

EXPLORATION OF ANCESTRAL SYMBOLS
AS A FORM OF SELF-CARE DURING SOCIAL UPHEAVAL:
AN ARTS-BASED INQUIRY

NINA MARISA PARISER

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Research Advisor:
Leland Peterson

Department Chair:
Guylaine Vaillancourt, PhD, MTA

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ABSTRACT
EXPLORATION OF ANCESTRAL SYMBOLS AS A FORM OF SELF-CARE DURING
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Nina Pariser

This research investigates the merits of exploring ancestral resiliency symbols and practices as part of self-care during a global health crisis. Training as a mental health care professional within the context of a global pandemic is an emotionally demanding experience. Using an arts-based methodology, this research addresses the value of utilizing response art as part of a self-care process during this difficult time. The proposed response art involved art-making to honour my own “intergenerational self” (Duke, 2001) and exploring authentic personal symbols based on my ancestors’ own creative coping mechanisms. Using a two-part response art session as a self-care intervention, this research focuses on an exploration of ancestral symbols as a path to resiliency and replenishing emotional reserves used by an art therapy intern while working during the COVID-19 pandemic. These response art images are analyzed using Pat Allen’s (1995) intention witness method, which treats art images and other artistic processes as sites to glean knowledge and wisdom.

Keywords: Symbol, Arts-based inquiry, Ancestral, Self-Care

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Introduction

“But there were the people who did not die, and there were the people who came back to life (...). And the people who came back to life (...) were able to reconnect with a certain fervour that basically said, “I’m not here for nothing. I’m gonna make the best of it.” And they understood the erotic as an antidote to death, (...) as answering the question: “How do you keep yourself alive in the face of adversity?”” (Esther Perel, 2018)

“Nobody knows how, when and where life began. Moreover, although many authorities have attempted to define it, it has become progressively more and more difficult in recent years to know exactly what we mean by “life.” No one would deny that a dog or a tree is vastly more complicated than a stone or a nail; no one would regard a crystal as alive or a bacteria cell as dead. But it has become necessary to think again about these things, and think more clearly....” (Ernest Baldwin, 1937)

“[A] new phase of interest began with a rather startling discovery that certain plant viruses can be isolated in crystalline form (...). These substances thus seem to bridge the gap between the living and non-living worlds.” (Ernest Baldwin, 1937)

Though the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique and demanding experience that is constantly evolving and shifting our ways of understanding the world, there remain many similar events from the past and more to come in the future. When reflecting on the past year and a half of COVID while completing the art therapy program at Concordia University, I was struck with the idea that my own family had lived through many comparable emotionally challenging, dysregulating and destabilizing experiences, and remembered some of their creative coping mechanisms. I thought of my grandfather telling me that everyone must have something to rely on and give hope to oneself when the world outside is challenging and chaotic. The thing that kept him “living” while he was a prisoner in the work camps where he stayed for an entire year was the biochemistry book “An Introduction to Comparative Biochemistry” by Ernest Baldwin, first published in 1937. The quotes cited above were from the first chapter of this biochemistry book, which my grandfather had with him at a work camp for a year, during which time his

family thought he was dead. While existing in a limbo between life and death with only a few things to keeping his soul alive in face of adversity, he read about plant viruses that exist in exactly this paradoxical state: neither dead nor alive (Lederman, 2012, Baldwin, 1937).

Similarly, I thought of my grandmother, growing up under harsh conditions, first in Kamianets-Podilskyi (in what is now Ukraine) and then in Montreal. Her life had always revolved around play and storytelling, and even as a young girl with a deceased mother and a mostly absent father, she soothed herself through play, imagination and curiosity about the inner worlds of people.

As I worked in my second-year placement during the pandemic, feeling the isolation, the grief and the deep uncertainty and heaviness that the global health crisis was causing, I was struck by the desire to find personal symbols to help reconnect to joy, playfulness and feeling alive via creative coping mechanisms, despite what was going on around myself and my clients. I was drawn to these coping mechanisms partly because of my own unique personality, and partly because of a commonality I share with my grandparent's coping mechanisms. Looking back at what had given my family joy and a sense of play in the face of adversity, I found a pull towards these self-care mechanisms, as the spark for this arts-based exploratory research. I wanted and needed a connection to the past that would give me resilience and a sense of grounding in the present. My primary goal as a researcher is to explore the merits of this exploration. The type of symbol I would be looking for would be different than family symbols found in coat of arms and animal totems and other symbolic metaphorical representations of a family lineage or tribe, because I would be trying to find symbols that I would generate in response to the paradoxical narrative of my lineage that would perhaps provide a source of

resiliency, a metaphor for my own self-regulation as part of my intergenerational self or something to reflect on in my arts-based self-care.

My research will use qualitative methods, namely an arts-based heuristic inquiry that utilizes Moustakas Heuristic Method (1990) and Pat Allen's (1995) method of intention witness processing to dialogue with images. Response art from the intention witness method will constitute data. In this response art method, Allen indicates that one should write an intention that inquires, engages, or celebrates something in the art-makers lives. The intentions would come to us intuitively and naturally, as we tap into what Allen calls the creative source. (Allen, 1995.)

My heuristic research question is: "How can the exploration of ancestral symbols be used as a form of self-care for an art therapy intern during a social upheaval?". Arts-based research, which seemed most appropriate to use for this question, is a way to construct knowledge via visual media (Sullivan, 2005), "with art and image-making as the "site" for exploring a research question" (Lau, 2019).

Literature Review

Creative coping in times of hardship Perel (2018) points out that to re-connect to ourselves and others during times of hardship, we need to play, be curious, explore. Perel's (2018) definition of the erotic is in the spiritual sense, it is not sexual but rather the energy that is the opposite of death. Perel (2018) talks specifically of the experience of Jewish refugees after WWII – those that survived and those that “came back to life”. Here, I would define Perel's “coming back to life” as Ventral-Vagal regulation in polyvagal theory (Dana, 2018). Dana (2018) explains that we are drawn towards connection and self-regulation when we are able to move away from sympathetic mobilization and dorsal vagal collapse (survival mode, fight or flight mode.). The states of sympathetic mobilization and dorsal vagal collapse make us think of the world through the lens of judgment and comparison (being better/ worse than others). When we can self-soothe and access ventral-vagal regulation, we move away from survival mode and into a state of curiosity about the world and our place in it, we access a resilient polyvagal state that allows one to be pro-social, curious and playful (Porges, 2009; Dana, 2018). The notion of “coming back to life” that Perel (2018) describes, and pro-social curiosity (Dana, 2020) are explored in reference to contemplative practices in Bhutan. According to measurements by the WHO, Bhutan is the happiest country in the world, where it is common practice to contemplate death five times a day. The practice of contemplating death is primarily attributed to the high scoring of happiness in the country (Tread, 2015). Similarly, in a study conducted in 2007: “From Terror to Joy: Automatic Tuning to Positive Affective Information Following Mortality Salience,” researchers Dewall and Baumeister (2007) found that people who contemplated death were often more able to “tune to positive emotional information” as a coping mechanism to mortality salience, which the

researchers point out is both an unconscious and counterintuitive mechanism (Dewall & Baumeister, 2007).

Resiliency – coming back fully “to life” – involves feeling all feelings. Numbing out one’s negative feelings so as to not to experience them leads to a numbing out of a whole other range of emotions which gives the “dead/survival” mode that Perel (2018), Porges (2009) and Dana (2018) make reference to in their respective research. To be fully alive, we must witness the full story, not only triumphs, not only losses as Duke (2001) states but the fact that both coexist.

What then can we learn about not just surviving, but coming back to life, through an arts-based exploration of ancestral symbols as part of a self-care practice for an art therapist in training during the COVID-19 epidemic?

The intergenerational self and resiliency Studies on family narrative and emotional resiliency point to important links between the two (Saltzman, Pynoos, Lester, Layne & Beardslee, 2013 ; Bohanek, Marin, Fivush & Duke , 2006 ; Duke , Fivush & Bohanek, 2008 ; Rajan-Rankin , 2014). One study “Family narrative interaction and children’s sense of self” conducted by Bohanek et al (2006) showed a significant correlation between childhood self-esteem and knowing an “oscillating” family narrative; that is, neither a narrative that only ascends, or only descends, but one that is nuanced and vacillates between successes and challenges.

According to Dr. Duke, Fivush and Bohanek’s 2008 study embracing the paradoxical and confusing nature of life in the family narrative is the best predictor for emotional resiliency in children, and in turn adults (Feiler, 2013; Duke , Fivush & Bohanek, 2008). The original study was replicated once again in 2001 during 9/11, where Duke and colleagues found that with the American children they studied – who were all experiencing the same destabilizing national

event – the most resilient children were ones who knew their family stories and knew both good and bad ones in equal measure. Duke (2006, 2008) describes the strengthening of character via knowing ancestral stories as the “intergenerational self”, the independent and strong sense self that is built from knowing a lot about where you come from.

Symbols Liungman (1991) states that any object could be called a symbol, “as long as a group of people agrees that it means more than itself”. The word symbol is derived from the Greek word “Symbolon”, which refers to a broken slate of burnt clay (Liungman, 1991). The pieces are given to each individual in a group of people as a way to identify them. The pieces reunite into a whole, but also exist fragmented. Liz Greene notes that symbols often contain a “polarity of meaning”, stating that “a symbol generates an aspect of life where the number of possible interpretations are infinite” (Liungman, 1990). One could compare the “polarity of meaning” in symbols to that of the oscillating family stories in the intergenerational self. Could symbols serve as a way to “capture” something essential in the oscillation of distinct family narratives? The exploration of symbols, according to [Farokhi \(2011\)](#), can lead to deeper understanding of emotions, a cathartic release, and help to both create meaning from and discover meaning in life events ([Farokhi, 2011](#); [Lantz 1993](#)).

The concepts of signs and symbols are explored by theorists in a wide variety of disciplines. Humans use a system of signs to communicate about both concrete and abstract concepts. Morell, (2011) explains that a symbols in the field of art therapy represents something deeper than a sign, and that psychological theorists are more interested in symbols which contain “meanings”. Symbols help us express undigestible situations ideas and experiences (Jung, 1933) and in the expression of the symbol we consolidate, express and then are better able to digest the multiple meanings symbols hold (Freud, 1955). Finding a re-ignition of aliveness through

reconnecting with my understanding of ancestral coping symbols and making them my own would be a way of exploring my “intergenerational-self” non-verbally, trying to access intrinsic coping mechanisms or rituals that may be positively associated with my own resiliency.

Art-based Self-Care Based on Perel’s (2018) and Dana’s (2018) theme of curiosity and play overcoming “the survival mode”, and Duke’s (2006, 2008) theme of narrative and storytelling fostering resilience, I turn towards myself and think of how this applies to my life as an art therapy intern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pat Allen (1992) speaks of the process where “the art therapist gradually takes on the skills and characteristics of other clinicians, while at the same time investment in and practice of art skills decline” (p. 22). This is not true for all clinicians, and in some ways art therapists could be considered better equipped to honour their own art practice and make time for it. Still, it is important to realize that as a clinician, we cannot lose our drive to be creative, to engage in play, in curiosity- to be alive. To neglect these parts of ourselves is not only a disservice to our own story, but to our potential clients. Especially in times of upheaval, coping mechanisms to regulate the nervous system in order to still access self-regulating processes such as play, and curiosity becomes crucial. Although self-care can take on many forms, for the purposes of this research, my arts-based self-care will revolve around activities that ground, embody and playfully give space to complexity (ie: polarity of meaning in found symbols).

Methodology

My heuristic research question is: “How can the exploration of ancestral symbols be used as a form of self-care for an art therapy intern during a social upheaval?”. Arts-based research, which seemed most appropriate to use for this question, is a way to construct knowledge via

visual media (Sullivan, 2005), “with art and image-making as the “site” for exploring a research question” (Lau, 2019).

Kapitan (2010) notes that the point of arts-based inquiry is in fact to deepen tacit knowledge rather than seek or confirm knowledge that already exists. I’m interested here in applying arts-based inquiry in the following way: part 1 involves grounding mentally and physically, generating an intention question, creating art, dialoguing with the art and then looking for links with the intention set at the beginning; part 2 involves grounding physically and mentally outside, and then enacting or embodying qualities discovered in part 1 via dialoguing with nature and the environment via video or photography. For instance, when curiosity for the natural world or playfulness came up in part 1, intention witness, this was enacted and embodied when filming squirrels in the park and applying arts-based inquiry by creating engaged responses to what I was seeing in nature. Nature has it’s own important way of communicating which should be respected. Since I am not able to understand the language of trees or squirrels, I will define my second process as “engaging creatively with environment as response”, as opposed to another dialoguing technique.

Heuristic Research Defined

The heuristic research process requires the researcher to plan rigorously, and yet be open to chance. It is a dance of feeling comfortable not knowing where one is going, and yet being confident that the path will be found once again. In its essence, Heuristic research asks the research to explore knowledge that exists within but is not yet conscious (tacit knowledge). Even though the researcher may not have conscious awareness they must on some level hold the knowledge as it is imperative that the researcher have personal experience with the investigated topic. Without this link, the researcher is thought to have little to uncover. The researcher’s

“intense interest and personal experience with the phenomenon” (Kapitan, 2010, p. 145) is required.

Moustakas’ Stages of Heuristic Research

Step 1: Initial Engagement

The first step of heuristic research offered by Moustakas (1990) is called initial engagement and explores an important question through tacit awareness and self-dialogue (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, the first stage of my research began with the exploration of the context in which my research question was born. Throughout the end of the first year and all throughout the second year of the program the covid 19 pandemic created an atmosphere of fear, grief and disconnection for many. I began to reflect on what my grandparents would say about this experience, but also their own creative coping mechanisms employed to feel connected and alive and experience joy and curiosity in the face of adversity.

Step 2: Immersion Phase

The second phase of Moustakas’ (1990) model is the immersion phase where “the researcher lives the question is waking, sleeping and even dream states” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). As a result, I became immersed in the question and my research process and discovered that in fact I was doing a whole set of data creation at the park, after the initial intention witness process. I did not realise this until well into the process.

Step 3: Incubation

This is a moment where the researcher disengages and allows the process to take place passively and without direct thought put towards their question (Kapitan, 2010; Moustakas, 1990; Rose & Lowenthal, 2006; Sela-Smith, 2002). During this phase, I found that continued to informally engage with some of the research rituals that I had been doing the two weeks of

research such as going outside early in the morning to walk or jog around the park, and to stop and take pictures or videos of anything interesting. I was not thinking explicitly of my research but instead engaging in my own personal wellbeing and self-care.

Step 4: Illumination

This part of the process is a revelation of sorts (Kapitan,2010; Moustakas, 1990; Rose & Lowenthal, 2006; Sela-Smith, 2002). In my case, it was realizing that the most authentic and rich part of my research happened after I thought I had conducted my research-- namely when I went to the park and began interacting with the animals, plants and leftover debris. It was not just that I wanted to embody my own version of the coping mechanisms and meaning making that I perceived my ancestors to have, but also to make it my own. To create meaning using ancestors as guides in combination with the additional technology of intention witness method.

Step 5: Explication

My journal writing as well as ultimately this document is the explication phase of my research. Explication helps the researcher clarify and elucidate their work. I would say that this phase is ongoing, as writing out this research has made me realise other connections I had not made before.

Step 6: Creative Synthesis

This is the last phase of heuristic research, where the researcher uses a creative means to consolidate and “digest” the work they have done. The creative synthesis emerges naturally on its own and elaborates on the experience of the researcher. (Moustakas, 1990; Sela Smith, 2002; Rose & Lowenthal, 2006; Kapitan, 2010) My creative synthesis is a summary painting and an interactive website with some of the photographs of squirrels I took during my research.

Ethical Considerations

There are many ethical considerations to consider in the arts-based heuristic method (Sultan, 2019). I am conscious that I am disseminating my findings in a research paper and will do that in an ethical manner. Although I have identified my grandparents, I am clear that this is my own interpretation of their life and my dissimilarities and differences to them. The subject of this research remains me and my own personal symbols, created in the context of an intergenerational self or lineage.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures used were a centering technique, the intention witness process and art-making both indoors and outdoors. According to Allen (2006) the intention witness process begins with becoming quiet, relaxing and allowing the intention to emerge on its own. The first method of data collection took place at home, where I did a short generative somatic centring practice which I learnt from Terezia Oroz, a generative somatic practitioner whom I spent 10 weeks learning from. “Generative Somatic’s centring” technique. This technique, as explained in *“Why the body? A brief introduction to generative somatics”*, is from a lineage of Aikido, meditation and Gestalt therapy (2018). Once an intention has emerged, it is written down clearly and in present tense and without using word “want”, and then forget about as art-making begins (Allen, 1995). Once art is created, the process continues with a witnessing and dialoguing with the art itself:

- “1). Sit in front of your art quietly and just notice what it looks and feels like;
 - 2). Describe in writing what you see as fully as you can without coming to conclusions;
 - 3) Write down any feelings or thoughts, including judgments that come up for you;
 - 4) Dialogue with the image or a part of the image; write it down as it comes, including any seemingly extraneous thoughts or tangents;
 - 5) Check in with your intention; ask your image what it has to do with your intention.”
- (<https://www.patballen.com/pages/process.html>)

Later in the day, I would do my centering practice again in the park, and then do video dialogues with animals and plants, expanding on themes that emerged during the intention witness process earlier in the day. I created two summary images, one for each week. In the end, the intention written at the beginning is revisited consciously again, and links, if applicable, are made. The main purpose of this process is to become in contact with the “creative source” also known as:

“The life energy that is the birthright of every person. It is a vast unending, incomprehensible source of potential. It is called the *Void, chi, ki, inner wisdom, the One, ein sof* or *God* depending on the tradition. Art and writing are a means to tap into Source. Other means include prayer, meditation, music and movement.”
(<https://www.patballen.com/pages/process.html>)

The research paper that follows provides context for the art data generated; the findings of my research and my process will be shared through a website online and through a potential exhibition.

My methodology process includes the following methods of data collection: Intention Witness Dialogue technique through art-making and journaling as part of the intention witness process, and videography and photography work with nature and the journaling that happens after this process as well.

Due to time constraints and a gruelling semester due to the pandemic, I had two weeks to collect my arts-based data. Therefore, I would create each day for 2 weeks. These artworks included sketches, watercolour paintings, photographs, and videos. 14 response images total.

Data Analysis Procedures

Sela- Smith (2002), in discussing Moustakas (1990) method of Heuristic research notes that in order to engage with Heuristic research, the researcher “must experience self-dialogue” as a way of allowing the researcher’s intuition to “make connections in the structures of tacit knowledge” (Moustakas 1990). According to Moustakas (1990) tacit knowledge not only

governs our behaviour but is the lens through which we interpret experiences. Tacit knowledge is housed deeply within us and is used as a personal compass or frame of reference for interpreting the world around us, but is made up of subject beliefs and values that we have collected throughout our life, or sometimes inherited through our lineage (Moustakas,1990, p.32). In this way, Moustakas, as well as Allen, both believe that Heuristic research involves a dialogue not only with the self but also with tacit knowledge we have internalized from the outside world (Allen, 1995; Moustakas,1990). This method helps to answer my question because my question inherently explores a dialogue between the self and tacit knowledge

Heuristic arts-based data collection is often arts-based data such as the drawings and journal entries. I collected as I explore symbols and that is then analyzed and coded. For the coding and data analysis portion of research I used a method offered by Schenstead (2009). After writing in her journal, she would highlight meaningful chunks and then would reflect on them, noting what themes emerged. For my research I collected data via journaling based off the intention-witness process outlined by Allen, where you write an intention, make art, and then dialogue with the art through a free-flowing journaling technique (1995). Schenstead (2009) recommends drawing out keywords or phrases, which could then become the inspiration for an artistic creation.

Intention Witness Process

Engaging in the intention witness process allowed me to dialogue with my image, but also helped guide me towards seeing how I was still engaging in the process hours later as I interacted creatively with my environment. Reading over my dialogue and journaling following my art-making practices, I did a Qualitative Thematic Analysis, where I highlighted and recorded recurring themes that emerged throughout the process. These themes are discussed

further here. It can be hard to interpret and analyze Qualitative data but organizing it by theme helped to clarify trends in the arts-based data.

Data Analysis

The data I collected is as follows: 1) Response Art Images, 2) Summary Images (two, one for each week), and 3) Intention Witness Dialogues/ Responses for the summary images/outdoor walks. Parts of this data are available in a game format for public perusal at “<https://squirrelgenerator.wordpress.com>”.

Image Dialogues

The following section enumerates the emergent themes of my data analysis and observations and insights from each week are summarized.

Week 1: Response Images.

The main themes that emerged from this week were a curiosity for the natural world and the connectivity of life and death. I was drawn to the images my grandfather drew in the corner of his biochemistry book and began copying the circular shapes that I learnt were different cells and microscopic organisms. As the week progressed, I began drawing images of plant viruses and the crystallization process that holds them in a fascinating yet unnerving limbo space between life and death. I film clouds in the sky changing shape, blackbirds puffing out their chests to sing, and seagulls fighting over a piece of orange cloth. In my own way, I am finding symbols of connectivity and curiosity.

Copying my grandfather’s images was informative, but it was not my own heuristic process. I then began noticing a pattern: that after I grounded myself, set an intention and drew and wrote, and then dialogued with my work for my research I would get frustrated and leave to go on a walk to a nearby park. While at the park I would walk to the top of a hill, look out at the

landscape and do the grounding exercise again. Then I explore the natural world of the park with a deep curiosity and reverence, taking photographs and videos. This was unplanned and happened as part of the “immersive” step of Moustakas heuristic process (1990). The photographs and short videos I would take on these walks became the second part of my heuristic arts-based inquiry, as I further explored the question of curiosity for the natural world, and the connectivity of life and death. The summary image combines these elements.

Week 2: Response Images

This week I concentrated on my experience of the playfulness of my grandmother, and what I could learn about my own playfulness under these conditions. I began with the generative somatic grounding exercise.

Notes from this week: After grounding and thinking about my maternal grandmother, I journaled for 10 minutes and then drew out some elements to inspire me to draw:

“.... What stuck with me about my grandmother was her playfulness. She would make up games with food by placing it on a fork and saying that the fork was wearing different dresses, broccoli gowns, cauliflower skirts etc. I drew some of these images but I did not find them satisfying. I was engaging with my idea of her symbols, and not gleaning my own personal authentic symbols yet. Then today I did GS grounding somatic exercise outside on a hill, and then began walking around the park. I have walked hundreds of times during the pandemic, usually at least once a day. There I stumbled upon a smiley face balloon that had deflated to the ground. I decided to see if I could make my shadow have a “face” by orienting my shadow over the balloon. In this way, I was playing with my shadow, with the mask/balloon on the ground, but also with the ways of the sun, the blades of grass and the seagulls who were hoping I had food for them. This felt more authentic and the spontaneity of anthropomorphizing and projecting into the everyday environment felt more authentic to me and authentic to what I felt I had in common with my grandmother. In my own way, I was creating a link from the past to the present, and this link gave me hope for the future (relates to resilience)

I continued this exploration both inside and outside. First, I would ground, then journal on a quality of an ancestor- the second time it was my grandfather, then draw pictures. This time it was of plants and plant viruses. Again, this did not resonate with my own brand of curiosity for the world, but it was a start. I went outside and grounded again on the hill in the park, then began exploring. I usually would have my phone ready to shoot 5-second clips as I had been

doing since the summer of 2020 and soon enough, I began seeing squirrels and seagulls and red-winged blackbirds. I have a strong affinity with all three of these animals, but red-winged blackbirds are especially close to my heart.

“...I see now that when I began recording the animals’ movement, and then either speaking to them or narrating their process, I was embodying an important “stance” from my grandparents, one that was hard to draw or name, until I had gone out into the world to attempt to experience it on my own terms. When I filmed seagulls fighting over an old piece of orange cloth that was in a puddle, and a squirrel that was running across a baseball field with a giant stale piece of bread, I was engaged in play and curiosity. These were not the ecological phenomena that my grandfather would have studied, but I brought his curiosity and respect for the natural world to the moment. (...) I also now see I both my grandmothers and grandfather storytelling and playfulness were different and was beginning to explore how my own versions of these were similar but also different to theirs- a unique mix that was all my own and yet fully in “the family” of my ancestral qualities, like a new paint stroke falling into place on a painting. We are nothing without the other strokes of paint, and yet we each bring something new and unique and different.”

“Rather than find a string of personal symbols for myself that help encapsulate resiliency, I found processes that give me joy, curiosity and bring me out into the world to connect in small ways. The smiley face balloon on its own would have never been a symbol for playfulness necessarily, but now it is a helpful shorthand in my mind to look at what is on the ground and see how our shadows can play with things in our environment. This is perhaps the thing that keeps us alive inside, the process of waking up and reaching to the world, noticing, repeating on a daily basis, projecting gently but without shame onto the environment, with joy even.”

“In July of 2020, well before I knew I would begin this iteration of my research, I took a free online course with Austin School of Film online. This course was on the Dogme 95 technique known as “5x5”, where you would film 5 seconds of your daily life in a still horizontal shot with only diegetic sound. You would repeat this 5 times, getting a 25-second clip, made of five five-second clips; hence the name “5x5”. This course fuelled me to go outside and explore over the summer, even when I felt unmotivated, depressed or otherwise without a reason to feel excited about the world outside. I continued this process over the winter, but it was only when I realized that I had intuitively incorporated the technique into my heuristic research that I revisited it in a conscious way. In this new light, I see that the 5x5 technique asks me to notice the world around me, got me in the habit of filming things I notice spontaneously, and to even engage with the landscape, to talk directly to animals and plants and not worry too much if people will overhear. This was revelatory for me.”

Intention Witness response art

I created response art to a specific question or intention relating to my research each morning. By response art, I mean art that is in response to the intention questions I asked, also then created a secondary iteration of response art at the park, where I immersed myself in the

question and embodied the qualities that had emerged in my reflection on my intergenerational self but could not be expressed fully through the intention witness process. From my research, I learnt that the intention witness process, under these conditions of isolation and “being in our heads” even more than normal, needed to be supplemented with processes that were connected to the outside world in some way. In researching ancestral symbols, I discovered that the symbols lead to rituals and practices that cultivated curiosity and playfulness.

Findings

Overview

The following sources provided data for this study; participating in a two-week process with the Intentions Witness Process (about one hour each day); dialogue with park environment captured via video or photography (approximately one hour a day); journaling, and finally documenting which parts of this experience felt relevant to self-care.

Themes and Images

The following reflections emerged through data-analysis, in relation to the intergenerational self, resiliency and arts-based exploration of my environment.

Based on the data analysis, I identified recurring themes: play and curiosity and life and death co-existence.

Themes:

• Play and curiosity:

- **Squirrels:** (Fig 1, Fig 2, Fig 6) Squirrels really became an important symbol in this process. because of the embodied experience talking to squirrels brought me, they came to symbolize both the curiosity for the natural world that my grandfather had relied on for

his own mental health, and the playfulness my grandmother had fostered for herself in times of hardship.

• **Life and death co-existence:**

Ghosts: (Fig 5) the image of ghosts or ghostly shapes recurred in the intention-witness portion of data generated. My grandmother used to tell ghosts stories as a child ; all the children in the neighbourhood would gather in what I assume is the first floor of an abandoned building, they would take turns telling scary ghost stories and when they got the scary part they would all jump out of the window of the building, and then run back in to tell another story. my grandmother said they would pile abandoned mattresses under the window so that you could have something to cushion your fall.

Crystals:(Fig 3 , Fig 4) These came from the idea of plant viruses having the ability to crystalize in a state that is neither alive nor dead. The process reminded me of hibernation, a state still in limbo but still defined as alive more than dead. Trying to image a state that comes naturally to a virus but not naturally to humans is hard, but in a way covid-19 protocols created a world that in some ways perpetuated this crystallized existence: in order to try and outsmart the virus we essentially had to take on some of it's characteristics- freezing and/or slowing down time and space between people in the hope that the virus would fade away. Crystals are aesthetically beautiful, but I often felt ambivalence in creating this shape within this context.

Discussion

What I learned as a result of the Heuristic research method using the intention witness process to better understand process the phenomenon of self-care as an art therapy intern during the covid 19 epidemic, was that although I thought I sought out ancestral symbols to comfort me and to create a resiliency building and meaning making self-care practice, , in actuality my

ancestors were guides on my own path to discover my own version of some of their resilience and meaning making practices. It was only through engaging in my own version of their practices that I was able to feel connected back to them, to the greater world as well, and find one or two symbols that resonated with my own self-care.

As I return to my research question of if we can explore ancestral symbols as a way to gain resiliency, I realize that the response art I was creating had two meanings by the end of the research. By response art, I mean art that is in response to the questions I asked, also then created a secondary iteration of response art at the park, where I immersed myself in the question and embodied the qualities that had emerged in my reflection on my intergenerational self but could not be expressed fully through the intention witness process. From my research, I learnt that the intention witness process, under these conditions of isolation and “being in our heads” even more than normal, needed to be supplemented with processes that were connected to the outside world in some way. In researching ancestral symbols, I discovered that the symbols lead to rituals and practices that cultivated curiosity and playfulness. Sometimes, when we are talking about a “symbol” we are talking about an experience rather than a representational image:

Morrell’s 2011 research on symbols in art therapy and the depth of *meaning* held within symbols helped me recognize that the desire to find an experience first and then to explore the symbols which I associate to the regenerative and intergenerational experiences of playing and exploring on my own terms aided me in finding symbols that could in some way consolidate the experience. The squirrels for instance became a stand-in for both the experience of curiosity and playfulness.

In Hinz’s (2009) Expressive Therapies Continuum, she states that symbolic art-making and kinesthetic art making are accessed and engaged with through very different types of

materials and parts of our brains. I was personally trying to access something that was tacitly known on a physical/kinesthetic plain, and not on an intellectual one it seems. The kinesthetic art-making (walking, talking, being outside and in dialogue with the sounds, sights, textures of the world) were all important practices to glean research data that relates back to my main research question. Through the arts-based research I conducted, I found that the squirrels in the park took on a symbolic quality for me- they were playful on their own, but I felt that I could be playful with them. My natural curiosity for the natural world was always piqued by their daily habits and patterns. I noticed that I found myself wondering about the genetic component of a white squirrel that seemed to have had a few babies this spring as there used to be only one white squirrel in the park and now there were 3, two that seemed much younger. Just by watching them, I reconnected with the outer world and self-regulated. This relates to “attention restoration theory” (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010) which explains that being in an environment that contains “soft fascination” helps people recover from mental fatigue. Nature is a clear environment that is filled with this element of “soft fascination” where we can be attracted to different elements of the space in an effortless and gentle manner. Kuo (2001) supports this as well, stating that nature exposure facilitates self-regulatory restoration.

Creating art is “a path of being exceptionally alive and dying small deaths over and over and over” (Allen, 2005, p. 28-29). When Allen (2005) writes “every entry into art is a time to renew our membership in life”, her theory of art and renewal connects with Perel’s (2018) theory of not just surviving in limbo between life and death, but coming back to life through imagination, curiosity, and a spiritual connection to the world.

Dana (2020) states that when we feel overwhelmed with emotion- we can numb ourselves. But we can also become curious as an antidote to the disconnection we feel. The aim

of polyvagal theory is to gear ourselves towards connection and curiosity in order to come “back alive”. It is unrealistic to think that we will always exist in this state, but to practice coming back to it is essential for resiliency and living a nuanced “intergenerational self” and accessing some of those ancestral stories that help us in times of upheaval.

Limitations, Validity, and Reliability

In order to maintain validity and reliability, Leavy (2009) suggests a plan to engage with the data collection process in a consistent and continuous manner. Kapitan also suggests maintaining the validity of the exploration by making sure it continuously relates back to the original question (Kapitan, 2017). By consistently committing to my practice on a daily basis and reflecting on my intentions each day, I maintained validity in the framework of a heuristic arts-based research project.

However, the results of this research are not generalizable. Not all people will want to engage with the past, and all ancestors are complex. Family enmeshment is an issue that should be considered, and taking care that people are not ruminating or replicating symbols to honour others out of guilt should be explored. It should also be mentioned that it is a privilege that I have any connection to my ancestry, and access to language and status that helps “legitimize” my exploration. Engaging with many forms of ancestor communication in Indigenous and other marginalized communities has been devalued and delegitimized to the point that links to the past have been ruptured and destroyed. This is a form of spiritual and intergenerational violence that should be named, and whenever possible the voices from these communities and their stories should be centered and honoured in their own right.

Moustakas (1990) states: “The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? This judgment is made by the primary researcher.” (p. 32)

I can only judge from the perspective of someone who is still trying to process this year, still unsure of what self-care looks like under these conditions. I think the data gathered is valid in that it helped me connect in an authentic way with my own ancestral information. Even if not all the information presented itself as a clear “symbol”, clearer maps and pathways of rituals and embodiment presented themselves. Exploring symbols can such an intellectual experience (Hinz, 2009), it makes sense that in a year where so much time was spent in my head, I felt the most regeneration and self-care while moving out of the realm of the mind and into the physical world, in my body and in space equally. The search for symbols became more of a map to follow towards rituals and practices of curiosity and play. Symbols emerged from interacting with these practices, but the main point was engaging in the emergent and ephemeral practices rather than finding a stable symbol to attach meaning to.

Recommendations for Future Research

While there is an abundant study of resiliency, the intergenerational self and meaning making through psychodynamic therapy, art therapy, and eco-art therapy, there is little research that combines all of these facets together. In psychological frameworks such as logotherapy (Frankl, 1997), art can be used. In Lantz’s (1993) “Art, logotherapy, and the unconscious God” Logotherapy in combination with art-making is discussed:

“The process of making art can help the client to focus reflection in an internal direction and to become more aware of repressed feelings, symbols, meanings, and spiritual potentials. In Logotherapy(...) clients are asked to use the creation of art as a way to tell the therapist about their life, their problems in living, and the potential meaning and spiritual opportunities that exist in their life. The creation of art is a process that profoundly encourages existential and spiritual reflection. “

(Lantz, 1993)

Art-making then is used as a way of making meaning, part of a larger framework for healing for the client. It is in exploring the art that helps us discover a more holistic and complete version of ourselves.

Similarly Pat Allen, the originator of the intention-witness process, states that the “contents of our mind, when left unexamined, exert a strong influence over our behaviour. The unexamined contents are a source of our resistance to living fully and joyful” (1995, p.60). The application of self-care practice, which uses art to create meaning in distressing times, reflect on ancestral symbols and coping mechanisms, and give an opportunity to engage with and respond creatively to the surrounding environment, could all be explored further in arts-based research and art therapy research in the future.

Conclusion

This guided journey of arts-based heuristic research was challenging but also rewarding. I feel that I have so much yet to discover, but what I found after only two weeks of research shows the potential of this type of exploration. I was also able to attain the methodology’s goal: I discovered answers to questions through my own inner wisdom. This research aimed to explore how the exploration of ancestral symbols could potentially be used as a form of self-care for an art therapy intern during a time of social upheaval. It turned out that my artistic “site” for exploring the research question (Lau, 2019) became a mix of art making, symbol searching, and ritualized processes of play and curiosity where I was responding creatively to my environment as well as making art. These responses were connected to my grandparents' own ritualized meaning-making during times of hardship and, while similar, took on their own unique and authentic shapes the more I engaged with them. Sometimes we may only have the strength to find our own authentic ways of self-regulating by having that process modelled

intergenerationally. Ultimately, by exploring both the good and the bad of an experience, story or symbol, can all find meaningful connections and practices that ground us and help us be present in our lives. Over the past year, I found it helpful to reflect on the coping mechanisms of two people I admired – who always centred the respect and dignity of others and themselves as best they could, who valued curiosity and play, and whose memory always seems to guide me. I had no way of knowing that this research on my grandmother Mary (Mariam) and my grandfather Ray would lead me towards such things as an intense observation of squirrels, but I am glad for the journey and the time spent in dialogue with their ways of being with themselves, with other beings and with the world.

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Appendix

Fig 1.





Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5

Fig 6

Examples of Squirrel dialogue:

1) (Squirrel runs towards the camera) Hey! Stop-- I just came to say hi. Just- don't -come over here to me but (Squirrel climbs a tree) ... hi! hi there. (squirrel begins eating snow off the branch) oh, you are eating the snow! that's so nice-wow....(laughing) (squirrel continues to eat snow)