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Research-Based Art

Robert Landy

It could be that each of us awakes each morning with any number of research questions circulating around our brains. Some are practical, personal and immediate – How do I manage an emotional wound suffered by my children? Others are philosophical and more subliminal – What is God and how can I engage in spiritual dialogue? In both examples, research can be seen as a search for an answer to a complex question that seems to elude a simple answer, but that also propels the search and re-search.

As an academic, I engage in research in my discipline, drama therapy, in order to raise and attempt to answer difficult questions. Being in an arts-based discipline, I have researched some of the questions aesthetically. And yet, as one attempting to link the domain of art to that of social science, I have also approached solutions to research problems from qualitative paradigms common to anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

I have come to believe that whatever methodological approach we take to research, the origins of the questions are the same—they begin at home, in personal, unresolved dilemmas and questions that keep surfacing as hard as we try to repress them. This paper is about a process that began in 1996 at my kitchen table when my 7 year old daughter announced that a friend accused her of killing Christ. I write this on Ash Wednesday, 2004, the day that Mel Gibson's film, “The Passion of the Christ,” opened to some controversy. Gibson was accused by some of making an anti-Semitic film that would ignite the issue of deicide, demonizing the Jews as killers of Christ. Deicide entered my young daughter's life, re-stimulating my own struggle with the same issue, and in response to her story, told to me long before viewing a Hollywood version of the killing of Christ, it was time for me to act.

As a father, I comforted my daughter and her younger brother, assuring them that the Romans and not the Jews actually did the killing. I tried to explain that as much I loved stories and used them daily in my work, when told from a particular perspective they can perpetuate prejudice and bigotry. I had trouble finding the right language to express this thought to a 5 and 7 year old, but I thought they got the point. Although they, too, had trouble finding the words to engage with me, they had no trouble conveying their feelings in another expressive language. Both drew pictures of the crucifixion. My daughter, Georgie, drew a bloody scene, with a mysterious figure poking a sword into the body of the crucified Christ. When I asked her about the drawing she told me: “The guy with the sword is Chinese. He is not me.” It was clear to me that as a Jewish girl, she did not want to bear the burden of deicide.
My son, Mackey, also drew an intriguing and revealing picture. He created a sad figure in a cage, surrounded by images of the crucified Christ. When I asked him about it, he replied: “That is a Jew and the Jew is in jail.” I reasoned that Mackey subliminally understood the consequences of deicide. The Jew would be locked up and like the pathetic figure in Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” he would never be able to escape the source of his transgression.

My children’s drawings were a revelation to me. I wanted to know more. I wondered how other children would respond to remarks about their religion and their gods. By reassuring my children that they were not god-killers, I hoped that I would reassure myself. But a part of me knew that my words and my sentiments were not enough. And so I decided to search for more information from more children. My first impulse was to take the next plane to Germany and speak to the grandchildren of former Nazis to see if they harbored the kinds of anti-Semitic fervor that led to the holocaust. But I knew that I would hardly be objective and so I slowed down my process and carefully thought through my approach. This was to be a research project and my research question changed from: “Are children anti-Semitic?” to: “How do children see God and why does it matter?”

Over a period of three years, I collected interviews from more than 500 children from all around the world, from multiple cultures and spiritual traditions. Because I could not travel to every locale, I trained colleagues in different cultures to do some of the interviews. I decided not to do the German interviews myself, to ensure some degree of distance. Each interview involved asking the children to respond to the following:

1. Draw a picture of God that shows what God looks like and where God lives.
2. Tell a story about the picture.
3. If you were God in this picture, what are you saying? Are you speaking to anybody or anything? Who are you speaking to? If you are not speaking to anyone, whom might you be speaking to?
4. I am now going to play God and speak the words you just spoke. You will be the person or thing God is speaking to. Please answer in any way you want.
5. Tell me who you are (as the person God is speaking to). What is your name?
6. Can you make up a title for the picture? What is the picture called?
7. Is there anything else you want to say about the picture or about the role-play?

8. (If there are no antagonistic, bad or malevolent characters in the picture, ask the additional question:) Does God have any enemies, anyone who wants to fight God? If so, can you name them and tell me something about them? If you’d like, add the enemies to your picture.

9. (If you feel that the picture and/or story is not clear or incomplete, please prompt the children with supplementary questions, such as:) Tell me more about the house, the cross, the sky, etc.

10. Do you believe in God? (If the response is a simple yes or no, please ask for more detail.)

I collected the stories and drawings of God and all the responses. In a phenomenological fashion I collated and analyzed the data. In considering the results, I recognized that children living in differing political, economic, and cultural circumstances responded in unique ways, even though there appeared to be many similarities that transcended particular cultural conditions. Given the differences and the similarities and the many contradictions, I decided to present my findings as a list of descriptive statements that exist along a continuum of paired opposites. This is how I saw the children's views of God:

1. God is visible and invisible, present and absent. God is revealed and hidden, tangible and mysterious.

2. God is a force in nature and a supernatural spirit.

3. God is human and superhuman. God is like me and very different from me.

4. God is masculine and feminine. God is both genders and no gender.

5. God is domestic and homeless.

6. God is in our hearts and in the sky.

7. God hates and God loves. God is punitive and forgiving.

8. God is silent and God communicates.

9. God is one and many. God is whole and in pieces.
10. God is a healer and a wounded being in need of healing.

And, somewhat tentatively, I offered 4 summary findings:

1. God lives. I recalled the old Hasidic saying that God is present wherever people let him in. The children I interviewed let God in. They see the living God not only in the framework of conventional religious traditions but also in terms of a spiritual consciousness independent of institutionalized religion.

2. God is a creation of children and indeed, all of us. Throughout the research, I discovered ironically that it is God who is created in the image of man. In interviewing the children I learned that for many, creating God is a powerful and healing act. This observation has therapeutic implications in that many of the children appeared to be working through concerns and fears about mortality and immortality, war and peace, bigotry and kindness, poverty and plenty as they drew their pictures and told their stories.

3. God is vulnerable and very human. God has enemies. God gets lost and lonely. God works hard and becomes tired. Sometimes God gets weak and loses heart and requires the special power of the child to make him whole again. Not only is man the creator of God, but also the restorer.

4. How we see God is determined by many factors—our age, our religion, our parents’ beliefs, our socio-economic and political realities. It is difficult to come to any clear conclusions as to which factors are most and least significant in determining our perceptions of God. But I have discovered, however tentatively, that cultural factors seem to be stronger than religious ones. (see Landy, 2001).

To attempt to put closure on this experience, I wrote two books. The first, *How We See God and Why It Matters* (2001), began as a conventional qualitative research document, with related literature and a careful delineation of my procedures and data analysis. But that approach seemed to belie the personal nature of the experience, and so I wrote a more personal book, engaging with the children's images and responding with my own stories. As such, the book took the form, in part, of an autobiographical memoir. At times it even read like a travel book as I moved from culture to culture, attempting to contextualize the children's stories and drawings. In the end, the book felt incomplete to me. For one, I wanted a way to directly speak to children. And so I wrote another book, *God Lives in Glass* (2001a), featuring a number of drawings and abstracting a number of stories about the drawings, all from the child's point of view. That book felt more satisfying as it was accessible, less personal and more of an aesthetically-pleasing product, closer to my experience of the process.
And then the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon were attacked on September 11, 2001, just weeks after the release of these books. Again I worked with children through a creative process, helping them to tell their stories and to transform their stories into drama with the aim of transforming their fears into hope. This work, a kind of research in itself, culminated in a documentary film, *Standing Tall* (Stern, 2004) and an accompanying Study Guide (Landy, 2004).

The terrorist attacks provoked many feelings. One was that I felt unsatisfied for not achieving my goal of understanding religious intolerance as filtered through the eyes of children. Three days after 9/11, at a scheduled reading, I read the children’s words aloud to a small audience in a bookstore, and I thought: How could a figure of procreativity and harmony shine its light equally upon tolerant people and those who kill randomly in the name of their god? The *Standing Tall* experience pointed me back to the creative process as the more appropriate research path toward answering my question. I needed to take the work on children and God down that same path. The artist in me needed to reach my audience in a more immediate way.

Coincidentally, shortly after 9/11, I was asked to tell stories from my books as part of a storytelling series sponsored by the New York University Program in Educational Theatre at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City. Instead, I wrote a play and performed it with my daughter. In the play, I narrated the story of my search for meaning through the children’s drawings and stories and role plays of God. The performance felt better, more embodied and dialogical. It felt powerful to share some of my experience with an audience, but after it was over, I still felt that something was missing. In hindsight I think that it was a more immediate presence. My research process was hardly over even though I had transformed the initial research-based narrative of the book into a play and performed it with my daughter, thereby, I hoped, moving toward the healing of her wound. It wasn't enough, however, to play myself or to play with my daughter. What seemed to be missing was a more direct experience with the figure of the divine. We needed to play with the divine or in some way to embody the divine, and to do so, the divine needed to be present. And so my research question became: how can I make the divine present? The methodology, short of prayer, was to be arts-based. The challenge was to find the appropriate art form.

Although I generally express myself as an artist through writing and theatre, my earliest means of creative expression was through music. Through a series of synchronistic events, I teamed up with a composer, Keith Thompson, and musical theatre director, Greg Ganakas, to create a musical version of the piece which came to be known as *God Lives in Glass*. The musical was created during the summer and Fall of 2003 and performed by a group of professionals and NYU music theatre students at the Provincetown Playhouse in September, 2003.
While engaged in the process, a deep re-working of the material, I re-captured my passion for music. I did not, however, write the music, but the lyrics and the book. In doing the latter, I abandoned the need for a linear narrative and instead followed the lead of my collaborators toward finding a musical through-line through which to hold the presence I was so desperately searching for. The marriage of my words and Keith's music allowed me to not just tell the story about God, but in some magical, less literal way, to make God present. My art was writing and shaping images through words and telling stories. I needed to collaborate with those who could give the images rich musical form and shape and texture. One unexpected collaborator was Georgie, my daughter, who added two songs which came to be known as: “Jump Rope Jesus” and “The Buddha Rap.” Our job was simple—-we wanted to make audible and visible that which is unseen. We wanted to be able to present not only the spiritual images of children, but do so through the eyes of adults who need so much to be reminded of the wonders of the universe. This felt like important work. And we all jumped in eagerly.

Witnessing a play and its direct reaction from an audience is very different from publishing a paper or a book. The academic researcher in me wants to get the data all lined up and wants to draw logical conclusions and wants to discover some truths about how children see God and why the arts help all people feel better about themselves. The artist in me makes use of the same data—the interviews from children. But it presents it in such a different form—in song and movement, in playful and dreamlike images intended to provoke and soothe and entertain. Or maybe, the academic and the artist parts of me are not so different. Both parts search for a kind of pleasure that comes from creating something new out of something old. Both parts begin that search not in libraries or websites or theatres or city streets, but at home, listening to the children or to the childlike parts of ourselves, the parts that ask the profound and silly questions knowing full well that the answers are only stabs in the dark by adults light-years away from the truth. Both parts search for a presence that is best known by its absence.

*God Lives in Glass* is not a play about religion, but about the varieties of spiritual experience that can take glorious form through song and story and action. And when the play was over, I realized that with each rehearsal and with each performance, I sat in my seat so full of life that it was hard at times to contain myself. I recalled another such moment toward the end of my academic research process in preparation for writing my books. I took my children with me to the Middle East where I would do many interviews. Somewhere in the Galilee where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, my son drew a picture, unprovoked. It was a drawing of the crucified Christ and had two figures on either side of the cross. Tell me about the picture, I said. And he told me that one of the guys, with a sword in his hand, is a Roman, and he killed
Jesus Christ. The other, with a gun in his hand, is a Jew, and he killed the Roman and took Jesus down from the cross and brought him to his final resting place. What a transformation—the killer of Christ becomes the rescuer, the savior of the savior.

After seven years of research on this project, from the pain of my child’s brush with anti-Semitism, to engagement with the expressive drawings, stories and role-plays of children, to the writing of books and plays and music, I can begin to answer my initial, very tentative research questions: How do I manage an emotional wound suffered by my children? I engage with my children through their expressive language and invite them to collaborate with me as I attempt to transform my own wounds.

And: What is God? Maybe God is the thing that drives all of us—the creative principle which not only gives us something meaningful to do with our hearts and hands and minds, but also keeps us hopeful, engaged in the business of living. Through this god source, we transform the destruction foisted upon us by terrorists, we transform our own impulses to be destructive, by holding fast to the belief that we are artists, daring to make new things out of old, and we are teachers, needing to pass on that method of transformation to future generations. And: How can I engage in spiritual dialogue? Whatever God may or may not be, I have learned that he or she or it is best revealed through creative expression. Once revealed, God, like all ultimate images, can become an object of engagement. One of my favorite songs in the play is called “The Three Brothers.” It is about three Taoist gods who overcome the plague through music and dance. The lyric says this:

*Among the Taoist deities,*
*These brothers still linger,*
*They bless the feet of dancers,*
*And the voices of singers.*

The performers of *God Lives in Glass,* like all performers in theatre as in everyday life, are those who attempt to reach a kind of divinity by embodying the other. They are blessed by virtue of their acts of re-search and re-creation. In creating new life from old, they perform godly acts. And such a performance implies not just playing at, with or for God, but, indeed, playing God.
References


