The new growth was the ability to work through the emotional depths and to fish for meaning. While I had painted the fish early on in the process (figure 3), I had no idea why and it too had frustrated me. I then connected it to swimming in the depths where meaning is found. The outcome of the process was to find release and forgiveness through the resolve to heal and to love. Resolution of inner conflict was played out in the art. The process was motivated by wanting to heal, love, and forgive.

Still, I was a little confused by the image at bottom left of the piece (figure 4). It struck me later that although I had used chain imagery throughout the poem, I had not included it in the visual art. I later recognized that I had. The figure that appears to be vomiting on another figure on the lower left of the image, (figure 4) represented the chain of pain from the poem. It is the chain of infectious anger that propagates universal wounds. The image was communicating that the pain and anger caused by injustice can be infectious if it is not compassionately healed. If we do not tend to our wounds, we risk vomiting our anger onto others or by spreading the infection
of injustice through vengeance. There is also the risk of harming others through projection and sublimation of anger. This was captured in the image as the figure is vomiting on another figure. This spoke to me of how anger can be misdirected and therefore cause further injury to others.

Containing and processing anger productively was important to the participants. Art was helpful as they could expel their pain and anger into the art actively and safely sorting though it so as not to misdirect it in a harmful way. Participants shared how they could express their raw emotions and anger in their art to transform it into something that they could live with. The vomiting image spoke to me of how art was a place for them to expunge the pain.

![Figure 4. Final art piece including the new life of forgiveness Title: Love finds a way](image)

The final piece (figure 4) ‘Love finds a way’, was that of resolution like the fourth movement of the poem. The brush symbolically was what brought the psychic content from the
subconscious wound to the outer world to be worked on. When the participants could see and process their art it revealed content from the inside that had held truth and meaning. Results of processing their forgiveness in the ‘art-work’ was new growth from within. I finally recognized that the egg shape that had frustrated me was the seed of forgiveness (Figure 4). It was meant to be in the center of it all. It was the origin for new growth from the inside growing outward. I painted a seedling and roots shooting out from it representing the birth of new insights and revelations that assisted by the art in the forgiveness process. Forgiveness had taken seed through the participants’ efforts in their ‘art-work’ process and in their motivation to heal and to maintain an identity of being a loving person through a reflective connection with the offender and the human condition. They had planted the seed, worked on it, and it was growing through their efforts, intentions, diligence, spirituality, and insight. This was the peace restoring resolve of the process. The new life planted through forgiveness. It was cultivated growth.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The results of this study addressed the question of how using art effected the participants process of forgiving. The participant’s accounts indicated that for them art was helpful in many ways that enriched the forgiveness process in a facilitative way. The overarching theme of how the arts helped was that the art offered a place of exploration in an alternate realm to work on the process of forgiveness that brought the interior emotional psychological matter out into a space that offered tangible access to be worked with. Working with the art provided a framework with sensory symbolic access to the participants’ inner felt experience. This allowed for emotional release and tangible reflection to work through the emotional impact of the offence, to discover truth, hold truth, and make meaning from what had happened to them. This helped to facilitate forgiveness toward the offender.

I was curious to explore how art could enrich the forgiveness process by providing a holding place to work through the intense emotions and complexities involved in confronting an offence through artistic tangibles. This was based on my experience of using art myself in self-reflection, in facilitating others in art making for self-reflection, and from discourse in expressive arts literature. This discussion will place the findings from this research into theoretical models of forgiveness and will align them with expressive arts theory and understanding to establish their merit within the convergence of these two important areas of study.

Theoretical backdrop for discussion

While this study is focused on the reflective recall of organic processes of forgiveness using the arts and not on clinical process, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) clinical model of
forgiveness will be referred to throughout this discussion to shed academic insight on the findings from a perspective of a forgiveness process model. Enright and Fitzgibbons’ model is a culmination of their work on forgiveness over the last decades and is based on compiled findings from forgiveness research. The participants’ processes of using art will be examined using this model. This will illuminate how the art was helpful by parsing the study findings through this psychological forgiveness theory. The Enright/Fitzgibbons model was chosen as it is a respected model that is referred to frequently in the literature on forgiveness and is backed empirically through research. The model has identified four phases that encompass 20 sub-units. The four phases are: the Uncovering Phase (8 units); the Decision Phase (3 units); the Work Phase (4 units); and the Deepening Phase (5 units). Discussion based on this process model of forgiveness will provide an enriched understanding of what art has contributed to the process of forgiving and where within this established model of forgiveness art was found to be salient.

To add further depth to this discussion, Tutu and Tutu’s fourfold path of forgiveness (2014) will also be included in the analysis of the interviews for further triangulation of the results. Tutu and Tutu’s process model was chosen as it takes a practical perspective in context to the spiritual and social practice of forgiveness and looks at creative methods for working through forgiveness.

There are some correlations of understanding between these two forgiveness models, yet each has a slightly different emphasis and intention in its inclusion in this study discussion. Enright and Fitzgibbons’ work (2015) provides a clinical and academic analysis whereas Tutu and Tutu’s (2014) work provides an approachable spiritual perspective of the process of forgiving. Both have a distinct four-phase observation of forgiveness and each offers unique
well formulated insight into the phenomenological process of forgiving. Tutu and Tutu defined their four phases as: Telling the Story; Naming the Hurt; Granting Forgiveness; and Renewing or Releasing the Relationship.

Tutu and Tutu’s (2014) process model was based on the reflective experience of Tutu in response to those who worked through profound forgiveness themselves and on their experience and involvement with the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa as well as involvement in places such as Northern Ireland and Rwanda. The book is co-authored by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho who, like her father, was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church. Their process model offers personal, individual, spiritual and social insights of forgiveness. Tutu and Tutu’s theory could be perceived as biased to the Christian faith although it does not speak directly to it, rather it takes an inclusive spiritual approach. Their approach examined forgiveness from varying perspectives including both writer’s personal stories of forgiveness, specific case studies of forgiveness, and was informed by social phenomenon such as racism, oppression, and social healing processes, in particular South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation process.

Theoretical and philosophical insights from expressive arts literature will also be brought into this discussion to provide further insight and context as to how the arts offer unique value to the forgiveness process. In addition, inclusion of expressive art theories such as Natalie Rogers humanistic expressive arts theory (Rogers, 1993; 1999), Shaun McNiff’s perspectives on expressive arts in therapy and spirituality (McNiff, 2004; 2009), Pat Allen’s art as a way of knowing (1995) and theoretical insights from Steven and Ellen Levine and Paulo Knill’s work (Levine & Levine, 1999; Levine, 2003; Knill, Levine & Levine, 2005) will be incorporated into
this discussion. These theories give key insights into how the arts were involved in the forgiveness process and provide a deeper understanding of the role of expressive arts in the convergent phenomena. This discussion will also refer to important studies from the literature review and will make connections with the results from my pilot study as represented in the introduction.

**Forgiveness: an idiosyncratic process**

The process and the felt outcome of forgiveness is highly variable and idiosyncratic. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) have indicated that forgiveness is a continuum rather than an ‘all or none’ phenomenon. That forgiveness is a continuum was apparent in the stories of forgiveness from the participants. All participants spoke of forgiveness in terms of letting go of caustic anger and resentment, and to varying extents, evaluated the progress of their forgiveness as evidenced by spending less and less time and energy thinking about the offender and offence. For some, forgiveness was a decision that was made and pursued as a goal, for others forgiveness ‘happened to happen’ as one participant worded it, as a result of her efforts in psychological, emotional, and artistic reflection undertaken in the process of healing. This is to say that art was helpful in the initial process of exploration of injury regardless of whether forgiveness was the motive in art making or not and whether or not forgiveness was even a consideration. For most participants, the cathartic release facilitated by the arts of emotional intensity related to the injury was important; for others the primary focus was a decision to soothe anger through art making due to the awareness of the destruction anger could cause if anger took over. But regardless of the priority of the motive to forgive, or how the anger was approached, art was a place of searching for and creating inner peace.
There are variables in forgiveness depending on the person who is forgiving, the pre-offence relationship (if any) with the one whom they are forgiving, and what the offences were that had been committed. In this study offenders included partners, family members, and for a couple of them, the offender was a complete stranger. Most participants were addressing situations of one main offender being forgiven; for others there was more than one. In context to the wrong doer, the end result of forgiveness was being able to recognize the offender as a fellow human being or a ‘child of God’ as two of the participants described it. For others it was a deep sense of wishing the best for the offender including hoping they would be restored from their hurtful ways. For some participants, reconciliation was sought or hoped for. For most a relationship was no longer viable or never existed as the offender was a stranger. These factors contributed to each journey being unique.

In this study, a criterion of inclusion was that the process of forgiveness involved a life impacting offence or wrongdoing. The extent of the injury is a highly impacting variant in the process. A commonality in this study was that all participants forgave someone for something that effected their lives profoundly, thus each participant’s process was one that required much time and energy due to the life impacting ramifications of the wrong doing by the offender(s). Yet, forgiving a stranger who committed murder of a family member is going to be widely different from forgiving a parent who was abusive during childhood, or forgiving someone with whom one have had a close relationship that involved deeply hurtful patterns. These variants also create distinctions in each account of forgiveness.

The accounts of the participants showed the extent that each process was unique. While there are commonalities in the processes shared, the unfolding of forgiveness was multivariant.
This factor makes the use of art compelling in the process of forgiving. Art is the offspring of creativity and has endless variations of expression and can therefore be adapted to the variants in the process. The use of art in self-reflection and in understanding is a process of discovery. It is an interaction of creative Poiesis (from ancient Greek meaning ‘bringing or leading into being’) between the artist and the art form (Whitehead, 2003) and cannot be prescribed. Art, distinct from craft, is an expression that is unique to the artist. Even in the use of art for therapy the process and outcome are unknown. McNiff (2004) stated concerning art therapy: “I might carefully plan the materials we are going to use or how our time is structured, but the distinct features of the process cannot be predicted: this is what most thoroughly distinguishes the healing qualities of the studio from medical science” (p. 20). Art offers each person an idiosyncratic manifestation of what is needed to express themselves and to share what they need to share in a way that feels authentic. Just as each process of forgiveness unfolds uniquely, so does the manifestation of the art encounter.

Moreover, the many modalities of art this study included – music, poetry, visual art, drama etc. demonstrated the spectrum of available expression the arts offer in the forgiveness process. The results of this study demonstrate how some the participants found unique expression involving the differing modalities depending on their need at the time such as the participant who first expressed in visual arts then moved on to sound and music, or the participant who described her writing as having color and visual experience for her. The interplay of artistic expression was described as by Natalie Rogers (1993) as ‘creative connection’ or ‘total expression’ by Shaun McNiff (2004). According to Levine and Levine, it is “rooted in the possibilities of sensory expression originating in lived bodily experience” and “the
unity of the imagination as a creative source of meaning” (1999, p.11). As there are many variables in the process of forgiveness, so too are there endless modalities of expression in the realm of art.

**Forgiveness as coping, skill, and moral practice and how the arts helped.** Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) named three qualities of what forgiveness incudes from a psychological perspective. They postulated that forgiveness can be viewed as a skill, a coping strategy, and “qualities of a moral virtue” (p. 38). Most participants understood forgiveness as being a way to cope with what had happened to them, however all three qualities of forgiveness were implied to varying degrees in the participants’ reflections.

For the participant who had spent over 30 years reflecting on what it meant to forgive in the aftermath of the murder of her child, forgiveness meant acting first out of love while still addressing the importance of justice, thus it was a moral virtue. She also shared that in her own desire to forgive, she was preventing herself from being consumed by the pain of the loss of her child while holding on to a sense of sanity thus indicating that forgiveness was a means to cope. She described that art was a focus for her in coping and maintaining her sanity. She also shared how art helped in rechanneling her passion and maintaining her resolve to put love before justice, or unhealthy anger. She stated further that maintaining her own sense of sanity was a way to survive and to continue to be present for the rest of her family. She shared throughout the interview the enormity of difficulty involved in the process of forgiving on many levels including the difficulties of forgiving the legal system for the pain caused to herself and her family thus implying that forgiveness was also a skill to be practiced and mastered. Her guiding principle of putting love first was a moral quality and was expressed in her use of art to maintain
inner peace by reflecting on forgiveness and love. Making art helped her to practice the skill of forgiveness. In her account of what it meant to forgive, the art was a part of all three qualities of forgiveness: virtue, skill, and coping.

While the ability to cope with the pain of the injury was a primary motivator for all participants, the art making process over time helped to develop the skills required to forgive by providing an active focus to develop skills through purposeful reflection which in turn strengthened coping. That art is tangibly active was also helpful. Painting, working clay, editing poetry, memorizing poetry and rehearsing performances are all ways that participants described actively processing and practicing the skills of forgiving thus providing a tangible focus. This is exemplified in the participant who referred to working in clay to practice patience and calming, or the poetry writer who focused on understanding the offender by writing from his perspective. The art also helped develop a stronger sense of spiritual development and morality for several as they reflected in their art making on the meaningfulness of the process and considered their own identity as a moral person. Several participants spoke to the spiritual growth that they felt in the process of forgiving that was realized in art making and in the art itself. The effect of the injury and response to the offender was played out in the art realm for participants to recoup a sense of identity oriented toward love and peace rather than the identity as a victim or one that reacts with bitterness or anger for a prolonged period. In this sense, the goal was virtue.

Art as Place

In the accounts shared each spoke of art as providing a place and an alternate realm that both externalized the internal process and provided tangible interaction to be able to work with the inner emotional and cognitive contents of the participants’ hearts and minds. The space and
place that art provided could be picked up during times of readiness for reflection or packed up
during periods when life demanded it. That the art was there for them when they needed it was
very salient to using art in the process. The value of having an externalized place for
emotional/cognitive exploration was directly, or indirectly, spoken about in each account. While
both Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) and Tutu and Tutu’s (2014) process models recommended
journaling, the arts added a creative, imaginative component to reflecting on the process.

The creative realm of art making as a place of transformation and sacred play is
recognized by many artists and expressive art therapists. This is not necessarily a reference to
studio space but rather to the realm of art making itself. The place of creativity and
improvisation is referred to as temenos, the ancient Greek word meaning ‘magic circle’
(Nachmanovitch, 1990; McNiff, 2004). Nachmanovitch shared that temenos is a sacred space
“in which extraordinary events are free to occur” (p.75). He went on to say, “My studio, or
whatever space I work in, is a laboratory in which I experiment with my own consciousness” (p.
75). In provision of a creative space for reflection McNiff (2004) referred to a place where
transformation can happen: “Whatever the physical space may be, I try to make it into a temenos,
a sacred place that acts as a vessel of transformation” (p.30).

Paulo Knill also spoke of this type of creative space in describing his architecture of a
session for expressive arts exploration (Knill, Levine and Levine, 2005). Entering into the
imaginal state or art space allows creativity to help increase ‘range of play’ as he explained it, or
to find new ways of seeing and framing a problem. The idea is that you enter into an imaginal
state and creative space that acts as a sort of artistic laboratory to explore new options through
the arts which in turn offers new interpretive approaches to the problem. “The alternative world
experience has two sources that enter the discourse of interpretation. One is the symbolic content of imagination, and the other is an affective sensory experience” (p. 83). Knill spoke of the creative space, or temenos, in the context of expressive therapies as being framed by an entrance and an exit. He stated, “In the entrance the client leaves the troubled logic of daily life and enters the logic of imagination. At the exit, we are challenged with the differences as a confrontation” (p. 83). The process described by Knill is facilitated in decentering away from the mindset of daily life to that of the imaginative artistic realm. Although Knill was referring to the creative holding place in therapy, the ability to enter and exit the place of creative work in processing forgiveness is what participants found so helpful. The art space was there for them. It could be ‘the portal out of madness’ or it could open ‘the door to explore’ or ‘a whole other world’ as they worded it. It was there as their temenos when they needed it. They could leave it when they wanted or needed to, then come back to it as readiness dictated.

Nachmanovitch (1990), McNiff (2004) and Knill (2005) referred here to the important elements of art making and healing described by the participants: the art was a place to experiment with consciousness and awareness; it provided symbolic representation of their inner world; and it provided a sensory or tangible experience where transformation could happen that in turn, created a shift in their inner world. It was in this space that the contents of the heart, mind, and subconscious process as it related to the offence could be puzzled with and where forgiveness could be experimented with in the art process. The pain, the anger, the confusion, and the complex matter of forgiving could find its place to be seen, heard or felt, and to be experienced in a healing way that allowed the forgiver some control over it. Ellen Levine (2003), said of the healing place of art: “Often the arts have played a significant role in the repair
of the world by providing a container for pain and suffering” (p. 15). Art is this container that the participants referred to in their accounts as the place where their forgiveness transformation was supported and held as the artist and the art worked on it together.

The importance of this holding place is that the raw emotions experienced from a grave injury or injustice have a place to be channeled that offers both catharsis and containment that is accessible. Because inflicted injury ignites powerful emotions, the need to express and release them can be intense. The intensity is proportionate to the depth of pain and loss inflicted by the offence and can be a factor of the relationship with the offender if the offense was perpetrated by someone who had been close. Managing the pain is difficult and sharing it effectively can be risky. Tutu and Tutu (2014) spoke to the importance of sharing the story to restore dignity to the one who has suffered the offense, yet conventional ways of sharing do not always feel safe or straightforward right away. Working with art allows a place of experimentation and safe containment. Tutu and Tutu extoled, “Even if intellectually I know that it is through my storytelling I will begin to heal from trauma, it is not always easy emotionally to take the first step. It can be a risky endeavor. There is the risk of being hurt again, of not being believed, of not being affirmed” (2014 p. 78). The art place or temenos is safe because it is contained and managed by the art maker. As one participant said in reference to the art realm: ‘only you have the key to that door’. Through art making the story can be explored in advance of sharing it with others if that is what the injured party needs.

**Releasing and Sorting: working through forgiveness artistically**

Releasing emotions and sorting through what happened after an offence were first steps described by many of the participants as they explored the story of what happened within the art
process. The art making helped to facilitate the understanding of their own story. Tutu and Tutu (2014) shared that when considering forgiveness after an injury, key questions come up in working through the process: “What is it you need to forgive? What happened to cause your pain? How have you been hurt? Whatever it may be, whatever has been broken or lost, can only be repaired and found again by telling the story of what happened” (p. 71). Sharing the story is the first step in Tutu and Tutu’s fourfold path to forgiveness. For many reasons however a story of being wronged may be held in fragments. Trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk (2014) stated that memories are frequently disorganized immediately following a traumatizing event as it is typical to be ‘dumbfounded by terror’ (p.195). He also explains, those who have been abused as children have the most difficulty as ‘their memories arrived as images, physical sensations, and intense emotions (p. 196). Van der Kolk shared that the memories may be dissociated: “The different sensations that entered the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography” (2014, p. 196). It requires the areas of the brain that can provide a sense of time and perspective as well as integrating “images, sounds, and sensations of trauma into a coherent story” all to stay on line to “integrate their traumatic memories as belonging to the past” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 221-222).

Working through traumatic fragments of her story to determine what her forgiveness involved was described by one participant. Part of her process was to understand the truth of what the offenders had done in the past so that she could forgive them in the present. For her, and for other participants, art was helpful in processing the traumatic or highly emotional components and events of forgiving. Because the arts are sensory, they can provide a more whole brain experience in processing difficult memories and making sense of them or form a
cohesive self-narrative that is part of the forgiveness process. Hass-Cohen and Findlay stated: “Autobiographical memories are generally organized as a series of personal episodes that are tied together with temporal, visual, and spatial associations” (2015, p. 131). Thus, in working through the story with art there is an opportunity to bring the fragments from episodes in time together by playing with them in the creative place that involves a sensorial experience. The tangibility of art can help to piece the story together and to create understanding of one’s own psychic material concerning what had happened and the resulting emotional impact.

The steps of ‘sharing the story’ and ‘naming the hurt’ in Tutu and Tutu’s (2014) fourfold path are a parallel process in many ways to Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) clinical model in the ‘Uncovering’ phase. This phase involves working through various emotional, and cognitive aspects concerning the events of what happened to cause the injury. This relates to what the participants in this study did through releasing and sorting and exploring in the art. The ‘Uncovering Phase’ deals with exploring the emotional impact of what happened, much of which may at first be confounded in the subconscious. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) described for example the possibility that anger can be either repressed or displaced after abuse and injury. This was recognized by some of the participants who were helped by the imagery in their art to recognized that they had a right to be angry, and that what happened was not their fault.

Processing anger and resentment is an important part of the process of forgiving (Enright, 2001, 2015; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015).

As previously stated, the release and containment of the emotions into art can access subconscious material resulting from the injury, particularly when the injury is traumatic and occurred in childhood. When the confusing emotions are released into the art it provides
catharsis held within a safe containment. The art then holds the emotional content in the temenos to be sorted through or processed. Part of the sorting and processing for some participants involved the validation of their anger as they were able to express it, sit with it, and review it in their art making, in some cases making the nature of the injustice clearer. The temenos provided the time and place for the participants to focus on components of what happened and allowed them space to decide what to do with their angry feelings and how they wanted to resolve them.

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) formulated a definition of what it means to forgive for clinical purposes that captures the importance of validation of anger by acknowledging that a victim has a right to be angry and resentful when they are wronged.

People, on rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right) and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the wrongful act or acts, has no right) (p.32).

Before abandoning the right to be resentful however, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) explained that it is helpful to explore the right to be angry as it may not be recognized at first. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) stated, “Denial, particularly the denial of anger, is a common defense seen in (forgiveness) therapy” (p.62). They expanded, stating that when “psychological defenses begin to break down, there is a tendency for the person to become angry, or more angry than before” (p. 63). They stated that the anger may last for months or years. Understanding angry emotions is helpful in providing clarity around what it is that the offender has done and what they are being forgiven for. Tutu and Tutu (2014) shared that: “After we have told the facts
of what happened, we must face our feelings. We are each hurt in our own unique ways, and when we give voice to this pain, we begin to heal it” (p. 95).

Participants described that art was a way to explore the impact of the story, particularly when the impact defied articulation in ordinary words. For these participants, art offered a form of expression that transcended the limitations of words while effectively holding and sharing emotions and meaning. Images, sound, and music or the poetic use of language provided symbolic and metaphorically descriptive expression that helped access emotions more effectively and safely than conversational sharing. Whether a participant used visual art, music, sound, imagery, poetry or poetic performance, or combinations of art forms, they had ways other than conversation to express their story.

A cryptic artistic sharing of the story is how some of the participants found safety in telling their story and naming their hurt. They could tell their story clearly and emotionally and have it witnessed compassionately without giving away details that they did not feel ready to share. This was described as restorative as it could help ease the pain and felt sense of isolation as they sorted through the injury. Having a means to share the pain offers relief and begins the healing. Tutu and Tutu (2014) spoke to the significance of telling the story and naming the hurt: “Telling the story is how we get our dignity back after we have been harmed. It is how we begin to take back what was taken from us, and how we begin to understand and make meaning out of our hurting” (p. 71). Art is helpful in making this sharing process safe, especially in the early stages after an offence when shock and fragmented memories create inner confusion.

Art can provide safe exploration and can be helpful on many levels in any healing process. Rogers, (1999) a person-centered expressive arts therapist and daughter of Carl Rogers
used humanistic principles in working with the expressive arts for healing. She believed that all people have a natural ability to be creative and that engaging in the creative process is healing. Rogers (1999) identified the following reasons that expressive arts help: “they provide access to feelings; they help in exploring unconscious material; they provide a release of energy; they help in gaining insight and solving problems; and in “discovering intuitive, mythological, and spiritual dimensions of the self” (p. 96). What Rogers forwarded as the benefits of expressive arts reflection were corroborated by the participants’ accounts in relating to how art helped in the process of forgiving. Similar to Rogers, participants identified that art helped with accessing emotions and unconscious material, provided release and catharsis, helped with sorting and problem solving, and helped explore spiritual meaning within their process of forgiving.

Art helped with both expressing emotions vividly or by soothing emotions and calming them. Working through emotions was instrumental in the letting go of unhealthy anger and resentment for the participants—a goal and motivation shared by all of them. To be able to effectively let go of the emotions, their emotions needed to be expressed, processed, actualized, understood, validated, and perhaps even tamed. Externalizing emotions into the art was described by participants as a release, an exhale, and a way to get the feelings from the inside to the outside, a way of expressing them or shedding them as one participant said. The capacity of art to externalize painful emotions and to hold them on the outside in the artform is different than verbal expression. This was evident in the account of participants who described craving the art release. Participants who felt a compulsion to release emotions through their art described being soothed by art making or even loving the art afterward as in some way it had organized something emotionally that needed to be solved in some way.
How much relief was actually achieved was on a continuum and was affected greatly by the degree of the offence and the impact it had in terms of loss for the participant. Understandably forgiveness took years, even decades for some of the participants who were working through deeply painful issues related to the offence and the offender. Regardless of the how much time was needed, the art provided a place where anger could be worked through in a productive, rather than a destructive way. The art allowed participants some control as to how to express anger and experience validation in a helpful way. One participant who ‘craved’ painting out her anger described going from expressing the anger into being absorbed in the art process. The expression of anger was then transformed into being soothed within the art making process. She described feeling ‘love’ for the painting that she created to express her anger. That the art could hold the anger, express the anger, and ultimately transform the anger is one of the poignant findings of this study. Participants described that having a place to take their anger, their hurt, and their ‘craziness’ was of extreme value to them in working through it. Expressing passionate emotions and finding some way to sooth, resolve or process them was salient in the process of forgiveness.

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) described various emotionally difficult components people go through in forgiving such as confronting anger and shame, awareness of “obsessional thinking or preoccupation with the offender” (p.65), comparing themselves to the offender, “facing permanent change” as a result of the offence (p. 66), impact on world view, and the resulting emotional exhaustion. Participants indicated that processing the confusing emotions was helped by the art and for some, with the support of others. Concerning the capacity of the art to help with confusing emotions McNiff (2004) stated: “The art process is intuitive,
labyrinthine, and welcoming of uncertainties, risks, and dark places” (p. 29). Support came from caring others, religious values, and from the art itself. Looking at the darker unconscious material helped in revealing truths that needed to be addressed in the process of forgiving. Transformation from the raw anger felt at the onset happened as participants worked through the depths of their own experiences in the art to transform the raw emotions into something that they could live with. For the participants releasing, then sorting emotions, and memory content happened in the crucible of the temenos where they were able to transform complex, difficult feelings into forgiveness.

**Art and forgiveness: transformation**

Participants spoke consistently of how art helped them to express and identify their emotions in order to understand how they felt about the offender and the offence and to explore the impact of what happened. Working through a process of forgiving had significantly more positive psychological outcomes in contrast to interventions that help in simply coming to a decision to forgive which showed no positive effect on mental health (Enright and Baskin, 2004). The meta-analysis by Wade et al. (2014) revealed the efficacy of forgiveness process model interventions over other treatment modalities or no treatment in improving anxiety and symptoms of depression increased for those who experienced more severe offences. This meta-analysis also showed that the longer the forgiveness treatment, the more robust the outcomes for improved mental health measures. This speaks to the importance of effectively and patiently working through salient pieces of the forgiveness process and of course that forgiveness does positively affect mental health.
The results of this study revealed that art contributed to transformation by accessing the subconscious and the complex emotional content of forgiveness in a deeply reflective process. Art was described as an alternate way of expressing and understanding anger, pain and other difficult emotions that were part of the forgiveness process all of which are seen as important passages in forgiving. All the participants shared a process that spanned considerable time, from months to decades, depending on the offence. This is not to say that levels of forgiveness were not reached earlier on, rather it speaks again to the idiosyncratic experience of the process and that it involves deep reflection.

Murphy (2005) who cautioned against ‘hasty forgiveness’ spoke to the importance of acknowledging healthy anger and even vindictiveness and resentment stating that these feelings are not the same as cruelty or malice and therefore should be expressed and heard. Murphy stated: “We should recognize that victims deserve to have their vindictive passions to some degree validated. Even if these passions should generally not be the last word, they have a legitimate claim to be the first word” (2005, p.39). While this is a valid observation, the strength of these emotions after a grave injury can be overwhelming, thus the need for safe containment. The safety felt in the containment of the art provided for participants a place that they could release and express their raw, unedited, unfiltered emotions while at the same time not being overwhelmed by them.

Murphy’s perspective is recognized in Enright and Fitzgibbons’ (2015) definition of forgiveness in that it states that an injured party has the right to ‘resentment and related responses’ (p. 32). Validation of anger is a transformative component of forgiveness as it legitimizes the fact that a wrong has been committed. Enright (2001) stated, “When it is an
immediate reaction to injustice, anger is normal and healthy, and no-one should feel guilty about experiencing it” (p.47). Reflection on the pain and anger can call out what the offender did as indelibly wrong while at the same time helping to protect the injured one from further injury by naming the injustice. Enright (2001) addressed defenses such as denial that are commonly used to avoid confronting the pain of injustice: “Temporary denial can be healthy, but pretending that nothing happened when something has or that you haven’t been hurt when you have is unhealthy (p. 95). Anger that was processed by the participants in their art making helped some participants with boundary setting and future decisions concerning the offender. Although they had forgiven them, some participants shared that they discontinued their relationship with the offender for emotional self-protection. Others in their process of understanding their anger, established accountability for the wrong done by determining that what happened was not their fault. This determination helped with releasing anger. Enright and Fitzgibbons addressed this recognition stating: “forgiveness takes place in the context of rationally determining that unfairness occurred” (2015, p. 63). This acknowledgement indicates that it was an injustice that was experienced rather than a misunderstanding, or that what was done was justifiable or excusable.

As previously stated, art was described as being very helpful in finding a place to express and release anger. The participant that said that her anger attached to the sound in her soundscape spoke to the need for that anger to be heard. She described her art experience as something angry, ‘but at the same time, that is part of forgiveness’. Productive anger is healthy and normal and is part of the transformative experience when it is processed (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2015). Healing comes from confronting and working through anger rather than
denying, displacing, or repressing it (Enright, 2001). Much of the transformation that happened in the art, and in the forgiveness for the participants in this study was based on recognizing, releasing and/or soothing anger in images, poetic expression, sound or music. Forgiveness for these participants was about releasing unhealthy, destructive anger rather than denying robust healthy anger.

McNiff (2004) emphasized, “Creativity engages breaking points and fashions fresh life from them. The big transformations are rarely planned and arrive in their own time, often contradicting the artist’s intention” (p.32). Transformation described by participants happened in their courage to face the emotional content related to the injury and engaging with it in the art. The transformation was described as liberating and resulted in varying levels of autonomy and freedom from the offender or the offense. Several participants described transformation from feeling like a victim. The transformation through art and forgiveness helped participants to move on, and to have more mastery over their future. Transformation happened in expression of authentic feelings in the art enabling participants to work through the complexities of deciding what to do with their feelings through interaction with their art. Transformation also came by practicing patience in the artform, editing, reforming, or rehearsing their art, thereby coming to a place of increased empowerment through self-definition and autonomy in relation to the offender and the impact of the offence.

Truth revealed and concealed in art

An unexpected result of this study was the importance of art in both revealing and/or concealing the truth and how that helped the process of forgiving. Tutu and Tutu (2014) stated, “The truth prevents us from pretending that things that happened did not happen. How we begin
is by first letting the truth be heard in all its rawness, in all its ugliness, and all its messiness” (p. 74). They were addressing the truth component of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in bridging South Africa’s past with South Africa’s future (Tutu and Tutu, 2014).

Exploring truth was also worked on in the art process by the participants. As one participant said, “My paintings aren’t pretty paintings. They are not meant to please. They are meant to get at the truth. What is the truth and how do I access it? The art was the way of doing that.” This participant was exploring truth in context to abuse in her childhood and from an ex-partner. In exploring the truth, art revealed aspects of the abuse over time and helped her to connect with events from the past with enlightenment from the present. The day to day survival and ordinary events in life had pushed the details and significance of how she was harmed down into her subconscious and art had helped to retrieve them.

Other participants highlighted that art helped them to understand the indisputable wrongness of the offence. In instances where offences were a pattern and the relational dynamics were complex, the forgiveness process included a search for culpability in the confusion. Statements such as ‘I realized that it was not my fault’ were made as a revelation arising from a process of mental and artistic reflection. Art making was helpful in working through the complicating factors involved in getting at the truth and comprehension of what it was that happened and the specifics of what was harmful and hurtful. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) addressed the importance of recognizing a wrong has been done in their uncovering phase. When addressing forgiveness from a clinical perspective the determination of wrongness is first explored before forgiveness can even be considered by a person who “may be in denial about the offense or the emotional turmoil that he or she is experiencing” (p. 61). Not
recognizing a wrong can be due to normalizing abuse as a child, or in the confusion of incidents surrounding harmful behavior. Working through the process in art can uncover details and emotions that help in the process of uncovering the truth of what happened and the impact that it has had emotionally and in other ways. For some of the participants the ability of art to reach into the subconscious and memory in a unique way was part of discovering and authenticating how they had internalized events from the past.

Looking at it philosophically Steven Levine (Knill, Levine & Levine, 2005) described truth revelation in art: “In the face of the work, it is as if I see the world for the first time - that is, I sense it in its truth. In the light of this truth I myself appear differently and the possibilities for action of which I am capable become laid out before me (p. 28). This comes up in expressive arts therapy as a process of artistic improvisation. Allowing the story to play out in the art enables a process of truthful discovery. It allows for subjective experience to take tangible form to allow for further understanding. Regarding the process of imaginative play in art McNiff stated: “The process generally requires us to relax the self and move out of the way so that the imagination can treat itself within the context of its innate wisdom” (McNiff, 2004 p. 88). The elements and effects of the offence can be revealed in the artwork and can be sorted into a narrative that explains the emotional sublimation or upheaval as the extent of the injury is explored. As Allen (1995) wrote about the process of creating art, “You will be able to see the contents of mind, in images where previously you may have had only vague feelings” (p.59)

Philosopher John Dewey (1984) explained art as language: “Because objects of art are expressive, they are a language. Rather they are many languages” (p 213). Dewy explained how
the language of art helps the communication of the self, to the self, in observation and interaction with the art. It was the unique language of the arts that helped participants to understand and make sense of their experience and their emotions. Dewey (1984) went on: “Language involves what logicians call a triadic relation. There is the speaker, the thing said, and the one spoken to” (p. 214). According to Dewey the artist is the speaker and the art is the language used. He describes that this triadic communication exists even when an artist works in solitude. Dewey posited that the artist vicariously becomes the receiving audience and interprets his own work. The process of creativity undertaken by participants in working through forgiveness can thus be understood as working in an artistic language which involves a speaker and a hearer – the artist/forgiver being both. The artist produces the art. The art is the language that then exists on the outside. The forgiver then engages in a form of ongoing dialogue between the creative content brought up in the art by the artist, and the reflective self that sits with the art. Dewey (1984) referenced the artist Matisse as saying that a completed piece of art is like new-born child that must be understood by the artist in living with it.

This sentiment was shared by the participants, who referenced ‘birthing’ the art, thus bringing the inside world to the outside in its own state of truth and meaning. Understanding the art for the truth and meaning it holds also included dialoguing or interacting with the completed art either through reflection, or rehearsing to ingest the meaning and truth held in the art. According to Allen (1995), “The image needs to be known, seen fully with loving attention and encouraged to speak, treated as you would treat an ambassador from a different world. Then it will develop and reveal itself according to its own logic” (p.60).
Dialoguing with image and metaphor is a concept familiar to expressive arts therapists. McNiff (2004) spoke of personification of images for dialogue in developing deeper self-understanding and healing. “Because images do spring out from inner lives, personifying allows us to be able to dialogue with feelings and concerns that are not easily accessible to conventional thought (p. 91). In sitting with the art and dialoguing with it, truth emerges in the discourse of art making, the art being created or ‘birthed’ as its own entity, and in hearing the art’s revelation. This was evident in the accounts of the participants that discovered truths in their art that helped them to feel calmed or understood by their own creation. As said by one participant who was working through multiple offences and trauma: “When you embrace the art materials, they respond to you. It’s never preplanned.” She described being focused on her intention of forgiveness as she worked in interaction with the art: “In forgiveness and art, you develop a new focus in life. It was very much on my mind as I was interacting with the materials.”

Allen (1995), speaks to intention in art making as facilitating the process of knowing: “This is the spiritual aspect of art making. Your intention can be simply to have the courage to experiment, or it can be wanting to learn about a problem you are facing” (p. 16). In the case of the participants in this study, their intention was to work though the difficulties of being harmed by another person. For many, the intention was, or became, the process of forgiving. With their intention in mind, participants could work on understanding various aspects of truth as they arose in the art process.

Another unexpected finding in this study was the significance of art in concealing truths for the forgivers. In a form of cryptic sharing, art allows for a nuanced language and emotional expression that provides a rich depth of understanding and interpretation that takes on its own
form. The symbolic or metaphorical representation of a truth within the art can hold deep meaning for the artist, yet it may not be obvious to someone else. The artist can then decide if they would like to share the meaning with others, or not. The truth sits within the art in full expression to the artist, yet those that see or hear it may not recognize it to its full extent. The participant who purposefully hid her scriptural inspiration for forgiveness in her work did not feel that she wanted to share that with others who may judge her. She described that hiding Bible verses underneath layers of paint was inspiring and made the art soothing. She knew that Biblical verses and her truth were there behind the paint in her artwork yet no-one else did unless she chose to tell them. Another participant did not want her family to know the nature of the offense, yet she could explore it in her stylized painting without others knowing what it was.

This also was the case for a participant who did not want to draw attention to the offence or the offender openly as reconciliation was presently being worked through. It was important to guise the offense and protect the identity of the offender while still being able to perform the art. This participant described feeling very alone in working through the injury, yet in performing described ‘having ears to my pain’. This was accomplished without sharing details. The cryptic potential of art, or the ability of the art to conceal truths allowed the truths to be held for the forgiver as the representation of their truth and was therefore significant in their healing process. Art speaks loudly but it does not name names. This quality of art is unique; it can safely hold truth allowing complete emotional honesty without overexposing the artist.

**Reflections on forgiveness: reframing the offender**

Empathy, or even compassion, for the offender is the most courageous step in forgiveness. It is also one of the more transformative aspects of forgiveness in that it allows the
victim to view the offender as a human being with their own story, hardships, faults and even virtues. Enright and Fitzgibbons’ (2015) work phase of forgiveness is the deep phase of forgiveness in that it involves developing more perspective of the offender. Understandably, this can be extremely difficult depending on the nature of the offence. Art was helpful in this phase as described by several participants. Art can help with empathy most powerfully as it is an imaginal experience offering the ability to explore other perspectives by working imaginatively, or even stepping into the shoes of the other --as in role play.

This was a step courageously taken by one participant who wanted to understand how the one who wronged her so gravely could have done it. She wrote poetic script from both her own and her offenders’ perspective and performed it. She did this to try to understand what happened from his perspective. She described that doing so was uncomfortable for others and they questioned whether it was a good idea for her. She was not dissuaded by others however and said that stepping into his shoes and performing both his and her parts as she saw them in a poetic drama, was a very powerful experience for her. Ellen Levine (2003) speaks to the power of these kind of dramatic role plays: “There is a significant felt difference between talking about a difficult or conflictual relationship with another person or part of the self and being the other for a discrete period of time – talking, walking, and feeling the experience of otherness” (p. 74).

It was this kind of experience through art that shifted Mariatu Kamara, who had been raped and maimed by child soldiers in Sierra Leone (Kamara and McClelland, 2008). While she did not act out their parts, she was involved in a dramatic presentation of the child soldiers who had harmed her so gravely and in so doing witnessed the background stories that led up to them to doing such things. Kamara recalled:
As I sat on the ground and watched, I realized that the boy rebels who had hurt me must have families somewhere. I thought back to the rebel who’d said that he wanted me to join them in the bush. “Would they have asked me to kill?” I wondered? (p.119).

By understanding their stories, Kamara was able to feel compassion for them and experience deep empathy by questioning what her own reactions would be under the same circumstances. The transmission of empathy and emotions can be one of the deepest powers of art. As Tolstoy wrote, “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experiences them” (Tolstoy, 1984, p. 181). As daunting as exploring empathy for an offender may seem, art helps the forgiver to enter into their world safely, not to condone what they have done, but to understand the person that committed the offense.

An important realization in forgiving is that it is a person, the wrongdoer, that is being forgiven, not the offence. The offence itself is not forgivable as it is indelibly wrong, thus it is the perspective and outlook toward the wrongdoer that is at the heart of the process of forgiving. The expression of intense righteous anger at the offense and the offender at first can be healthy yet the shift in perspective from the wrong doer to the offense can be significant in the forgiveness process. But this process cannot be hurried. As Holloway (2002) noted, “We only add to the trauma if we try to urge or hurry people into a forgiveness they are humanly incapable of offering” (p. 52). At the point of readiness, whenever that may be, seeing the offender as a fallible human being with a story that lead up to their ability to offend was a pivotal part of the process for participants.
The participant that spoke of images that came up for her in Guided Imagery in Music ® sessions described seeing the sad, pathetic side of the man who had abused her. She described that seeing him this way revealed him as a victim himself. This helped her in her process of healing and it also helped loosen the hold he had on her. She shared that while she did not set out to forgive him, the various artistic experiences and images helped while ‘forgiveness just happened to happen’. She explained how this helped by saying ‘the ways that I have improved? … I am not obsessing; I’m no longer trying to figure out what happened’. In some ways, understanding the perspective of the offender allows the injured person a healthy distance from the offender.

Cantacuzino (2015), explained it this way: “Empathy doesn’t mean feeling sorry for someone or having pity; it simply means having the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, no matter how soiled and sordid those shoes may be.” (p. 28.) Gaining a sense of empathy can help bring relief. Empathy can help to create understanding that the offender was responsible for their actions and that they are also a human being with a back story. Their backstory or context “does not excuse them; it simply helps to explain them” (Tutu & Tutu, 2014, p. 127). After empathically considering a hurtful family member, one participant shared: ‘So I know. I get it. I guess she makes sense. You lay the facts out on the table and they list her behavior, and you go ‘yep’ … like that. I wouldn’t … I couldn’t have become a better person so I can’t judge her anymore, or her choices’.

Empathy, or even compassion, does not in any way constitute trust, however. Several participants expressed empathy for the offender with full knowledge that a relationship was not viable, that the offender could not be trusted, and that distance and boundaries were in place.
Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) discussed empathy and compassion for the offender with high cautions: “For particularly offensive injustices, the client should continue to distinguish forgiving and reconciling” (p. 75). There is a sharp distinction between these two processes. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) explained that forgiveness is the position of the person who has been offended and wants the autonomy to cope with the effects of what happened through healing. This includes addressing perspectives of the offender. Reconciliation however, requires a reestablishment of trust. To re-establish, or establish, trust there must be proven contrition on the part of the offender. This is a whole other process.

Tutu and Tutu’s (2014) final phase of forgiveness is to renew or release the relationship. They shared that renewing a relationship is based on the truth of what happened, not pretending that it did not happen. Releasing may be the only option for self-protection. As they stated, “Releasing is refusing to let an experience, or a person occupy space in your head and heart any longer” (p. 155). Most of the participants released the relationship in their forgiveness process realizing that reconciliation was not possible for varying reasons. Working through the truth of the situation and the relationship with the offender (if there had been one to begin with) was worked on in the art by several participants. One described a difficult process of re-establishing trust in renewing the relationship with a hurtful partner. For others, the offender was not mentioned as part of their art exploration except that they felt released from the intense preoccupation with the offender and with the painful offences committed by them in the process of forgiving.
Art and meaning

Art was associated with finding meaning for many of the participants in connection to their process of forgiving. Regarding meaning and forgiveness, Tutu & Tutu (2014) wrote:

The guarantee in life is that we will suffer. What is not guaranteed is how we will respond, whether we will let this suffering embitter us or ennoble us. This is our choice. How do we allow our suffering to ennoble us? We make meaning out of it and make it matter (p.134).

Meaning making was facilitated in both the making of art and in the journey of forgiving. The transformative process of forgiving was a culmination of values striven for in the art. The meaning came in reclaiming freedom, shifting identity from victim to one who is autonomous in deciding that the offender and the offence do not control their future.

Meaning for participants came in the recovery of autonomy. Victor Frankl (1946) famously explored the importance of finding meaning in suffering in his seminal book ‘Man’s Search for Meaning’ as he drew from his experience in the Nazi concentration camps during the second world war. In explaining what he called ‘the tragic triad’ of pain, guilt, and death, Frankl spoke of ‘tragic optimism’ which included the human potential for “turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment” (p.162). Frankl’s insight directly contrasted with what he saw as ‘neurotic fatalism’ which denied freedom through belief in the determinism of ‘heredity and environment’ that cast us as pawns and victims of our outer influences or outer circumstances. “A human being is not one thing among others” Frankl posited, “but man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes – within the limits of endowment and environment – he has made out of himself” (p. 157). He observed that in the camps humans
acted as ‘swine’ or ‘saints’ and stated, “Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions” (p. 157). Our decisions, or choices are what make us free.

The potential for choices and freedom were facilitated in the art created by participants as art brought inner content out in expression for deeper reflection. All participants spoke of some aspect of self-determining and autonomy through forgiveness as they became free from preoccupation. Several spoke of overcoming the identity of ‘victim’ and being able to move forward by deciding how they would respond to the past. Having the inner emotional content and the story outside in the art helped in realizing opportunities for change. This aspect of a healing shift was addressed by Tutu and Tutu (2014): “… when we lock our stories inside us, the initial injury is often compounded. If I tuck my secrets and my stories away in shame or fear or silence, then I am bound to my victimhood and my trauma” (p.78). It was in releasing the story and putting the pain on the outside in their art that participants explained that they were able to find some relief. One participant expressed that holding on to emotions allowed them to ‘fester’ on the inside. Another participant stated that creating art was an act of movement from ‘sitting and stewing’ to making something. This is reminiscent of poiesis in art, the making of something original and transformative (Levine, 1999).

The concept of poiesis is foundational to expressive arts in therapy. In introducing the foundational aspects of using expressive arts in therapy Steven Levine stated: “The suffering which lies in the human condition and which strikes each one of us in the form of our fate can only be met by a surrender to Being which makes it possible to receive a blessing adequate to our pain” (Levine & Levine, 1999, p. 31). According to Levine, poiesis involves bringing something
into being that brings new visions of being. Art making is an active process that involves discovery in actioned creativity. Arts’ healing properties come from the interaction between the artist and the art. There is no need to know in advance what will come from it. As Whitehead (2003) stated, “The artist makes a work and is in turn made by it. Something takes place in the exchange between artist and work, for artist and work are instruments to one another” (p. 8). In the act of poiesis there is faith in the power of imagination in confronting suffering in a creative act (Levine, 1999). Participants described that in the creative imaginative process discoveries of meaning were made, and pieces came together. Releasing pain and anger in the art where it could be processed gave meaning through a sense of empowerment; the participants had something that they could do with their suffering through actively transforming it in the art process.

Meaning making comes through a process of creative imagining, and openness to discovery. Frankl’s (1946) encounter with the strength of making meaning in suffering is shared in his story of marching under the cruel command of the Nazi’s. He shared, “I clung to my wife’s image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness” (p. 57). It was the image and the meaning of the image: her; love; of something beyond that created an epiphany for Frankl.

Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire (p. 57).

It was the meaning of a higher aspiration rather than the circumstances themselves that helped Frankl in the camps. Although he did not even know whether his wife was alive, this did
not change the meaning of her image. It is in the engagement of the imagination and creative potential that can open strength in finding meaning. The art for participants was helpful in realizing the imaginative and creative in working toward forgiveness. A commonality in each experience of forgiveness was the battle toward self-definition. It was a battle in which the participants described wanting to decide for themselves who they were, and not leaving that to the offence and the offender. Because forgiving a major offence takes immense effort, the art often held the goal and the meaning as forgiveness was striven toward. Meaning was also found in the process as art making was active and productive. The art provided, as one participant said ‘a new passion’ rather than defaulting to unproductive rumination. As previously discussed, the art was also a way to understand the offender and to see them in context.

Making meaning was discussed in Enright and Fitzgibbon’s (2015) ‘deepening phase’ in reference to Frankl. “Frankl reasoned that the heart of healing was in finding rational meaning, a narrative that made sense to the one suffering (p. 79).” According to Enright and Fitzgibbons the deepening phase for those forgiving includes finding meaning in suffering and in forgiving; in recognizing that they too may have at times needed forgiveness; in identifying support in that they are not alone; in finding purpose: and being aware of one’s own affective transformation (2015). Time spent in art making touched on most of these markers for the participants. Most referred to finding meaning and purpose in forgiving and in art making and, in recognizing a transformation in themselves.

Meaning was further enhanced by being able to reach out to others by sharing their art with those who may have experienced similar pain. The poet that wrote from her own perspective and the perspective of the offender performed her art to reach out to those who had
also been harmed in effort to offer them hope of healing. Other participants recognized the same possibilities in sharing their art. They recognized that they could, when they felt ready, share their art toward helping others. The art and forgiving came together offering empowerment and meaning in their suffering. Their art was a tangible manifestation of the meaning that they had discovered and created and could be shared with others.

The present study in comparison to the pilot research

The themes identified from my pilot research that explored the use of art in forgiveness resulted in some different, and some similar findings. The themes from the pilot study indicated that the art helped participants in processing emotions, in connecting to their identities, in experiencing deeper communication through the art, in revisioning the offender and the narrative, and in finding meaning. The pilot research involved three participants with the same criteria of inclusion for the present study. Art viewing or art consumption (i.e. viewing films and reading literature) was more of a factor than art making however for two of the participants, with one having briefly experienced drama therapy as well. The third participant wrote poetry and brought it into therapy. For the two that primarily reflected on art (movies and literature), the findings were similar.

The pilot study and the present study did not have vastly different results qualitatively, rather the markers were gathered and named differently. Art still represented an external reflection process that gave new insight, however art making may access subconscious material more subjectively and deeply and thus could be more revealing than reflecting on the art of others. For example, the participant who wrote her own poetry was confronted with her own feelings as she read her poems aloud in therapy. She stated that this helped her to understand her
own feelings and her mother more deeply which in turn helped her to forgive her mother. The other two that had viewed the art of others were also helped in the process of forgiveness, however it may not have impacted them as deeply. The participant that described having a session of drama therapy described being very positively affected by as it was participatory. Exploring art viewing as compared to art making in the forgiveness process would be another interesting research exploration.

The art-based research (ABR) from the pilot study was based on Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) four phases of forgiveness and was therefore quite different from the art-based research in this study. The ABR from the pilot brought out interesting insight into the forgiveness process. In this study, the ABR directly reflected and revealed insights on how the participants described the facilitative effects of using art in their process of forgiveness.

Other important factors

Readiness: Even with the facilitative reflection through art making, forgiveness is something that is undertaken at a time and a pace that is individual to each forgiver. The decision to forgive is something that is arrived at when the one who has been offended is ready. Cantacuzino (2015) who collected forgiveness stories from many people states:

I have come to believe that it is unhelpful to talk of forgiveness when people are right in the middle of battle, whether that battle is with malicious siblings or massacring tribes. Some few individuals will be able to line themselves up to forgive right from the point of crisis, perhaps spurred on by a deep religious or moral conviction, but most of us will not be ready. In the middle of battle all we can do is concentrate on survival, on getting
through and protecting our own. Whether victim or perpetrator, there is no time for reflection; and forgiveness, whether for self or for other, requires reflection.

As participants in this study shared, the process can take time to come to a place where the intensity of anger substantially subsides enough to begin the work of exploring forgiveness. In terms of readiness, art was helpful in that it was there when they needed it. The stories described in this study unfolded over months, years, and even decades. While the facilitation that art offers forgiveness is helpful, it is still a difficult journey of deep reflection, especially after a grave offence. It takes time to process grief while coming to a place of forgiveness. Art is therefore poignant as it is present in a tangible form to go back to and to reflect on in times of readiness.

**Spirituality:** Another salient factor that influenced the process for most participants was spirituality and faith. Forgiveness can be conceptualized as a spiritual battle. It can be conceived as a battle of trying to overcome evil with good or hate with love. For the Muslim and Christian participants in this study, faith was an influence in their desire to heal and to be available to love. For those that did not name faith, it was a similar battle but without the same framework. Some were inspired by a formal religion, others not. For those that reported having a formal faith structure, faith teachings were an important factor in the forgiveness process providing motivation to forgive and inspiration and hope. Others found forgiveness as they strove to cope with the injury. Forgiveness provided them a way to resolve the pain of the past and a way to move forward.

Tutu and Tutu (2014) spoke of forgiveness as being found in recognizing our shared humanity in which we are all flawed and vulnerable to doing wrong. Moreover, they spoke of
the importance of forgiveness saying: “We choose forgiveness because it is how we find freedom and keep from remaining trapped in the endless loop of telling our stories and naming our hurts” (p. 121). Finding the freedom sought in forgiveness involved a tough journey of confronting difficult emotions and truths. Tutu and Tutu (2014) stated, “…even very spiritual people try to leap over their suffering in pursuit of inner peace or their sense of what is the right thing to do” (p. 128). Thus, art can be the helpful bridge between spiritual desire, and ability to process cruel realities and painful emotions. This was described by several participants of faith that used art as a keeper of spiritual goals. One participant shared that art held the hope of increased peace through forgiveness ‘even if I am not there yet’. Another said that his art helped him to believe forgiveness could help.

In writing about belief and the imaginative art of poetry Fuchs (1999) said “The basis of poetry is imagination, a going beyond what we ordinarily believe. Yet the poetic imagination makes belief possible, a belief that life is worth living” (Fuchs, 1999, p. 195). She described the tangibility of this art form by describing it as ‘the thingly presence’ and how “poetry represents belief so that we can understand” (p. 197). By providing a ‘thingly’ presence of a held spiritual belief and a desire to overcome painful associations, an art form can exist as an inspiration and motivator to press on in the pursuit of peace and love. It did this for several of the participants.

It is the thingly presence that can be helpful in exploring spirituality and religious experience. Karen Armstrong, a British author who writes on comparative religion and explores religious practice extensively speaks of the importance of art in understanding religion. She discovered that “people turned to art when they tried to express or evoke a religious experience: to painting, music, architecture, dance, or poetry. They rarely attempted to define their
apprehension of the divine in logical discourse or in the scientific language of hard fact” (Armstrong, 2004, p. 288). The participant who spoke of wanting to believe that forgiveness could help, described how, after a long struggle to forgive, through his poetry writing came to a place of transformation that felt to him like achieving Nirvana. He said, “I am a spiritual person, so I felt like I reached another spiritual understanding of what attachment means in this earthly plain.” He went on to say that in writing and editing his poetry he was able to explore his spirituality as it related to attachment and ownership.” He described the poem that resulted from his process of forgiveness was his magnum opus. Art, therefore, in its various forms was helpful for participants in developing their own understanding and interconnection to their faith and/or spirituality in the forgiveness process.

While forgiveness was achieved to varying extents, coping with the loss of a loved one, loss of trust, or loss of a relationship was also a process of grief. Another important observation was that for most of those interviewed, the offence was traumatic. Traumatic events can affect one’s worldview and personally held values and meaning. It is important to note that healing from trauma and grief are considerably overlapped with forgiveness, thus they played a significant role in the forgiveness process. It is also important to note, that forgiveness, although involving hard work, was helpful in restoring a worldview that included benevolence and caring.

**Support:** Most participants referred to caring others who offered support and inspiration in their journey of forgiveness and were there as encouragement in art making or in sharing their art. Forgiveness and healing was the inspiration, others were the support, and art was the vehicle, the space, and the method of self-support during the process. While art is a valuable assistant in working through a process of forgiving, it is important to consider that art could also
be a means of negative rumination, thus the factors of caring support and spiritual and religious inspiration are significant in healing and forgiveness.

**Limitations of this study and future research in expressive arts in forgiveness**

It is hoped that this study can contribute to a foundation for further research by offering some preliminary findings in the value of bringing expressive arts in the process of forgiveness. The findings in this study will need further development due to small sample size. While participants were each working through forgiveness that involved a life impacting offence, a more cohesive specific sampling with participants who experienced a similar offence or offences with stronger delineations such as one time assaults by a stranger, or emotional abuse by a parent could offer more specific findings and could produce different results qualitatively.

Moreover, most of the participants in this study were engaged in the arts in some form outside of their process of forgiveness. This is a limitation as the question comes up: would the arts help those who are unaccustomed to artistic expression for self-reflection? It would be interesting to introduce art reflection into forgiveness processes for those that may not have previously considered doing so. Ongoing study of how the arts can facilitate forgiveness is important in learning how to help those who have suffered injustice. Future research could include study of art expression in forgiveness models such as Enright and Fitzgibbon’s model (2015) to determine if such models help to enrich the process.

Future research could involve different forgiveness situations such as forgiveness at the societal level post conflict. Work such as that done by Lederach and Lederach (2010) that investigates post conflict healing, forgiveness and reconciliation where art was used, points to important areas of study. Looking at how using art organically or organizing art interventions for
post conflict peace keeping would be a beneficial area of study in determining if art expression and reflection are helpful in implementing meaningful strategies post conflict. Art interventions similar to the theatre group described in ‘Bite of the Mango’ (Kamara and McClelland, 2008) used in post conflict Sierra Leone, for example, could be researched for qualitative markers and efficacy in finding ways to help establish peace through forgiveness.

**Conclusion**

The phenomenological qualitative portion of this study succeeded in identifying that using the arts helped facilitate the process of forgiveness for the eight participants involved. Artmaking externalized the forgiveness process and in so doing, provided a tangible, focused, active interaction that was available during times of emotional readiness. Art held space and containment for raw emotions to be released, expressed, and processed. The art revealed truth as it accessed the deep subconscious, and concealed truth in cryptic symbolism allowing participants to safely explore their experience, injury, emotions, and meaning related to the offender and the offence. Finally, art helped with the discovery and creation of meaning in the forgiveness process. Participants described that their intention in art making was motivated by the desire to discharge negative emotion, to heal and to love. For some forgiveness was the motive, for others it was the outcome.

The arts-based investigation involved three phases of inquiry. Interviews were distilled into succinct descriptions of each participants’ process of forgiveness involving art. The distillations were combined into poetic form using symbolic/metaphoric imagery describing the forgiveness process which was then explored in visual art. Poetic movements of the participants’ processes were identified: impact of the injury; shifting; the art-work of forgiving; new
perspectives; and creative identity. The image-based inquiry explored how deeply art interacted with the subconscious revealing truth and meaning so that it could be recognized cognitively and consciously through sensory and symbolic involvement with the piece of art. The arts-based research explored how art had provided new insight to the participants that in turn was brought back consciously into their awareness. Art making was instrumental, moving emotional content out to be explored, then bringing it back in as new awareness that created personal growth.

Because art involves metaphoric and somatic experiencing within a sensory process, participants described art as facilitating release, insight, active interaction, and an alternate way of expressing the depth of the struggle to cope with injury in a healing process that goes beyond verbal conversational articulation. Tennyson expressed this poetically in his poem of deep grief: “Break, break, break, On thy cold grey stones, Oh sea! I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me” (as cited in Boyes, 2019). Art allowed alternate expression to process deep emotions, felt experience, truth, and meaning in the process of forgiveness.

The convergence of the disciplines of forgiveness, study, and expressive arts in healing introduce possibilities of identifying impacting ways to help people who have suffered injustice and injury at the hands of others. van der Kolk (2015) described how Archbishop Desmond Tutu intervened during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proceedings in South Africa in 1996 when he recognized that those giving their testimonies were emotionally overwhelmed. van der Kolk shared that Tutu would “lead the entire audience in prayer, song, and dance until the witnesses could contain their sobbing and halt their physical collapse. This enabled the participants to pendulate in and out of reliving their horror and eventually to find words to describe what happened to them” (2015, p. 335). The process of using music and dance as noted
by van der Kolk speaks to the facilitative effects of the arts in trauma, and potentially in forgiveness. van der Kolk went on to say: “I fully credit Tutu and other members of the commission with averting what might have been an orgy of revenge, as is so common when victims are finally set free” (2015, p. 335). Understanding further how the arts can help in healing and forgiveness and peaceful outcomes opens important new areas of research. Further investigation of the arts in facilitation of forgiveness could establish new insight into healing and re-establishment of peace after injury, conflict, and injustice.
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Appendix A: Call for Participants

Call for Participants for Research into the Expressive Arts and Forgiveness Process

I am a PhD Candidate at Lesley University (Cambridge, Mass.) living in Gatineau Canada doing research in expressive arts in therapy. I am presently doing qualitative and arts-based research on the facilitative healing effect of the arts on the forgiveness process.

I am looking for participants to interview who have forgiven someone for a substantial offense against them; that the offence had a considerable impact on their life; and that the arts were an important part of the forgiveness process (art making, participation in the arts, or art viewing). Any form of art (music, visual arts, poetry, dance, dramatic arts, literature) in art making, or art reflection is of interest in this research. For this research the focus is that a modality, or modalities, of the arts was part of working through forgiveness.

Art inclusion could mean that: you listened to, wrote, or performed an impacting song to move through the process of forgiving; that you engaged in visual arts to help understand your feelings; that you wrote poetry; that a book or movie plot was impacting; that you wrote a narrative of your experience, or that reading literature helped; that you used dance to work through your feelings etc.

Criteria for inclusion in this study are: That the process of forgiveness is resolved to the extent that the emotional impact of the offense is now manageable and that speaking of forgiveness for the offender no longer risks triggering re-experiencing or any other problematic psychological or emotional effect and that you feel that you have forgiven the person(s) who committed the offense.

What is involved? Participation in this research involves two components.

The first is an interview of approximately one hour that will be recorded for research purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity will be assured.

The second component is that themes derived from the interviews will be made into a short artistic video by the researcher for the arts-based segment of the research. The video will not include images of or any identifying information about the participants (unless it is requested). This video will be placed in a closed on-line group and participants will be asked to comment on the video as to the extent that it resonates with their experience of forgiveness. This will occur...
after approximately six months to a year after the interview. The confidentiality of participants will also be kept during this process.

If you are interested, please contact me – Darlene Kuehn – at dkuehn@lesley.edu

A brief phone interview will be arranged in advance to assure that you understand what this research involves and that you feel that you are a suitable candidate to participate.

**Your participation will assist in valuable qualitative and arts-based insight into the significance of the process of forgiveness using art in healing.**
Appendix B: Consent Form

Research Informed Consent

Inform consent to participate in the research project titled "The art of forgiving: an exploration of using art in the forgiveness process toward regaining peace"

The intent of this research study is to explore how the arts may facilitate the process of forgiving.

Participants will be interviewed about their process of forgiveness. This will involve open ended questions to briefly describe: how the participant understands forgiveness; what motivated the participant to forgive; who the person is that the participant has forgiven in relation to the participant (no identifying information is required); offence that the participant is forgiving the person for; the process of how the participant managed to forgive; how art was part of the process of forgiveness; what art form was used and how; and what the art contributed to the process. Thoughts and emotions that were involved in both the decision to forgive, and the ability to forgive will also be addressed in the interview. There will be emphasis in the interview on how the arts (music, literature, poetry, film, story, dance, visual arts, image, drama) have been part of the process.

The interview will take approximately one hour and will be conducted in a place of the participant’s choice – such as their home, office or the researcher’s office or on line via Skype. The interview will be audio recorded.

The researcher will be creating a short artistic video based on the themes found in interviews with participants. Participants will be asked to view the film when it is completed in a closed forum on-line and will be asked for brief written feedback on the film as part of the data for this research. This process will take approximately a half hour of the participants time and will occur approximately six months after the interview.

Participants will have access to the results of this research at their request.

In addition

- Former knowledge about the psycho-spiritual literature on forgiveness is not necessary.
- You are free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue your participation in the research at any time.
- Identifying details will be kept confidential by the researcher. Data collected will be coded with a pseudonym, the participant’s identity will never be revealed by the researcher, and only the researcher will have access to the data collected.
- Any, and all, of your questions will be answered at any time and you are free to consult with anyone (i.e., friend, family) about your decision to participate in the research and/or to discontinue your participation.
- Participation in this research may pose some minimal risk to the participants through recalling a distressing period. Participants will be directed to counselling should the interviews cause any triggering or distress concerning the discussion of the participant's review of their forgiveness process.
- If any problem in connection to the research arises, you can contact the researcher Darlene Kuehn at 819 661-5486 and by email at dkuehn@lesley.edu or Lesley University sponsoring faculty: Mitchell Kossak, 617-349-8167; mkossak@lesley.edu.
- The researcher may present the outcomes of this study for academic purposes (i.e., articles, teaching, conference presentations, supervision etc.)

My agreement to participate has been given of my own free will and that I understand all of the stated above. In addition, I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_________________________________    __________________
Participant's signature       Date

_________________________________    __________________
Researcher's signature        Date

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at irb@lesley.edu
CONSENT TO USE AND/OR DISPLAY ART

CONSENT BETWEEN: _______ Darlene Kuehn _______ and ________________________________
Expressive Arts Therapy Doctoral Student Artist/Participant’s Name

I, __________________________________________, agree to allow _______ Darlene Kuehn _______
Artist/participant’s name Expressive Arts Therapy Doctoral Student

to use and/or display and/or photograph/recording of artwork (visual art, poetry, writing, recording of
dramatic work and/or music and/or dance) for the following purpose(s):

☐ Reproduction and/or inclusion within the research currently being completed by the
expressive arts therapy doctoral student (in print).

☐ Reproduction and/or presentation at a professional conference.

☐ Reproduction, presentation, and/or inclusion within academic assignments including
but not limited to a doctoral work, currently being completed by the expressive arts
therapy doctoral student. This may include your art being represented in a brief film
that summarizes the resulting themes discovered in the research.

It is my understanding that neither my name, nor any identifying information will be revealed in any
presentation or display of my artwork, unless waived below.

☐ I DO ☐ I DO NOT wish to remain anonymous.

This consent to use or display my artwork may be revoked by me at any time. I also understand I’ll
receive a copy of this consent form for my personal records.

Signed ________________________________ Date __________________
Participant’s signature

Darlene Kuehn M.A., RP
323 Chapel St, Suite 301, Ottawa ON, K1N 7Z2 dkuehn@lesley.edu or darlene@expressivehealing.ca
Appendix C: Semi Structured Interview

Semi Structured Interview

Questions:

(Questions will be asked in these categories, yet conversation will follow the flow of the story as told by the participant)

Briefly describe the offence committed against you and your relationship to the one you are forgiving.

Describe your process in forgiving the person(s) and how the art played a part in it.

How would you describe the function of the art in your process of forgiving the offender?

After having gone through this process, do you believe that art has something to offer those who would like to forgive but may be struggling in the process