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Art for Life: A Spiritual Journey of Art and the Bonds of Community

Tara Lynn Smith

The University of Montana

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ART FOR LIFE:
A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF ART AND THE BONDS OF COMMUNITY

By

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Within mainstream culture exists an accepted protocol by which most people function in daily life. The majority of the population has a standard way of life without much detour to other possibilities. Sometimes this canonical does not seem quite right. The potential detour then becomes increasingly difficult to ignore because a disconnect of community runs rampant in the corners of our culture. My intuition regarding a way to live differently coupled with a spiritual connection and life-purpose, has caused me to take action in unexpected ways resulting in outcomes of revelation. In pursuit ways to re-connect to the significance of community, an exploration of my personal role and the role of art became a crucial starting block. I strive to use art to re-build community in places of disadvantage, lifestyles of mishap, and with people who carry wheelbarrows full of pain and life-experience. My spiritual awareness and deliberation to pursue this vision initially led me to the idea of teaching art in a homeless shelter in Missoula, Montana. My life goal and passion is to dive into the endless possibilities of art as a way to form unique bonds and life-growth with people in alternative populations.

An indispensable aspect of my vision is my personal connection to the presence of God in my life. This connection is what ignited me to search, listen and follow the ideas that felt intentionally and divinely placed into my heart. As my experience working with art and people who are homeless increased, so did my awareness to a greater purpose behind the circumstances in our lives. The significance of this notion cannot be omitted from the written exploration of my project without a misrepresentation of what truly happened to me in this journey. The stories from my students who are homeless and the experience of utilizing my own artwork to financially support their efforts continues to inspire my life work. I am excited to pursue unknown circumstances with a perspective that life is divinely designed and the significance of human connections reaches a precious depth beyond our normal pattern of perceiving our world.
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Introduction

Picture yourself as a child sitting next to a large wall. It stretches as far as your mind can comprehend, and it is high enough that you cannot see, jump, or climb over it. You have lived here your entire life. The space around you is your canonical. You eat, breathe, and exist there next to the wall. Life by the wall is adequate enough and most of the time you are quite content. Yet once in a while you hear subtle noises coming from somewhere else and the thought of other possibilities existing on the other side of the wall flicker through your subconscious.

As you grow in your life by the wall, curiosity visits once in a while. You begin to venture down the perimeter that was once thought to be never ending and you discover new things. You visit places by the wall with new plant life, different textures and patterns on the bricks, and markings left by other people who have also wandered here. The surroundings are fascinating. It is as if someone dabbled the wall with shiny treasures just for you. The sounds you have heard all your life begin to have definition and direction. You now hear it in the form of music coming from the other side of the wall. Sweet music as if sung from the rims of a thousand crystal glasses. Its melody tickles your ears and a new thought resonates in your mind: your life is no longer adequate until you reach the instrument--the source of the sound. The sense of beauty and something amazing for you beyond the wall is now the foundation of your pulse as you move faster, searching. With defibrillated motivation you begin to jog, and then run. All the while catching glimpses of confirming light through the cracks of the wall as it rapidly passes in your haste.
Suddenly you see it. A door. It is the first real possibility of a chance to see the other side. Heart pounding with anticipation, you reach for the brass ring by which to open the door. It is locked. You then notice that several keyholes scatter the front of the door, each one distinct and important. All you have to do now is find the keys.

I have had the sense of something more, something beautiful my entire life. The wall I sit next to is quite possibly my lack of knowing how to reach these perceived realities. Yet, I believe that I found a few keys that have begun to open the door to a different way of functioning in a society with a conditioned system of expected behavior.

**Chapter One: The Beginning**

Two years ago I pursued an idea to teach art in a homeless shelter in Missoula, Montana. This endeavor inspired other ideas within the art realm including a deep growth and exploration of my personal artwork and style. My curiosity initially was to answer questions about “the other side of the wall” or other ways to operate through life that I sensed possible for as long as I can remember. Through this inquiry, I discovered that I have questions about art specifically and its role in an alternative, more genuine way of life. I ultimately desired to prove the suspicion that art is a catalyst for developing community, sense of self-worth, connectedness to life among people lacking in habitual resources of wellbeing. This work has given me several keys to unlock the barrier which has very dialed-in and self-righteous rules for life.

The inspiration for this work came from a yearning to experiment. It also came from a burning question: How can art influence the lives of people in alternative situations? My specific role in this process was a point of interest and self-discovery for me; one that I felt would benefit solving my notions of “something else.” My
disagreement with our society’s norms caused me to examine my ideals concerning art and community. These thoughts, coupled with a sense that there is a deeper significance in art than simply making things to hang in some expensive gallery available solely to an elite population, urges me to search for the “where” and the “how” in which art and relationships can move past society’s superficial realm. As an artist, I cannot shake the inclination that the worth of my creativity extends far beyond creating works of art to sell. I want my artistic style challenged. My goal for my life is now this: To fuse both my artwork and life ideals together as a component that connects to the greater good of humanity.

The initial experimental step is an attempt to do something, anything to ignite the possibilities art brings to the table. My vision is and always will be a challenge. The components of the greater whole often seem unattainable and far-fetched. My idea to teach art at a homeless shelter seems bizarre and complicated, yet this was one idea that surfaced in making my vision a reality.

Two years ago, I had no idea what to expect as I introduced myself to the volunteer coordinator of the Poverello Center (a shelter and food-resource for people who are homeless in Missoula, Montana) and explained my idea. I half expected to be required to go through some complex initiation process, background check, and volunteer training to even be considered as a possible instructor for an art class. Surprisingly all I had to do was show up, form connections with the residents, and start teaching art. Reflection upon the ease of my admittance into teaching at “The Pov,” I realized that an ironic simplicity exists in the structure of homeless life. In part by necessity and in part because of unpredictability of whereabouts, to verify the experience or integrity of a
potential art teacher was on nobody’s priority list. I have come to believe that the simplicity of this process makes perfect sense and is highly significant to the structure (or lack thereof) of this particular setting. The absence of mainstream logic is precisely why random experiments of creativity seem to work.

Chapter Two: Expectations Shattered

A dominating realization that has occurred with the experience of this project is that working with people who are homeless or people who are considered street kids functions in complete opposition to what most people would commonly expect. Due to the necessary effort in acquiring resources and inconsistency of daily schedules, people on society’s fringes exist according to no specified protocol. Their time-structure is determined by survival. Instead of posting the art classes on a calendar and having people sign up for attendance and payment, people found out about my class because I spent time talking with them over their daily free meal. The familiarity of relationship was more of a motivator that the art itself. Sometimes people chanced to walk by the art room and by mere curiosity wander in and pick up a paintbrush. It became apparent that interaction and strength of friendship became more crucial than punctuality and consistency to people who are homeless. It is not as if I could contact any of my students consistently. If they had a phone it was usually out of minutes and none of them had an address other than “The Pov.” To relay information about the class, or upcoming sessions, or changes, meant that I had to just show up at the ‘Pov’ in hopes that I might see my students at the right time on the off-chance that they wandered in that day. This was confusing at times, but an indicator that their reality was completely different than mine.
When people are obtaining resources for survival on a moment-to-moment basis, it is nearly impossible to achieve regularity. My students’ daily lives consisted of making decisions that the majority of society does not have to make. When my students have to choose between the free shower offered at the same time as the free meal all the way across town, daily priorities get adjusted. The tendency to operate outside regular societal norms reoccurred so much in my process that I now expect art, or anything for that matter, to happen in such settings without any obvious indication of organization or procedures. Even things such as lesson plans began as set in stone yet changed to encompass whatever creative needs were present at the table during that particular second.

At one point, I came in with a lesson on gesture drawings planned and ended up teaching a modge-podge of skills based on individual needs and requests. One person wanted to learn graffiti letters, another watercolor landscapes and the person who just joined the group an hour late wanted to experiment with portraits. I quickly abandoned my lesson plans. It mattered not what type of art was being accomplished but that people had a chance to come together and create a chance for hope. I now believe that things in life may not happen according to our plans, but what does end up happening trumps our original intent.

Events and daily struggles are dealt with in the homeless world in an almost matter-of-fact, unexplainable, unexpected fashion. Someone might show up for an art class one day never to be seen again. Others come back twice a week and after two sessions agree to be in a documentation video and perform on stage for a handful of college professors and university graduate students. It is as if what is happening in the
moment is the most important, and most logical way to be spending their time. This acceptance of my presence in their world is in spite of having no previous knowledge of me as a person or instructor. People who are homeless do not always know when they will have to jump a train and leave town next, or where or even if this very important, in-the-moment art class will even exist next week. For reasons I am still figuring out, friendship is microwaved instead of neglected under such circumstances. When working with art in alternative settings, the ‘right now’ becomes the ‘only now,’ yet with an influence that lasts indefinitely.

It is increasingly difficult to pinpoint the concrete effects art creation has on the people in my art classes at the Poverello Center. As previously mentioned, nothing functions according to bullet-pointed expectations or clear-cut recordable calculations. How does research obtain measurable results with a population who is somewhat difficult to approach and highly inconsistent in their daily patterns? The only documentation I have is the invaluable stories and experiences I witness with my students. Once in a while a treasure occurs and my students let me have a small glimpse into the actual impact experiencing art has on them.

**Chapter Three: The Stories**

The first one was Don. Don showed up to the art class during the summer of 2007 mainly to hangout and socialize. He sat for a while staring at the paintbrushes before him without saying a word. Eventually he just started painting. Don painted without speaking for an hour. By the end of class he had created a watercolor piece (see figure 1, p. 7) and suddenly spoke, “I promised that I would never paint again, and here I am. It’s been about 5 years.”
Don proceeded to tell me that while he was in prison (for who knows what and for how long) he sent drawings to his son every week. Apparently, his ex-wife and mother of his son destroyed every piece he had created, and his drawings never made it to his son. The pain of this event was drastic. Losing his art forced Don into a vow of refusing to create. When he had the opportunity to explore creating again in my art class, his abandonment of making art changed. Right then Don promised to make more drawings for his son and save it until the boy turned 18 when his mother could no longer cut him out of his life. Though this outcome was not expected because the situation was not planned, it was apparent that Don’s connection with art, even for a short while, allowed him to reflect on his life experiences long enough to bring about change and eventual healing from his past.

Monica’s story had a similar visible element in that she allowed me to see the affect art had on her and others over a longer period of time. The prolonged feedback I
received from her was unexpected. Monica showed up to the art class at the “Pov” in the summer of 2007 nervous and convinced that she had no artistic ability. Her interest in creating, however, made her curious enough to allow me to work with her. I taught Monica graffiti letters and by the end of her second class she had perfected drawing the letters with a developed and unique style. I left Montana that summer with the understood possibility that I may never see her again. Yet, as serendipity would have it, when I returned to “The Pov” over a year later, I found Monica on the porch outside of the dining hall. I was excited to see her and somewhat relieved to know that she was alive and well. She heard my voice and immediately came over to talk with me. Our connection had not waned over the year we were apart. She attended my art classes again in the summer of 2008 and possessed a vibrant energy and charisma that encouraged the rest of the group. Through conversation with other students I learned Monica had been drawing. She had since found her own place to live yet still maintained her connection to the shelter by dedicating drawings to each person who moved on from the “Pov” for whatever transient reason.

As I think about this now, not only is Monica’s story a testament to the power of art in developing self-worth and connection to others, she taught me a new type of trust. Sometimes, my focus is too concentrated on pushing through the red tape of my daily life. I begin to mislead myself and think that my actions do not affect others whatsoever; that what I do does not matter. Monica told me personally that art had given her joy in life and a place for her ideas to have purpose. I went an entire year not knowing how art had continued to impact Monica from the initial class she attended, and in turn how she began to impact others through her generosity and drawings. As humans, artists, and
teachers, we must remind ourselves that people are changed for the better (or for worse) by our actions even if we do not see it. Meaningful impact happens amidst and despite our inability to fully comprehend our influence. When reflecting on this influence, I find myself acknowledging the fact that trust expands beyond a person-to-person connection. Trust encompasses a way to mentally approach new possibilities that can happen in life. Monica’s story exists in my mind as an example of our often-overlooked impact.

Keith’s story is a perfect example of an unexpected situation that produced fruit beyond what I could have expected. As a random arrival, he showed up for dinner while I was volunteering in the kitchen of “The Pov” in the summer of 2008. After a conversation about art and the power of education over our meal, he attended my class later that evening. Odd and eccentric as he was, and not really certain why he ended up in Missoula, or if he would stay, Keith proved important my efforts with art. After merely one hour in my class, he had used the entire large tube of blue and white acrylic paints on a multi-part abstract piece (See figure 2, p. 10). Keith claimed that to create was to fully express our joys and angst in life and he was overjoyed to have the opportunity to simply make art. The fact that he could create ten paintings in an hour gave him a sense of competence and uniqueness. To him, emotions could not be in full fruition unless they spilled out of their owner in the form of art. Keith’s life was random. He had an unknown circumstance keeping him apart from his wife and only a suitcase of items with which to start over. The energy of the work he literally threw on the canvas accurately portrayed his life and purpose within my vision.
Figure 2. Keith created an 8-part series in blue acrylic. He explained to me that for him, the color blue expressed his emotion because of the variety he was able to achieve. Poverello Center art classes. Summer 2008

The day I met Keith was only a week before my scheduled performance for the Creative Pulse, which would feature my work at the “Pov.” During that one week, Keith showed up to another art class, allowed me to personally interview him for my documentation video, and created a personal painting for each one of my Creative Pulse
professors. When he came to me with the idea to present the paintings to the University of Montana faculty as a symbol of gratitude for the knowledge they had passed on to me, I could not help feel an intense sense of intended purpose (see figure 3, p 11).

Figure 3. Keith painted this painting for me prior to performing on stage. He presented it to me as a surprise to go along with the paintings dedicated to my professors. Summer 2008.

Some might call it fate. Without knowing the motivation behind my intended project Keith’s actions to graciously give away his art fell directly in line to my vision: to use art and the learning of art to build community that did not otherwise exist.

At the end of our week together, Keith along with Monica and several other homeless students from my classes, showed up to paint on stage as a performance means to celebrate art in our lives together. I did not anticipate my homeless students to even be willing to paint on stage in front of a public audience. I especially did not foresee the miracle that happened because of this event. Their presence on stage with me caused a fusion between two creative worlds. The first contained unpredictable, possession-less
wanderers who need imagination to survive. The other world housed intellects who were trying to make sense of their college degrees and what they had been so methodically taught. Both worlds exist, and both are valid. Yet rarely do they intermingle with each other. Nothing in that moment could shatter the happiness and sense of purpose I felt with my entire being. Tears of joy ran un-contained down my face as Keith read a surprise poem he wrote for me about our experience together (see figures 4-11, pp. 13-17). The willingness of my students to come into the University setting, despite their crazy lives, and the reception of awe from my professors and colleagues taught me a powerful lesson. Trust is believing something will happen against all odds and when we give certain ideas the slightest chance, our vision will be realized. Complete trust and learning will happen when we let down our defenses and preconceptions long enough to form community with those around us. Art and God made the backbone for this revelation.
Figure 4. The first page of Keith’s poem.
Figure 5. Page two of Keith’s poem
Homelessness is now
America! And in
Being Homeless myself,
The Beauty of my
life is Art! Everything
I see that's good is
someone who's doing Art.
The art of life is to
live as one, and to keep
one's own individuality.

Figure 6. Page three of Keith’s poem.
IT is truly a
joy to be here
and share this
moment with
that
Beautiful Soul
for I can see clearly
and steadfast the
individuality and the
Beauty of her soul.

Figure 7. Page four of Keith’s poem.
Let it be known to all here and now in the week and a day I have known Tara, my new goal is to be as unselfish and as caring as you. Sincerely your's, Keith May the blue grass winds blow and may all your endeavors always be at your back!
in Missoula. Like last year, we had to pick an issue and do something about it, perform our growth in front of our class. I taught art lessons at the Poverello Center again this summer. Yet I was struggling to connect with the energy—struggling with apprehensions regarding the effectiveness of our work. Sometimes seeing people one week and then never again makes me wonder if anything good happened with the art classes. I was also struggling with how to make my time with my students more meaningful. During the last week—things really came into fruition, however, and I felt pretty lucky to have experienced such neat things. In attempts to figure out how to present this to my class—my ideas don’t always fit into a nicely wrapped box—I kept somewhat envisioned my students from the Poverello joining me on stage. I wanted my professors and other students of the Pulse to see what can happen with community and art. I wanted my homeless students to see the source of my inspiration and I wanted to provide each group a chance to communicate with each other.

Figure 9. My personal journal entry regarding the experience painting on stage with my homeless students. Written July 21, 2008.
that my students might feel like I was putting them on display— or that my colleagues would think it didn’t make sense. My goal, however, was to continue my experiment of community and what is possible with that and art. I’m glad I got the courage to ask my students at the Pav—and asking meant that I had to go find them—most didn’t have a phone. It ended up being a wonderful treasure of a day. 5 students: Jeff, Nick, Haas, Monica, & Keith came to support me on stage. Together we painted (continued) in front of my professors and students of the Creative Pulse. Keith, unbeknownst to me before the day before this—and without him knowing that I was giving art away, gave each of my professors a painting. The moment of bridging the gap had begun. My professors were touched. Afterward we had lunch together & I wanted each group to talk to each other. Oh, Keith had also written me a poem for me about community, my influence on him, and art. I didn’t know what to say and as tears of joy, humility, & thankfulness streamed down, I felt I had finally made a breakthrough with my ideas & another step toward living my life how I think things should happen. My
Figures 11. My personal journal (page 3) regarding the experience painting on stage with my homeless students. Written July 21, 2008.

Chapter Four: Divine Connection

I cannot refrain from acknowledging the spiritual aspect that contributes to my growth in this journey. My endeavors over the past two years and my ideas for the future do not function solely from an academic perspective. In fact, it is entirely from a spiritual perspective that I even began this quest. The deep and intentional connection I feel to who I recognize as God is the igniter for my project with art at the Poverello Center and the superior reason why I am compelled to continue. A few specific and clear-cut examples stand out in my mind that demonstrate spiritual progression in proving art essential for developing community among alternative populations. The incident with my camping stove is one case that left me certain and in awe of the spiritual guidance for my project.
One morning in the summer of 2007 I was preparing my materials for the Creative Pulse personal performance. This performance was intended to portray a resolution of an issue that I chose to pursue over the duration of my summer classes. I needed to purchase art supplies to complete some paintings and I went outside to find my car completely dead. Let it be known that three days prior to the discovery of my useless vehicle, I had a strange yet crucial thought. Immersed in thinking and planning how I would approach the people at the Poverello Center, I remember asking in meditative prayer what in the world I needed to do to pull off such an un-orthodox idea. “Give away your camping stove,” was the only thought in response. Difficult as it may be to understand, it was as if God were making the request. With feelings of annoyance and disbelief, I dismissed the idea. The notion of giving my camping stove away did not make much sense. The thought came from no valid or cohesive connection to any other thought or event at the time. I did not think about it again until later when the reason behind this bizarre request became clear.

So there I was, three days later, with errands to accomplish and with the frustrating discovery of a dysfunctional vehicle. Normally, I would have pursued the structured response of dealing with this dumb car, for how was I supposed to GET THINGS DONE? However, I felt a strong sense that something else was supposed to happen with my time that day. I followed that sense. I decided to spend my morning in prayer and silence by the Clark Fork River in Missoula. I made my way to a little island and basked in my alone time for about an hour and a half. On my way back out a voice startled me from my thoughts.

“Hello,” he said.
“Oh, hi.” I said to the man cooking by a campfire, “I didn’t see you.”

“Beautiful morning to be outside,” he responded.

“Definitely,” I said. I began to chat with him. His name was Doug and somehow we ended up in casual conversation about how he arrived in Missoula by jumping trains and what I was doing wandering by the river on such a morning. I mentioned my broken car and he told me about growing up in Germany and about his travels. Somewhere in the midst of our chat I noticed the copious amount of smoke his cook-fire was releasing into the air. Given that we were in the middle of town I could not help think that this smoke would probably draw attention and get him in trouble. Then I remembered the Godly request from three days earlier to give my camping stove away. Though meeting Doug had more to do with my deliberate change of perspective and less to do with art, maybe he, this random person by the river, was the intended recipient for my stove. Astonished and still in moderate disbelief, I now felt compelled to find a way to give my stove to this man. I needed to find out if, and especially WHY God was behind all this.

When I brought up the fact that I had a stove he could take, Doug’s reaction was surprised and grateful, yet hesitant. I could tell that despite his needs, he did not want to take the gift. By now my curiosity was too intense to move on. I had to figure out a way to give him my stove. How could I convince him to take it without pressuring or offending? I had an idea.

“Tell ya what,” I said, “You mentioned that you’ve worked on a few cars in your day, how about you look at my car, give an honest attempt to fix it, and the stove is yours.” Doug looked at his campfire with billows of smoke. He knew as well as I did that having a stove would drastically ease the difficulty in making daily meals. He
agreed to look at my car. What happened next astounded me and solidified notions of divine purpose behind my work. An hour later Doug came to fix my car. I had my camping stove ready as he got in the driver’s seat to assess the situation. When he turned the key in the ignition before doing any work, the formerly lifeless car started right away. He walked away with my stove and left me with a fresh point of impact in my life, not to mention, a working car (see figures 12, 13 and 14, pp. 24-26).

When I look back on this event and re-tell the story I realize how crazy it must sound. As unbelievable as it may be, I know what happened to me that day. When Doug left with my camping stove in hand after the Divine request three days earlier, I had an outpouring of energy and ideas. I now knew how to approach the homeless students and articulate my project to the Creative Pulse; two areas I had mulled over in frustration about what to do for quite some time. Previously confused and second-guessing my intended project, this event motivated me to continue, and was a confirmation that my vision did have validity and that I was in the right place.
Figure 12. A copy of my journal regarding the incident with the camping stove. Written July 8, 2008.

So today I woke up—went out to my car and it wouldn’t start. I’ve learned by now that this usually means I need to (fix) something or that God has other ideas for me that day. So I began to pray. I’ve also begun learning how to listen. Okay, so no car. I decided to walk down to the river to pray. To take some time with God and the water. Help me to live how I’m being led to live. I thought about how and why some people have experienced God and some have not and why? Was I just lucky that I grew up in the church with my parents and it became a springboard for my faith—or did God choose this life for me? And if God chose this life for me—why me? I trust God’s ideas but yet sometimes it’s very abstract. So I prayed and
thought I sang by the river. On my way out I
when things began to change. I met a homeless
 guy who was making coal's hot with a fire so
he could cook his food. His name is Doug.
I've met a lot of homeless people in this town
they all have their story to tell. So do we all
I guess. As I was talking to Doug about
things - his travels, my unworking car, a thought
from a few days ago came into my head.
The thought being: you need to give away
your camping stove. At the time, I dismissed
it. Weird random thought. But today while
talking to Doug I realized that he needed
a stove. Since Campfire smoke this close to
the town (in the MIDDLE of it) would
definitely get him in trouble.

T: "Do you need a stove?"
D: "That would be great, don't you need it?"
T: "Yes, but you seem to need it more."
D: "Now I couldn't take your stove - it'd be
 too heavy anyway."
T: "Tell ya what - I'll give you my stove if
 you come look at my car."
D: "I suppose that'll work."
I met Doug an hour later on the corner of 4th & Hazel. It’s been HOT. 100° or more. I gave him my stove & he looked at my car. Before he did anything he wanted to try & turn it on, and it worked right away. No labor needed. He used my phone to call his family in Florida & went along on his way with my stove & fuel bottle holding the words: “Romans 12:2.” A verse in the Story that has resurfaced in me all of my life & I was particularly aware of it today. The whole reason I needed my car was to get supplies for my personal presentation for class. My personal presentation is about my issue of living differently through art and action. These ideas have been surfacing in my life here every day. Crazy, yet I’ve learned to expect crazy from God. It’s almost unreal that this happened today. It almost made too much sense. God never ceases to boggle & amaze my mind. So here’s the day in a nutshell:

Project of living differently in my head thought about giving away my stove 2 days ago going to get materials for my project car doesn’t start go to river pray meet Doug who needs a stove My stove is given away car works

July 8, 2008
Chapter Five: Art with Intention

It is important to note that the spiritual aspect of this project lives interconnected to my personal artwork as well. From the initial thought process for starting graduate school, I sensed a deeper purpose for creating art than how I was experiencing it. Prior to teaching art at the “Pov” my artistic work had reached an impasse that was both frustrating and unyielding. I was becoming creatively stagnant. I feel that in order to push away from such artistic doldrums I need to approach creating in a manner that avoids the tendency to succumb to the traditional create-to-sell mentality for a trendy art market. This intuition does not come from me, but seems again to come from a divine source outside of myself that is asking me to move in the direction I am still heading. The initial experiment to work at the Poverello Center undoubtedly influences my artistic style in a way that I hoped for, yet did not fully expect. Symbolic colors that were previously lacking began to emerge in my work and I developed a refined sense of symbolism (see figure 15, p. 27).

Figure 15. Blue and Orange #2. Acrylic and Paper on Board. 36x42”. This painting is an example of my new style. I created it over the duration of teaching art at the Poverello Center.
My paintings and drawings now feature torn newspaper on board with deliberate use of words and phrases from headlines, advertisements, and want ads. My work itself is becoming a point of reflection regarding new concepts, story, and increased spiritual relevance. I now have at least thirteen finished works created over a year and a half (see figures 16 and 17 on pp. 28-29). Perhaps not as prolific as Picasso, but this is the highest number of original work I have ever created in such a short time frame and my inspiration for this work comes directly from my experience in this process of the last two years. Each piece explores a different facet of the relationship between humans and the divine. I have discovered that God does not operate under the norms humans have set forth. As a person, I do not always understand God’s logic. To follow God’s call is to risk being regarded as a nutcase, and requires the courage to pursue ideas that I may not always understand. My artwork represents that following my intuition and risking response to the divine callings I feel does in fact change my life. I am connected to an invigorating energy and purpose that I have not yet found anywhere outside of a Godly existence.

Figure 16. Left: “In Your Face.” Graphite, acrylic and newspaper on drawing board. Right: “Immersed and Unaware.” Graphite and newspaper on drawing board. Both drawings were created in the fall of 2008 for my art show “Human, Divine, Slime.”
Embedded in the ideas behind my new artwork exist questions regarding art’s potential to serve as the financial source for other art entities who work with society’s outcasts. I strive to find out how art can in turn fund programs for art in alternative settings. In pursuit of this question, I am in the initial stages of using my personal artwork to raise money for two non-profit art places. A month-long show in January 2009 featured my current new work and brought in over $500 dollars to be donated (see figure 18, p. 30). The sale of my art helps fund the art program at the Poverello Center of Missoula and the Ezra studio in Denver; A place that provides daily open studio time for Denver’s street kids (see figure 19, p. 31 and the website www.justezra.com). The connection of my art to these groups is critical. It represents the availability of choice to live differently and the support and shared vision of agencies who also choose this lifestyle. My regard for community is heightened because of my experiences over the
past two years. Art, like people, do not exist solely for selfish means. People survive more healthfully with greater purpose when connected to each other. By selling my art to fund programs that foster relationship through creativity, my world is expanded and my actions have new relevance.

Figure 18. Newspaper article featuring my art show. Sky Hi Daily News, Grand County, Colorado. This article was published on January 16, 2009. Please visit skyhidailynews.com
Chapter Six: The Journey Continues

Spending time volunteering at Ezra in Denver of late gives me a local opportunity to follow my ever-expanding ideals that stem from my process over the past two years. Considering the nature of working with people in alternative lifestyles, it is no surprise that Ezra functions in the back of a building that is run-down and haphazard, no specific program exists, and no one can give an accurate account of which students attend and when. I stumbled across Ezra randomly through a friend who happened to hear about my vision for art and community. She had the insight that the values of Ezra and my vision come from the same mold. I only had one conversation with the Ezra directors...
over the phone and I felt the connection myself. It is fortuitous that this connection is close to my home near Denver, Colorado. This relationship came about too simply for me to dismiss it as random or unintentional.

I believe that when things are meant to happen, the process to start them will not seem like work. In fact, being plugged into Ezra happened so easily that it is not mere coincidence. I have learned that powerful things happen where we least expect it and where we can least control it. Such awareness alleviates the pressure to live life by someone else’s standards and instead allows me to choose what God has in mind for my life.

An overall thread that I hope to convey from this two-year project is a sense of connectedness, purpose, and relevance that life-events can have when we follow our insight, heart, theories and philosophies. I now approach things with a perspective that though we experience things that are unexpected, never realize our full impact, or have more nagging questions than answers, good things come out of all situations. I can trust in my ideas and the intentions of God for my life. However, this is not to portray a known conclusion to my journey in unlocking the door in the retaining wall. Rather a birth of a life-long search for more keys. The many facets of my vision for art in community and art in self have just begun to weave their way into my existence. The more I work with art and people who are homeless, the more I am satisfied and curious about the possibilities life offers. I see a commonality among people that transcends notions of class, status, material possessions, and even time. There is Divine intentionality in the small and large events in our lives that leave me feeling creatively claimed by God and interwoven with humanity. I believe that God is the artist behind
this beautiful offered life. The glimpse of this reality and my experiences so far are too compelling to ignore: The journey of art for life continues.
Bibliography


