
CULTIVATING CREATIVE LEADERSHIP: ART-MAKING AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL FOR TRAINING SPIRITUAL LEADERS

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Abstract

Employing phenomenological, heuristic methods, this qualitative research study provides a description of art-making as a spiritual practice for religious leaders and seeks to identify how these spiritual leaders understood the effect of the practice upon their leadership. Of the eleven distinct themes that emerged in the study, this article highlights four significant behaviors that are nourished by the spiritual practice of art-making and that have particular relevance for leadership development. The findings yield insights for cultivating skills for transformational spiritual leadership.

Introduction

Numerous scholars in the field of leadership studies point to the nature of leadership as an art, and this insight informs scholars within the subfield of religious leadership, as well. Indeed, Everist and Nessian note aptly that, “As an art, leadership summons forth originality and creativity as one seeks to imagine, embody, and serve God's transforming purpose of establishing life-giving relationships.”¹ If this is an ideal goal, how then do religious leaders cultivate creativity? As the title of her book states, Sharon Daloz Parks argues that, as an artful

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¹ Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nessian, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 630–631.

practice, leadership can be taught.² While Parks' work focuses on pedagogical techniques in an academic setting, Barbara Smith Gilbert's dissertation points to the potential for cultivating imaginative leadership through experiential training in the creative process.³ Gilbert's research focuses on leadership lessons that may be learned from the creative process of professional visual artists, dancers, and jazz musicians. If creative process is indeed instructive for the practice of leadership, what particularly relevant lessons might be gleaned from Christian spiritual leaders who also happen to make art?

This study, an exploration of spiritual leaders who utilize art-making as a spiritual practice, holds significance for the field of religious leadership in four important ways. First, the study conceptualizes art-making as a spiritual practice. Second, the findings inform the professional practice of ministry, insofar as art-making nourishes the spiritual life of religious leaders. Third, the research offers spiritual leaders' reflections on the formative effect that art-making has on their leadership and ministerial practice. Along those lines, and most importantly for the purposes of this essay, the study suggests best pedagogical practices in the development and training of spiritual leaders.

Theoretical Framework

Embodied acts of faith are variously ascribed to the realms of practical theology or spirituality. The field of spirituality is concerned with the lived experience of faith. Similarly, the discipline of practical theology invites theological reflection upon human experience,⁴ intentionally exploring practices performed within a given

² Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2005).

³ Barbara Gilbert, "The Creative Process and Leadership" (Ph.D. diss., Seattle University, Wash., 2006), 114.

⁴ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2011), Kindle loc. 87.

situational context.⁵ With respect to the theological place of the embodied practice of creativity and the arts, in particular, theologian Karl Rahner argues that:

If and insofar as theology is man's [sic] reflexive self-expression about himself in the light of divine revelation, we could propose the thesis that theology cannot be complete until it appropriates these [nonverbal] arts as an integral moment of itself and its own life, until the arts become an intrinsic moment of theology itself.⁶

As a moment of embodied reflection, the process of art-making becomes simultaneously a form of spiritual expression and a means of doing theology. To this point, Frank Brown argues, "To the extent that artistry interprets life both faithfully and engagingly, and does so in ways not interchangeable with intellectual theology, it can be thought of as experiential theology traveling incognito."⁷

Furthermore, this research is steeped in the kataphatic tradition of Christianity, which embraces the beauty and power of words, ideas, symbols, and imagery as vehicles for prayer, based upon an incarnational theological view which supposes that, having been incorporated into matter, the Divine may be encountered with the senses.⁸ Building on this understanding, I assume that the very act of art-making may serve as a tangible means through which one may explore and encounter the Divine,⁹ and thus, this spiritual practice can serve a sacramental function in the lives of spiritual leaders. Put simply,

⁵ Robert K. Martin, "'Mind the Gap': Closing the Distance Between Theological Method, Theological Education, and Practical Theology for Religious Leadership," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3(1) (2004): 7.

⁶ Karl Rahner, "Theology and the Arts," *Thought* 57(1) (1982): 18.

⁷ Frank Burch Brown, "How Important Are the Arts, Theologically?" in *Arts, Theology, and the Church: New Intersections*, ed. Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 44.

⁸ Betsy Caprio Hedberg, "Not Words Alone: Spiritual Direction with Visual Images," in *Still Listening: New Horizons in Spiritual Direction*, ed. Norvene Vest (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 7.

⁹ Pat Allen, *Art Making Is a Spiritual Path* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2005), 1.

making art is a way to encounter and come to know God more deeply. All of which is to suggest that this research is grounded in a practical theological understanding of human experience as an epistemological resource and assumes the validity of the arts, and more specifically the practice of art-making, as a meaningful Christian way of cultivating the spiritual life.

More specifically, this research assumes that the practice of art-making also serves a formational function in the lives of spiritual leaders. Following the insights of America's premier educator, John Dewey, this research study acknowledges that "The knowledge which comes first to persons, and that remains most deeply ingrained, is knowledge of *how to do*."¹⁰ The very practice of art-making cultivates habits of being and doing, including an aesthetic mode of knowing, which translate meaningfully into the realm of transformative spiritual leadership.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed phenomenological, heuristic research methods to compile and analyze data consisting of interviews with spiritual leaders who are engaged in art-making as a spiritual practice. Qualitative research seeks to understand lived experience.¹¹ More specifically, "Phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants."¹² Or as Michael Patton phrases it, "What is important to know is what people experience and how they interpret the world. This is the subject matter, the focus, of phenomenological inquiry."¹³ According to Clark

¹⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy* (Charleston, S.C.: Forgotten Books, 2012), 217.

¹¹ Sensing, Kindle loc. 1625.

¹² John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE publications, Inc., 2013), 14.

¹³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2001), 104.

Moustakas, who pioneered the social scientific field of heuristic research, this particular research process involves a unique epistemological approach or way of knowing.¹⁴ He contends that “To be heuristic means to discover through one’s own internal awareness and intuition . . . the truth of our own experience, what is true of our life.”¹⁵ The experience of the researcher is thus taken into account in this method and to that end, as a spiritual leader and practicing artist, the researcher also engaged in art-making throughout the course of the study and placed journal reflections about the practice into conversation with interviewees. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate what is actually happening in the lives of ministers who are engaged in art-making as a spiritual practice, with the goal of being able to provide a vivid, detailed description of a phenomenon.¹⁶

In soliciting potential participants, the researcher utilized intensity sampling and endeavored to the greatest extent possible to include people from diverse cultural backgrounds, social locations, gender identities, and denominational affiliations. Seminary educated spiritual leaders were eligible to participate, regardless of whether they served in churches, nonprofit organizations, or community service agencies. As the intention was not so much to achieve maximum variation but rather to describe the experience of a particular subgroup in depth, five subjects were carefully interviewed. In this case, “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample

¹⁴ Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* (Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1990), 10.

¹⁵ Clark Moustakas, *Being-In, Being-For, Being-With* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 13.

¹⁶ Lyn Richards and Janice M. Morse, *Read Me First for a User’s Guide to Qualitative Methods*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 23, 50.

size.”¹⁷ This research goal holds particularly true for heuristic studies. As Moustakas likewise suggests, for heuristic inquiry, “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?”¹⁸ Thus, the primary purpose of the study was to expand knowledge about art-making as a spiritual practice, in and of itself, by identifying how subjects experience the practice, and to explore how they describe their own understanding of how it impacts their leadership.

Each interview took the form of an approximately hour-long conversation, employing a combination of the so-called general interview guide approach, based upon twelve established questions, and an informal conversational interview, which allowed for unexpected questions and areas of discussion to emerge in the dialogue.¹⁹ As such, the study was focused on the participants’ self-reflection upon the nature of the process and their self-evaluation of the effect of the practice of art-making upon their leadership. No attempt was made to measure or quantify any actual results of the practice in their respective ministries. After the raw data from the recorded interviews were transcribed, the research was coded, using Initial/Open Coding and Thematic Coding, and then evaluated, with the goal of describing the phenomenon of art-making as a spiritual practice as experienced by this group of seminary-educated spiritual leaders. Only after themes had emerged from the subject data did I return to the review of literature to analyze whether and how the concepts that the participants identified in the interviews had any resonance with scholarship in the field of leadership theory.

¹⁷ Patton, 253 and 245.

¹⁸ Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 32.

¹⁹ Patton, 342.

Findings

The findings suggest that the practice of art-making serves as a vehicle for personal and communal spiritual development for these religious leaders. Engaging in creative activity as a spiritual practice produces spiritual and bodily shifts, which heighten an awareness of interconnectedness. Thus, it makes space for encounter—with oneself, God, and others. Furthermore, the practice of art-making influences how these spiritual leaders understand and embody transformational leadership. This article will highlight four leadership behaviors that are nourished by the spiritual practice of art-making: practicing presence, embracing vulnerability, a focus upon process, and a cultivation of creative habits and attitudes.

Practicing Presence

The first theme to emerge in reviewing the data was that the practice of art-making contributed to a heightened sense of awareness of the present moment. One interviewee, a parish minister who employs a variety of visual art mediums, particularly collage, hereafter referred to by the pseudonym “Jane,” clearly affirmed the idea of an affinity between the kind of attention cultivated through creativity and through spiritual practice, by reflecting, “I’ve been so formed by Buddhism, especially Pema Chödrön, and in being present.” Another subject, “Susan,” a singer and a musician, struggled to articulate the intensity and meaning of being fully aware of music, in the moment:

I don’t know how to explain that... Just like when I’m listening to music *right now*, I hear the melodies, I hear the music, I hear the notes, I hear the words, and after they’re created ...It’s like it takes on its own form.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of describing the phenomenon, however, the participants in the study were universally mindful of the formative power inherent in the practice of intentionally attending to the arts. The spiritual leaders repeatedly suggested that being present in the

moment of art-making had shaped them spiritually, in profound ways, that informed their way of being in the world. “Michael,” for example—a liturgical artist (who develops art as either an installation or performative activity for use during ritual events), a visual artist, and a writer—suggested that the practice of paying attention in art-making made one more mindful of the sacramentality of all creation, and more aware of the interconnectedness of reality.

I think, that there’s this invitation to be present in the world and with other people, in the action of the art. . . . And it feels holy. And I would say a big part of it is the shaping of me as an artist to be more open to the sacred in the world.

Furthermore, the participants in the study were mindful of the potential effect of practicing presence upon their leadership, not merely in their roles as spiritual leaders but precisely through their work as artists. Two of the study participants explicitly named an awareness of how their art might contribute to transformative change in others, or in the world. Crystal, a liturgical artist, writer, dancer, and choreographer, noted that “There’s an old Christian saying about how you might be the only Bible someone reads . . . when I engage in this work the other dancers [and I] become the word incarnate, and . . . it brings a whole new meaning to that phrase.” Tad, who is a campus minister and liturgical artist as well as a writer and spoken word poet, declared:

There’s very much a sense of that, that when I am in that moment, that is a moment where I’m doing one of the things that I was put on this earth to do, . . . to be there in that moment, offering what I have to offer, so that it can do its work in the world.

These introductory ideas about art-making as a spiritual practice coincide with findings from other studies regarding the potential benefits of engaging in artistic activity. In her dissertation titled “The Creative Process and Leadership,” for example, Barbara Gilbert noted that research into creative personalities supports the existence

of “a heightened awareness of interconnections among people who are regularly engaged in the creative process.”²⁰ Indeed, with respect to her study, which involved interviews with professional artist-leaders, Gilbert determined that her subjects were particularly mindful of interconnections with the natural world, the inner world, and the physical medium.²¹ Although Gilbert associates her research with issues of spirituality, a heightened awareness of connection with God is not explicitly named as a category. This current study, then, with its focus upon spiritual leaders as opposed to secular artist-leaders, contributes additional information to the larger academic conversation.

It is worth noting that cultivating heightened awareness requires the fundamental practice of paying attention, or practicing presence, which art-making as a spiritual practice does indeed foster. Ellen Dissanayake (2000) aptly declares that:

Artists are ever alert to details and connections that arise unexpectedly in daily life and contain the promise of elaboration and further connection to other things and to feelings. Although busy lives conspire against noticing ordinary things, the arts encourage openness and curiosity, seeing possibilities in unpromising material, and paying attention to the moment.²²

The practice of art-making has inherent spiritual implications. For as Earle Coleman rightly notices, “Just as the mystic advocates living in the ‘eternal now,’ an artist may try to capture ‘the present moment.’”²³ Both disciplines, spirituality and creativity, are concerned with attending. By way of example, Coleman intentionally seeks to connect the understanding of “this here nowness . . .

²⁰ Gilbert, 22.

²¹ Gilbert, 64.

²² Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 197.

²³ Earle J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality: Bonds Between Art and Religion* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998), 36.

[of] Buddhist suchness . . .” with the artistic admonition that “The enemy of the aesthetic is not ugliness but lackluster observation.”²⁴

The practice of attentiveness constitutes a way of being, which spiritual leaders ideally model for their communities. According to Michael Jenkins’s article in the *Journal for Religious Leadership*, ministers are to live the practice of attentiveness as “Docents in the House of Wonder.” He writes:

Rudolf Otto says of the consciousness of the holy, that it cannot be “taught,” only “awakened.” It is this we need to reclaim at the heart of pastoral ministry and church leadership. Hidden within every practice of ministry and each gathering of the community of faith, despite the stated purpose, there is the possibility of encounter with the sacred other, the living God, who alone transforms humanity. The docent is in the midst of it all, communicating, shepherding, and leading. The docent points here and there, sets velvet ropes around the mysteries in our midst.²⁵

In this sense, pastoral leadership is an art.²⁶ Furthermore, for a leader to do this successfully, one must be personally steeped in the practice of presence.

Such a disposition also has potential implications for spiritual leaders, not only insofar as they are charged with the task of being open to and communicating the holy, but because practicing presence in a given moment is critical for leadership.²⁷ Indeed, Heifetz and Linsky state that leadership “is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to

²⁴ Coleman, 15.

²⁵ Michael Jenkins, *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1(2) (2002): 18.

²⁶ Sharon Henderson Callahan, “Leadership in Ecclesial Contexts: Integration of Art and Competence,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2(2) (2003): 48.

²⁷ Robert B. Denhardt and Janet V. Denhardt, *The Dance of Leadership: The Art of Leading in Business, Government, and Society* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2014), 120.

moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening.”²⁸ Leaders can only successfully do that if they are paying attention. Such work is not easy. As Parks observes, “Paying attention, as the phrase suggests, requires an active investment of self—and a certain vulnerability to the phenomenon at hand. It asks us simultaneously to be awake, to be present, to observe, to see, to listen, to hear, and to feel.”²⁹ An intricately related theme then, which emerged within the interviews, involves the participants’ comments about the experience of vulnerability, risk, and trust, within art-making as spiritual practice.

Embracing Vulnerability

Practicing presence requires vulnerability, which is an attitude of being that art-making cultivates. “Taking up art is risky, just as it is risky to change our lives or fall in love,” suggests Robin Jensen. “For it to work, we must give up all control and allow ourselves to be vulnerable and exposed.”³⁰ Art-making as a spiritual expression involves a communication, a sharing, of the deepest self, and therefore a willingness to be vulnerable. One never knows how one’s work will be received. Even if one never shows one’s art to others, the act of creation is not without risk, as an artwork may fail to embody the artist’s vision adequately. Just as art-making involves a willingness to embrace vulnerability, so too does a life of prayer. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the leaders interviewed in this study described art-making as a spiritual practice that requires one to trust and take risks.

In describing the invitation to embrace vulnerability, Jane shared a mantra often repeated in the midst of

²⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 73.

²⁹ Parks, 244–245.

³⁰ Robin Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 19.

engaging in art-making as a spiritual practice: “Okay, God called you here, trust the process . . . trust the process.” Once trust was established and the practice of art-making fully engaged, this leader further shared that, “I find my defenses completely are let down. I find that I feel centered. I feel most myself. My authentic self. I feel those barriers that keep us from being vulnerable are taken away, and I feel safe.” Similarly, Tad described moments of pushing oneself to embrace vulnerability as an artist, by declaring:

OK, I’m going to do something that’s kind of scary, but I think that’s a spiritual, that’s a way in which you encounter God . . . because I think my sense of God and the transcendent is that there’s a call to take risks and to step out of one’s comfort zone and to step into something that you wouldn’t normally do, so that you can experience something totally new and different.

Speaking powerfully about the confluence of the experience of surrender, within both creativity and spirituality, Michael declared that embracing vulnerability, particularly in the face of uncertain artistic outcomes, was a worthy endeavor for a leader:

There’s this feeling of surrender, to—I may not be able to express this. And yet it’s my work to *try*. . . . I have to take an emotional risk, to show up in that space for the sake of this community that I’m creating with and for, right?

The notion that art-making cultivates a facility for risk-taking is important to identify, with respect to spiritual formation and leadership development. The Christian tradition indeed affirms this call or invitation to vulnerability, suggesting in the words of David Perrin that “The spiritual center is the deepest center of a person: the place of surrender to authenticity and love.”³¹ Becoming deeply grounded in authenticity and love, at the core of

³¹ David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2007), 22.

one's being, are ideal hallmarks of Christian leadership. Not surprisingly then, in the leadership text, *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in an Organization*, Hagberg argues that leading from the depths of one's soul requires vulnerability.³²

Focusing on Process

A related habit for leaders to cultivate, repeatedly described by participants during the interviews as a component of the experience of art-making, is the practice of focusing upon process rather than product. In other words, the interviewees were more invested in the activity of art-making in and of itself, as a spiritual practice, than in the outcome of their efforts. Susan described the gift of simply allowing “the words to the song, not just in the art form . . . that you use when you sing” to move one beyond mere concern for technical precision. Jane also spoke eloquently and at length about learning to let go of a desire for perfection and to embrace instead the freedom inherent in declaring:

It's OK, whatever you have, just bring it, you know, it's enough. So that was one of the biggest things I learned that was so helpful to me, was that there's a place of enough in art-making. There's a place of enough. And that may not be finished in the way that we expect things to be finished.

Similarly, Michael shared that “this spiritual practice that I was learning, that has shaped the way that I do art” shifted the focus, so that “It's not the finished product that matters, so much as the way that it's created, that there's something, that the action itself is prayer.” This understanding was so significant for him that he reiterated it during the interview, stating that “The work for me then as an artist is not about how good of an idea I have of something to do or how surprising or stunning it is, but it's that I'm faithful to the action.”

³² Janet O. Hagberg, *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations*, 3rd ed. (Salem, Wisc.: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2002), 274.

Embracing such faithfulness to the action, or a focus on art-making as process, indicated a willingness on the part of these spiritual leaders to risk making mistakes. Crystal embraced this notion and wholeheartedly declared:

Living inside the piece was more important to me, being more emotive was probably more important to me. I would always say to dancers, “I don’t care if you’re on your left foot or your right foot, I care that you’re here. I care that you’re in this moment engaging this text in this way,” you know—the Word incarnate, that’s what I care about.

Michael expanded upon this idea of the freedom to err. Indeed, he went on to speak movingly about the spiritual lessons to be learned from failed artistic attempts:

As I experience God’s capaciousness, the ability to be present with us, that there’s nothing I can create that will be unable to be received by God . . . That is the work of learning how to be loved by God. That frankly I think is a big part of the spiritual formation that I experience of my “failure art,” the things I create that don’t go the way I wanted, that don’t live anywhere besides the bottom of the stack, that no one but me and God will ever see. That those are necessary parts of my artistic work because I am learning to be loved.

Such an understanding of faithfulness to process over product, coupled with the willingness to risk and even to embrace mistakes, had implications for how the participants approached not only artistry but also leadership. For example, Tad mentioned how attention to the process of art-making invited him to remain faithful notwithstanding the potential risk of judgment. As he aptly described it:

I think that the creative process pushes me into all the fears, the voices of my head that [say], “Well, you’re not really good enough to do this,” and you know, there’s always somebody better than me or more gifted or talented, and so it forces that struggle with trusting myself . . . to be like, “Well,

regardless of how others react, I'm going to do this, 'cause this is what I think is right, you know?"

In this way, for Tad art-making as a spiritual practice emboldened his spiritual leadership. Even more significantly, art-making served to embolden entire ministries. Jane shared that she purposely incorporated art-making as a spiritual practice within a local congregation, as a means to build spiritual awareness and a sense of community, and in so doing, used it as a tool to cultivate a culture that supports risk-taking. In describing the impact upon parishioners, Jane suggested that, through doing art, the congregants learned:

It isn't about doing it perfectly. It isn't about best or better. It's about being in a community, and having this as a process to share our spiritual lives with one another, and to feel our struggles and inadequacies.

In similarly reflecting upon ways in which artistic attitudes cultivated through creative activity served to enhance his leadership, Tad stated, "Being an artist . . . my role is to inspire, and . . . there's an art to inspiring people." For Tad, sometimes that inspiration involved being willing to model, in his role as a leader, the kind of risk-taking that artists employ:

If you're not failing then you're not trying to do something big enough or important enough. You're not pushing yourself or pushing those you serve or work with, if you're not failing once in a while. So creating that kind of culture of understanding that . . . everything's a process, right, and that we're going to try some things on, and I think that's definitely for me a huge part of leadership.

Leadership theorists suggest that such a process-oriented mindset, which is willing to allow for error, matters significantly. Leaders are distinguished by their willingness to fail.³³ This willingness to move forward by trial and error matters immensely in our current complex,

³³ Henry Petroski, *Success Through Failure: The Paradox of Design* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 64.

changing historical situation.³⁴ Whether in the face of daunting social challenges or everyday ministerial crises, Harford argues that as leaders “We need that willingness to risk failure. Without it, we will never truly succeed.”³⁵ Furthermore, spiritual leaders empower their communities by modeling this willingness to make mistakes, in the service of progress, change, and fuller flourishing. Such an approach to ministerial leadership is critically important, if one takes seriously Barrett’s suggestion that “Innovative cultures maximize learning by nurturing a mind-set of enlightened trial and error. . . . This involves creating a psychological comfort zone, one in which it is safe for people to talk about errors and what can be learned from them.”³⁶

Cultivating Creative Attitudes for Leadership

In addition, the participants described how art-making as a spiritual practice influenced their leadership more explicitly, particularly with regard to how they engaged with members of their spiritual community. A number of participants noted that art-making inspired them to employ more collaborative models of interaction. For example, Susan spoke of how singing cultivated an awareness that leaders need to be willing to recognize their own limitations, and thus to share and delegate responsibility. She shared, “Some people can sing and lead, I can’t—I don’t want to do all that. I want to have somebody that I can relate to directly, that can convey my vision to the band.” Along similar lines, Crystal indicated that:

I mean, we can’t all be cheetahs and we can’t all be rabbits. [laughs] Nobody draws the picture the same way. . . . I think the thing that art can highlight in a

³⁴ Petroski, 21.

³⁵ Tim Harford, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure* (New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2011), 284.

³⁶ Frank J. Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 66.

very simple and non-threatening way is how very different we all are. But also how much we all need each other, or how much stronger we are together, when we let each other use the gifts that we're given.

Similarly reflecting the wisdom that a leader should not seek to be and do all things, Jane declared that the practice of art-making had fostered an inclination to "be much more of a mutual leader rather than a hierarchical one." Such an attitude reflects Northouse's suggestion that transformational leaders work effectively with others, building trust and fostering collaboration.³⁷

Furthermore, Northouse argues that "Transformational leaders set out to empower followers."³⁸ Jane identifies a shift toward this style of leadership, which includes making space for others' voices and ideas, as one result of her spiritual practice of art-making:

I've always been someone who can be very driven, can bring people together and be very task-oriented. And I realize now, where I'm at in my life, that that was more what I thought I should be, what I had to be, it is not really my natural leadership style. [Now, I] sit back, kind of listen, be present with, see what everyone wants to do, figure out how to do that.

This approach echoes Burns' assertion that transformational leaders "may modify their leadership in recognition of followers' preferences."³⁹ Along similar lines, these spiritual leaders described a concern for embodying another tenet of transformational leadership, according to Northouse, that of being "attentive to the needs and motives of followers . . . to help followers reach their fullest potential."⁴⁰ In this vein of transformational leadership, Tad explicitly stated:

³⁷ Northouse, 200.

³⁸ Northouse, 199.

³⁹ Burns, 426.

⁴⁰ Northouse, 186.

I think being a good leader is understanding your context and being a student of that, listening, paying attention, trying to understand, listen, knowing the stories of those you serve . . . who they are, what their story is, what their backgrounds are, what their sorrows are, what their joys are, what motivates them.

Having ascertained the needs of a community, a transformational leader then empowers the constituents. This focus shines through in Michael's description of how the practice of art-making informed his approach to leadership:

I think . . . my work in leadership is to be a custodian of space and relationship and to create a context in which those I am working with can be most themselves and use their gifts and express those things in these truest ways. Not in this sort of Platonic "in their highest form" sort of way, but in this sensuous, earthy physicality, you know . . . to be most themselves in relationship. That's going to be messy and in flux and all these things, but that together there are these moments where you bring these disparate things together, these people who are in conflict or whatever and then there's these spaces where it all just syncs . . . It's the jazz ensemble where there's enough arrhythmic things happening, and accidentals, and then it comes together for a groove for a few measures, and then it falls back out again, but those few moments, those measures are heaven, right?

According to Tad, empowering people to use their gifts fully and truly in the midst of community, as a transformational leader seeks to do, additionally means:

As a leader you also understand that people need to be sustained, because as an artist you understand there are certain things that you have to cultivate and have in your life to have the fuel to do your work. So I think that helps me understand those that I'm leading or in a place of leadership with, that part of my role is to help

them figure out how to sustain themselves and to give them tools and room to be sustained.

Such an approach to leadership, according to Barrett, “means creating space, sufficient support, and challenge so that people will be tempted to grow on their own,” and in so doing, it promotes what he calls “provocative competence.”⁴¹ This is the work of change, and arguably, transformational leadership. While *leadership* as a term was not defined for the interviewees during the study, from the perspective of the researcher, leadership involves inspiration,⁴² building a shared vision,⁴³ and the action of mobilizing people in fruitful ways,⁴⁴ so that they may work together to achieve a common goal.⁴⁵ Likewise, leaders establish direction, align people, motivate them, and produce change.⁴⁶ Furthermore, leadership “...is considered transformational when it promotes trust, creativity, commitment, and ethical behavior, and like art, is informed by and engaged in the creative process.”⁴⁷ These spiritual leaders apparently understand that their art-making practice enhances their capacity to engage in such work.

Perhaps even more importantly, these spiritual leaders asserted a belief that by employing art-making as a spiritual practice, both personally and in the midst of their ministerial contexts, the activity itself could help usher in transformational change, not only in an organization but in

⁴¹ Barrett, 139.

⁴² James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 2.

⁴³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York, N.Y.: Crown Business, 2010), 12.

⁴⁴ Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2002), 15; and Laurent Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1996), 42.

⁴⁵ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013), 5.

⁴⁶ Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership* (Chicago, Ill.: Loyola Press, 2003), 13–14.

⁴⁷ Gilbert, 5.

communities. Once again, transformational leadership changes institutions and societies by focusing upon the systems of operation. In addition, it transforms the relationship between leader and follower, reversing the order, such that a leader becomes primarily concerned with enhancing the welfare and mission of followers, thus empowering them so that they do not need a leader in the same way.⁴⁸ Northouse indeed argues that transformational leaders nurture followers in change and likewise “attempt to raise consciousness in individuals and to get them to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of others.”⁴⁹ Tad echoes such sentiments by declaring that engaging in this spiritual practice of art-making contributed to maturation in personal development:

My bias is that our spiritual practices or religious practices, ultimately what I believe they’re intended for is to make us more fully human, in the best way that we can be human and the healthiest way that we can be human and the most just-filled and solidarity-oriented way that we can be human.

Such a perspective aligns with the assertion made by Vrudny that “Lives lived with awareness of Beauty . . . who share in turn this Beauty with one another, are lives that experience the depth of what it means to be human. They are lives that have encountered and reflect in our world that which is truly sacred.”⁵⁰

Michael similarly affirms that the spiritual practice of art-making calls one to acknowledge the sacred:

[I] think about my work in leadership as how do I listen and see the sacred that’s happening and invite that and celebrate and help others bear witness to these moments of goodness and to bear with the moments where there’s discord, but to bless both of

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Robert K. Martin for framing this insight.

⁴⁹ Northouse, 199.

⁵⁰ Kimberly Vrudny, “Spirit Standing Still: Documenting Beauty in Photography,” in *Arts, Theology, and the Church: New Intersections*, eds. Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 97–98.

those, that the work of leadership is to bless and invite humanity in both of those kinds of moments. . . . Everything is holy.

How does such an aesthetic sensibility contribute to transformational leadership? Block argues that in bearing witness to the sacredness of being, “The arts [serve as] an essential part of the story of what it means to be a human being and a community.”⁵¹ In this light, Jane energetically asserted that creative activity may function as a vehicle toward personal and communal transformation:

I feel like . . . if I did [art-making as a spiritual practice] more often and people did that more often . . . I think that we could have a world of peace. I think we could have a world of justice. I think there would be grace and mercy and compassion in a much, much more abundant way. And then sometimes I feel like, am I just being naive? But the transformation I’ve seen in myself and people, you know. I’m a completely different person when I’m doing it, I really am. I shouldn’t say completely different—I am who I am authentically called to be.

This vision evokes the description Burns offers for transformational leadership, which is “more concerned with end-values, such as liberty, justice, equality.”⁵² Tad further expands the notion that art-making as a spiritual practice not only fosters individual integrity, but also serves to build communal authenticity and transformational change:

The point of understanding God more deeply or practicing my spirituality has everything to do with allowing me to be more fully human. And so I think, for me, both the communities of art appreciation, the communities of art-making together, is a place where I experience glimpses at times, probably just like I do in the church, I

⁵¹ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 91.

⁵² Burns, 426.

experience glimpses of the fullness of feeling connected to other people. Right? Glimpses of this radical solidarity, glimpses of compassion and people at their best, glimpses of deep and abiding love. . . . So I think that art-making or participating in that in some way really has the potential to build solidarity and connection where it's tough. And I think that's ultimately one of the things that God wants of us, is to try to build that [solidarity and connection] where's it's tough, 'cause that's the only way we're going to make a better world and a more humane world.

Such language exemplifies Northouse's assertion that transformational leaders, who are seeking to craft a new and better way, "create a vision" and "make clear the emerging values and norms of an organization."⁵³ Furthermore, Tad's statement resonates deeply with Parks' suggestion that adaptive leadership requires employing the artistry of skilled jazz musicians. As she aptly notes, jazz involves "...bringing tradition, intuition, technique, and the power of imagination and innovation to that edge where the toughest challenges and the greatest possibilities are located."⁵⁴ Are spiritual leaders not called to do the same?

In summarizing the findings, note again that the study did not define the concept of leadership for the participants, nor did the interviews specifically ask the participants to offer their own definition. I acknowledge a predisposition to view the findings through the lens of transformational leadership, insofar as the practice of ministry ideally "raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower," while developing followers "to their full potential and improving their performance."⁵⁵ However, it is certainly possible to interpret the findings in light of other leadership theory

⁵³ Northouse, 200.

⁵⁴ Parks, 213.

⁵⁵ Northouse, 186 and 191.

models. At the very least, one may assert that art-making as a spiritual practice enhances creativity, and cultivates an aesthetic mode of knowing, which has transformative potential.

Conclusion

How might we cultivate creative spiritual leadership among church leaders? What if seminary training were to move beyond simply studying the habits of other people from afar, and instead were to encourage students to engage in the process of art-making as an intentional spiritual practice, as a pedagogical tool for cultivating creative leaders? What if students were encouraged to take arts lessons, in any mode, and engage in a regular habit of art-making as an ongoing part of spiritual leadership formation?

Doing is critical to the learning process. As Parks notes, “People cannot simply be *told* what they need to know in the complexity of practice. They must learn to *see* for themselves.”⁵⁶

Indeed, some educational contexts have already come to recognize the potential benefits of art-making as a practice. As of the writing of this article, numerous highly regarded medical schools, such as Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, have begun to incorporate the arts and lessons in art-making as a required element of their pedagogical process, precisely in order to cultivate empathy on the part of physicians. Wesley Theological Seminary similarly requires students to take at least one arts course as part of its formational process. Might not art-making or creative activity be one of the skills worth practicing as part of other seminary training programs, as well?

Embracing art-making as a spiritual practice, this article does not presume that ministers ought to cultivate the same level of artistic skill and technique as professional artists, although some might. Rather, this inquiry is grounded in the understanding that the practice of art-

⁵⁶ Parks, 5.

making may nourish certain skills and capacities that are translatable to the work of spiritual leadership. For as one recent leadership text indicates:

The leader is expected to exercise a certain creativity and artistry, not the same kind of artistry as the dancer or choreographer, but artistry with respect to bringing the right people together at the right time, drawing forth a vision of the organization, saying just the right words to stabilize or mobilize the group or organization, and establishing a flow of energy in the direction that is selected. ...the leader must be an artist with respect to human energy, especially that energy expressed in human relationships.⁵⁷

This is particularly true of spiritual leadership, and thus practicing the capacity for such creativity is essential.

By their own account, the spiritual leaders in this study declared that immersion in the spiritual practice of art-making has proven to be formative in profound ways. Engaging in creative activity afforded them an opportunity to practice presence, embrace vulnerability, and focus upon process, which are essential for spiritual development. Furthermore, being steeped in the creative process was essential for cultivating an aesthetic way of knowing. Such an aesthetic mode heightens awareness of self, God, and others, which evokes compassionate action and sparks the imagination. As Warnock suggests, the imagination is “at work in our thoughts about what is absent, which enables us to see the world, whether present or absent as significant, and also to present this vision to others, for them to share or reject.”⁵⁸ This makes postulating a better way of being in community possible. As a spiritual practice, then, art-making informs, forms, and shapes leaders not merely individually, but also for the task of engaging in the work of transformative societal

⁵⁷ Denhardt and Denhardt, 137.

⁵⁸ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), 196.

change.

This is precisely what spiritual leaders are called to do, insofar as they seek to participate in creating a more just and humane world that embodies Christ's image of the Kingdom of God. Surely it behooves one to consider how best to undertake the task of developing such prophetic, transformative spiritual leadership and to utilize every potential avenue one discovers to do so. Likewise, if one takes seriously the theological assertion that "God has created us with the marvelous ability to envisage states of affairs which we have never come across in actuality,"⁵⁹ and that this gift of imagination "may be trained to some extent by observation and reflection,"⁶⁰ then should not spiritual leaders be encouraged to exercise this capacity? Furthermore if, as contemporary scholarship suggests, exercising imagination and creativity are essential for leadership, then perchance fostering art-making as a spiritual practice ought to become a key strategy for training spiritual leaders.

The doing matters, in the formation of people for spiritual leadership. Callahan concurs that "The most effective leadership education has to involve students in learning at both the cognitive level *and* at the interpersonal and personal level . . . [allowing them to] practice the skills over and over."⁶¹ Might art-making or creative practice be one of the skills worth practicing as part of seminary training for spiritual leadership? Indeed, Barrett argues that "Nurturing spontaneity, creativity, experimentation, and dynamic synchronization is no longer an optional approach to leadership. It's the *only approach*. The current velocity of change demands nothing less."⁶² Parks declares that leadership education and training, in general, ought

⁵⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 132.

⁶⁰ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1992), 121–122.

⁶¹ Callahan, 167.

⁶² Barrett, 163.

best be modeled upon the practice of art-making.⁶³ Gilbert likewise advocates developing imaginative leadership specifically through training in the creative process.⁶⁴ In light of such assertions and if “Our task as seminary and university educators is to continue to research, evaluate and educate in ways that form and develop peoples’ imaginations for pastoral leadership,”⁶⁵ then surely cultivating art-making as a spiritual practice is worthy of consideration as a pedagogical tool for the formation of spiritual leaders.

That may prove especially true if, as the spiritual leaders in this research study profess, art-making serves not only as a vehicle for spiritual formation for leaders themselves, but also functions as a potent agent for transformative change within ministerial contexts. Certainly, this is not a new assertion, for the potential of the arts to move the heart and evoke change has been heralded by scholars for millennia. Many philosophers have espoused the idea that a significant relationship exists between theological conviction, aesthetics, and ethics.⁶⁶ This research study promotes the conscious development of such connections between creativity and ethical engagement, for “Receptivity toward what is beautiful is crucial to the ability to envision and do what is good. Without the aesthetic embodied in communal practices, the vision of goodness grounded in the holiness of God may lose its point.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, the testimony of the spiritual leaders within this study, regarding how the experience of art-making shaped their understanding and practice of leadership, supports the notion that, “Perhaps

⁶³ Parks, 49.

⁶⁴ Gilbert, 114.

⁶⁵ Callahan, 83.

⁶⁶ John W. DeGruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics and the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

⁶⁷ Don E. Saliers, “Liturgical Aesthetics: The Travail of Christian Worship,” in *Arts, Theology, and the Church: New Intersections*, eds. Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 181.

the moral life can once again be understood as an aesthetic mode of seeing and beholding, rather than only in terms of decisions and action.”⁶⁸ According to Brueggemann, such an aesthetic mode of beholding is crucial to the task of prophetic ministry, which involves the challenging work of reimagining the world, and therefore requires an “...act of imagination that violates conventional epistemology.”⁶⁹ What may be at stake, then, is not only the efficacy of spiritual leaders but the ability of the larger church to fulfill its mission.

This research argues for fruitfulness of art-making as a spiritual practice for spiritual leaders, in the hope that future scholars and educators will engage this issue further. The true potential of art-making as a pedagogical tool for cultivating creative spiritual leadership remains to be tested. Next steps to a more robust engagement with these findings might, therefore, include the establishment of pilot programs, incorporating art-making as a required, ongoing intentional practice for students within spiritual leadership training centers.

⁶⁸ John Dykstra Eusden and John H. Westerhoff, III, *Sensing Beauty: Aesthetics, the Human Spirit, and the Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 42.

⁶⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter-Imagination,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(1) (2011): 5.