Garrett - Evangelical Theological Seminary

ARTFUL AWAKENING: A CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION STUDY USING ART, POETRY, AND LYRIC AS AN INVITATION TO EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

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Artful Awakening: A Critical Participatory Action Study using Art, Poetry, and Lyric as an Invitation to Embodied Spirituality

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Artful Awakening: A Critical Participatory Action Study using Art, Poetry, and Lyric as an Invitation to Embodied Spirituality

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"Artful Awakening: A Critical Participatory Action Study using Art, Poetry, and Lyric as an Invitation to Embodied Spirituality" explores how pastoral leaders can use creative expression to facilitate deeper spiritual engagement within congregations and communities. This project responds to the spiritual and bodily harm of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy, which manifests as disembodiment, dualistic thinking, and perfectionism. Through a six-week Critical Participatory Action Research and Arts-Based Participatory Action Research intervention using art, poetry, and lyric (APL), participants moved beyond intellectual knowing into embodied awareness, experiencing increased body trust and a shift from perfectionism to permission.

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This project is for all artists who surrender to the sacred work of creating and courageously share their work with the world. I am deeply grateful to the participants who trusted this process with their presence, vulnerability, and creativity. Their willingness to listen to their bodies, engage mystery, and remain open to transformation shaped this work in ways I could not have imagined.

I give thanks for the teachers, mentors, spiritual directors, and companions who helped me trust the questions, the unfolding, and my own embodied knowing. On this journey, art became prayer, and community became a means of grace.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Context

The Problem: Disembodiment as a Cultural and Spiritual Crisis

I was sick, literally sick. My body was responding to a church culture built on production, perfectionism, and results. I had high blood pressure. My hair was falling out, and I was rapidly gaining weight. When I went to my doctor, the diagnosis was clear: stress. The source was equally clear: a ministry environment that demanded more — more programs, more growth, and more time. When I went to the church leadership to advocate for myself, asking for time to heal and set boundaries, I was told I was not a good fit for the church at all.

In the aftermath, I picked up a paintbrush for the first time in years. Watercolor became a form of prayer. Mixing colors on the page invited presence. Their uncontrollable nature taught me to let go of perfection. The more I engaged a creative practice and eventually explored other art mediums, the more I was able to notice grace and cultivate gratitude. Art opened a door to deeper spirituality for me. These practices allowed me to access something that I could not access through thinking, reading, or praying in traditional ways. My body knew something my mind had refused to acknowledge, and art gave me a way to listen. This embodied awareness became the doorway to a deeper, more integrated spirituality.

As the journey of healing began, I noticed the ways perfectionism, fear, and dissociation showed up in my own life. Once I recognized these tendencies in myself, I began to see them reflected in my pastoral work and in the world around me. After

more than a decade of ministry, I became aware of a troubling reality. Many people lived disconnected and fragmented lives that made wholeness feel out of reach. As a pastor in the United Methodist Church, I often think about our mission statement: *to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.* For me, discipleship is a journey toward wholeness and integration.[1] What began as a personal awakening slowly developed into a pastoral concern.

I began to see patterns of dissociation, fragmentation, and fear in my congregation. People would come to me in the thick of family crises but would rarely look for where God might be in the midst of it all. It became clear, even when unspoken, that many congregants had learned to associate God primarily with church rather than with the everyday realities of their lives. Attentiveness to grace in ordinary moments was unfamiliar territory. As my awareness deepened, I began to see this same fragmentation extending beyond personal crises into the broader cultural and political landscape of the United States. Christians have learned to separate the teachings of Jesus from the ways they engaged the world around them.

As I looked more closely, I began to notice how little a person's faith shaped their understanding of justice, neighborly love, or communal responsibility. In small group settings, I regularly invite participants to consider where God might be present in situations, how God might be responding, and what faithfulness might look like in practice. Often, those questions are met with silence or discomfort. It was not

[1] Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 56.

resistance so much as unfamiliarity. They were shaped by dualistic thinking that separated sacred from secular, mind from body, and faith from action. Many had never been given tools to integrate their faith with the fullness of their lives. Faith occupied one space, while relationships, daily decisions, and embodied experience occupied another.[2] Over time, it became clear that this separation had limited people's capacity to encounter the mystery of God's grace at work in the world.

I remember facilitating a small group where a lifelong Christian and beloved church member was sharing about the Christian responsibility to share the gospel and save the lost. She went on and on about all the things she needed to do in order to be a *good* Christian. Her earnest sharing was filled with the notion that she should be better and do more. When she finished sharing, I asked, "What part do you imagine God playing here?" I watched her immediately shut down. These questions were beyond anything she could answer. She shared a few religious tropes about being a faithful Christian, but she could not name God's role in her striving or imagine her own role beyond performance. The group talked around it for a moment, someone else spoke up, and I continued facilitating. I wrestled with this interaction for weeks, though I do not think this was a pivotal moment for anyone else in the room.

Moments like this, both in my own story and in my pastoral work, revealed a deeper spiritual problem. What I was witnessing was a persistent disconnection between faith and lived experience. This project takes that disconnection seriously. It

[2] Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 43.

names disembodiment, a separation from one's body, emotions, and lived experience, as both a cultural and spiritual crisis. Grounded in theology, spiritual direction, and arts-based research, this study explores how art, poetry, and lyric (APL) can function as invitational practices that help people reconnect with their bodies, their stories, and the presence of God. What follows traces how this crisis emerged, why it persists, and how embodied, creative practices can serve as bridge work toward wholeness. These practices seek to engage the whole person and not just the mind.

To understand why this work matters, it helps to see where the disconnection lives. Recently, I was leading a small group on spiritual formation. We were discussing the theology of original goodness, that God calls us very good, that we are enough just as we are, and that God loves us regardless of what we do. A dozen people in that room shared that they never feel good enough, much less good enough for God. I remember thinking that the emotional tone in the room felt disconnected. Someone made a joke about deconstructing their Evangelical roots. It was not sadness, but it was not freedom either. The mindset of doing for God was so ingrained that they could not imagine what it would mean to simply be with God.

In most Bible studies taught in churches across the United States, the overall goal is to gain more knowledge about God rather than cultivating an experience of being with God. This focus on knowledge comes from the Enlightenment's influence on Western Christianity, which has centralized thinking, facts, and answers as the primary expressions of faith. Knowledge, in many Christian circles, has become synonymous with faithfulness. This emphasis has left people spiritually drained and has positioned the

church, the institution and its leaders, in places of power and control. In these spaces, it can feel like a moral failure for people to admit not knowing. Mystery and ambiguity are unwelcome.

In the United Methodist tradition, we teach about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. These are "the principal factors that John Wesley believed illuminate the core of the Christian faith for the believer."[3] They include: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Scripture is primary, but the quadrilateral is most meaningful when each element is in conversation with the others. Tradition informs experience, reason engages scripture, and all four work together toward spiritual maturity. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is useful when teaching about spiritual formation because it decentralizes reason. It affirms that our lived experience is also a way we understand and encounter God. Yet so many of the people I serve have been taught, implicitly and explicitly, that their bodies, their feelings, and their lived experience do not matter as much as right belief, right action, and measurable faithfulness.

These teachings take their toll on individuals, the church, and its leaders. I began to notice patterns of emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical illness among those I served. Many pastoral conversations were seemingly about the facts of a situation or about justifying circumstances, but beneath the surface, they were really about control. Mystery, surrender, and discernment, all essential in my understanding of spirituality, were rarely part of the conversation. Again and again, I noticed how people shaped the

[3] United Methodist Church, "Glossary: The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," accessed (December 14, 2025), https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-wesleyan-quadrilateral-the.

gospel and scripture to reinforce their own certainty rather than allowing the gospel to transform them. Control seemed necessary because uncertainty felt unbearable.

This resistance to mystery and ambiguity pointed to something deeper, a need for control. When people struggle with hard conversations and questions that don't have clear answers, uncertainty begins to feel like a personal failure. If they can't arrive at certainty, then they must be lacking in faith or spiritual discipline.[4] That internalized inadequacy shows up as burnout and as a spiritual life that is often results-focused and judgmental. Faithfulness gets measured by productivity: attendance, service hours, and visible growth. This reflects a broader culture that values doing over being and ties worth to measurable achievement rather than presence. People are striving constantly and never quite arriving.

Serving as a United Methodist pastor in Mississippi, I see how these dynamics are reinforced by a theological landscape shaped by political and cultural forces that prioritize control and dominance over flourishing. Our spirituality has mirrored the fragmented world we live in, leaving people stunted in their spiritual growth, overwhelmed by loneliness, and dissociated from their lived experience. People are detached from the world, their neighbors, and themselves. Faith has too often been reduced to allegiance, certainty, or performance rather than a way of being rooted in love, presence, and connection.

[4] Brian D. McLaren, *Faith after Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do about It* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2021), 78.

This disembodiment is a spiritual problem rooted in systems of capitalism (which values productivity and profit over personhood), colonialism (which imposes dominant ways of knowing while erasing others), and white supremacy (which assigns worth based on proximity to whiteness and control over bodies, particularly marginalized bodies). I will explore these systems in greater detail in future chapters, but I believe these systems perpetuate chronic stress, trauma, and alienation, disconnecting individuals from their sense of safety and worth. This disembodiment is not just a personal problem, it is a communal and theological crisis.

Definition of Terms

Before we go any further, we need to be on the same page about the terms I will use throughout this project. These terms carry theological, cultural, and political weight. Some of these definitions draw from established scholarship; others reflect my own understanding shaped by years of pastoral work, study, and lived experience. Either way, clarity matters. These are not just academic concepts; they name realities that shape how we see ourselves, engage the world, and encounter God.

Disembodiment is living disconnected from your body, emotions, and physical presence in the world. It is living primarily in your head, cut off from the wisdom your body carries. Disembodiment shows up as dissociation, numbness, and/or the inability to recognize what your body is trying to tell you about safety, need, or truth.

Embodiment is the practice of living with awareness and integration of body, mind, heart, and spirit. Flora Slosson Wuellner writes that "the way we relate to our bodily selves profoundly influences the way we relate to God, to one another, to prayer,

to all of life."[5] Embodied spirituality honors the body as sacred and trusts that God meets us in our flesh-and-blood humanity.

Mystery is the practice of living with uncertainty, ambiguity, and questions without clear answers. In the Christian mystical tradition, mystery is not a puzzle to be solved but a reality to be entered. Meister Eckhart describes this movement toward God as a process of unknowing: "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction."[6] For Eckhart, true knowing requires the release of certainty, concepts, and fixed images of God. Mystery is not a failure of understanding but a spiritual posture of openness, trust, and surrender. This process of unknowing resists binary thinking and invites us into spaciousness, where God is encountered beyond language, certainty, or control.[7]

Spiritual Direction is a sacred, contemplative practice of listening for the presence and movement of God in a person's life. Wendy Miller defines a spiritual director as someone who "looks for and listens for the presence and guidance of the Spirit of God within the person sharing his or her story."[8] Rather than offering advice or answers, spiritual direction creates spacious, attentive environments where silence, discernment, and reflection reveal where God is already at work.

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[5] Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Prayer and Our Bodies* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1987), 21.

[6] Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 199.

[7] Mallory Wyckoff, *God Is* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022), 137.

[8] Wendy J. Miller, *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director: A Pilgrimage Through the Gospels* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2004), 22.

Art, Poetry, and Lyric (APL) are creative practices that invite people to slow down, pay attention, and engage their inner lives in embodied ways. They work through image, story, sound, and metaphor to create space for reflection rather than explanation. In this project, APL function as gentle invitations rather than instructional tools. They do not require a single right interpretation; therefore, they open participants to curiosity, emotion, and mystery. APL help people notice what is stirring in their bodies and invite trust in lived experience as a place where God is already at work.

Empire is, as Cláudio Carvalhaes defines it, "a coming together of economic, cultural, political, and military power… that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination." [9] Empire is not merely a historical or political structure but a theological force, one that shapes imagination, values, and bodies. It is a totalizing system that normalizes exploitation, rewards productivity over presence, and prioritizes control over communion.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that "Empires are never built or maintained on the basis of compassion. Empires live by numbness." [10] This numbness is not accidental; it is necessary. Empire depends on disembodiment. It needs people to become disconnected from their bodies, emotions, and moral imagination, so that suffering can be managed, ignored, or justified.

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[9] Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 4.

[10] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 88.

In this project, Empire names the interlocking systems of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy that shape Western culture and Christian practice. These systems train people to value certainty over mystery, efficiency over faithfulness, and domination over mutuality. Empire is comprised of these systems. Naming Empire is not an abstract political exercise but a spiritual act of truth-telling that opens the possibility for liberation, re-humanization, and embodied faith.

White Supremacy is both an ideology and a systemic structure that privileges whiteness while marginalizing people of color. It operates not only as individual belief, but as institutionalized patterns woven into economics, politics, culture, and theology. It perpetuates hierarchies that determine worth based on proximity to whiteness.

Capitalism is an economic system that values productivity and profit over personhood. In the context of Empire, capitalism extracts whatever it can get from bodies, land, and labor while measuring worth by output and achievement. Under capitalism, rest becomes suspect, creativity without marketable results becomes frivolous, and people are valued for what they produce rather than for their inherent worth.

Colonialism is the practice of acquiring and maintaining control over land, resources, and people. Beyond political domination, colonialism operates as what Randy Woodley and Bo Sanders call a "Western consciousness," a framework that divides the world into hierarchies and justifies domination through binary thinking.[11] Colonialism

[11] Randy Woodley and Bo Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism: An 11:59pm Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 41.

imposes dominant ways of knowing while erasing or marginalizing indigenous cultures, languages, and ways of understanding the world.

Decolonizing is the work of recognizing and dismantling colonial patterns of power, thought, and practice. In spiritual formation, decolonizing means breaking down binary thinking, honoring multiple ways of knowing, and creating space for mystery and ambiguity. Randy Woodley and Bo Sanders describe this work as a "hermeneutic of suspicion," which asks: How did we come to know this? Whose voice is missing? Who made the decisions?[12] Decolonizing spirituality refuses to relegate God to one way of knowing or one cultural expression. It creates room for the body as a site of revelation, for emotions as forms of wisdom, and for practices that engage the whole person. Ultimately, decolonizing is the work of freedom. It is untangling systems of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy from our everyday lives in order to experience freedom from Empire's hold on our bodies, minds, and faith.

The Thesis

Many people live disembodied lives, dissociated from their deepest desires, which hinders their ability to fully embrace an embodied spirituality. This disembodied state is a reflection of Western culture shaped by capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy, which inherently leaves individuals feeling fragmented. This project seeks to use APL as a bridge to awaken individuals to an embodied spirituality. APL is subjective and therefore invites participation. APL is inherently ambiguous, which cultivates a space that gives permission to ask questions, wrestle with meaning, and experience

[12] Woodley and Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism*, 41.

something new. Awareness is the first step of deeper spiritual work. At the same time, people do not know what they do not know. Therefore, this project seeks to use APL with the tools of spiritual direction to help gently guide individuals toward a more embodied spirituality.

APL works as bridge practices of decolonization for several reasons. First, APL is subjective. There are no right answers when contemplating a poem or standing before a painting. This subjectivity dismantles the binary thinking that colonization depends upon. Second, APL is inherently embodied. When we look at visual art, listen to music, read poetry aloud, or create with our hands, we are engaging our bodies. We are seeing, hearing, touching, and moving. We cannot participate in APL with only our intellect. Third, APL bypasses the intellectual defenses that so often guard against transformation. A well-crafted question about a painting invites curiosity. Fourth, APL invites wonder, mystery, and ambiguity. These are the very qualities that have been squeezed out of many circles in Western Christianity. In a theological landscape that prizes certainty, APL gives permission to not know, to sit with questions, and to allow meaning to unfold over time.[13]

This project pairs APL with the practice of spiritual direction because transformation requires more than exposure to new experiences. Spiritual direction is a sacred, contemplative practice of listening and waiting for the presence and movement of God. It can take place in individual or group settings, where a spiritual director

[13] James W. Pennebaker and John Frank Evans, *Expressive Writing: Words That Heal* (Idyllwild, CA: Idyll Arbor, 2014).

creates a spacious, attentive environment rooted in trust and curiosity. Rather than offering advice or answers, the director listens deeply, asks transforming questions, and invites silence, discernment, and reflection. In this space, a person's full story and lived experience are welcome. Spiritual direction pays attention to patterns of grace, helping people notice where God is already at work and how the Spirit may be gently inviting them toward greater freedom, integration, and wholeness.

When APL is facilitated with the posture and tools of spiritual direction, it becomes more than creative expression. It becomes bridge work to decolonizing spirituality. It breaks down dualistic thinking. It embraces mystery. It begins the work of integration. It offers a first step toward wholeness. This is not a solution to the crisis of disembodiment. There are no quick fixes to systemic fragmentation, but it is an opening, an invitation, and a gentle disruption of the status quo. It offers people a way to begin reconnecting with their bodies, their neighbors, and God.[14]

Research Questions

This project is guided by one primary research question with three secondary questions that explore specific dimensions of the work. The primary question addresses the central concern: how APL functions as a pathway to embodied spirituality. The secondary questions examine particular aspects of this process: the decolonizing potential of APL, the measurable impact on participants, and the practical application

[14] Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 1.

within group spiritual direction settings. Together, these questions create a framework for both theological reflection and empirical investigation.

Primary Research Question: How can the use of art, poetry, and lyric (APL) cultivate, embrace, and deepen embodied spirituality for individuals and small groups?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. How can APL be used as non-threatening tools to begin the work of decolonization?
2. What impact does the use of APL have on participants' levels of embodiment and spiritual awareness over the course of a group intervention?
3. How can the use of APL in a group spiritual direction setting provide practical pathways for addressing issues of embodiment and decolonization?

Primary Audience

This project is designed primarily for church and spiritual leaders. This includes pastors, spiritual directors, church educators, and denominational leaders who are seeking to deepen spiritual formation in their communities. I believe that church leaders are naturally positioned in spaces where transformation can be cultivated. Many of our church institutions operate under the same rules of capitalism and colonization as the broader society. They focus on results, numbers, and productivity. The gospel itself invites something different. The gospel is transformational, not merely informational. As previously mentioned, Western Christianity has been deeply shaped by Enlightenment values that prioritize knowledge, answers, and certainty. Jesus invites us into something

deeper, something that changes us and the world we live in. This project seeks to equip church leaders with tools to help facilitate that kind of transformation.

Church leaders will gain several practical resources from this work. First, they will receive concrete tools, including APL practices, contemplative structures, and reflection questions adaptable to worship, Bible studies, small groups, workshops, and retreats. Second, they will be offered a theological foundation for embodied spirituality, helping them articulate why this work matters within a Christian framework. Third, they will learn a strategy for bridge work. Specifically, how to introduce decolonizing concepts without triggering resistance. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, they will receive permission to lead with curiosity rather than expertise.

Bridge work is essential because transformation requires meeting people where they are. When people feel attacked, they automatically become defensive. When people do not understand a term or idea, they disengage. Using words like decolonization, capitalism, and white supremacy can be polarizing and unfamiliar, particularly in the context of the southern United States where this project is situated. The work of decolonizing, however, is the work of spiritual formation. APL invites people into that decolonizing work without specifically naming it in ways that create resistance. APL creates a space where people feel safe to be themselves.[15] It begins with wonder and breath, giving permission to not know. APL is not about right or wrong answers. In a world that focuses on binary thinking, art offers a different path. It is intentionally

[15] Pat Schneider, *How the Light Gets In: Writing as a Spiritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 247.

ambiguous. It invites the participant in to reflect, explore, and share. APL lowers defenses and opens people up. It creates curiosity rather than judgment.

This project builds tools and resources that cultivate space for APL to be an approachable introduction to decolonizing work. Church leaders can take the six-week intervention developed in this project and replicate it in their own settings. Even more than that, they can take the ideas, resources, and experiences and implement them in ways that fit their unique contexts. The vision is not rigid duplication but creative adaptation. Leaders who understand the principles can develop their own APL practices to be used in worship, pastoral care, small groups, or retreats. This work fits into existing ministry structures while gently disrupting the systems that have kept people fragmented and disembodied.

Ministry Site: Link Centre

Research for this project took place at the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi. The Link Centre seeks to provide a welcoming environment along with transformative arts experiences, resources, and education programs to improve the wellbeing of community members of all ages. Serving a sixteen-county region in Northeast Mississippi, the Link Centre is housed in a repurposed church building. This is a symbolic detail that was not lost on participants.[16] Everyone familiar with Tupelo's history knows what the building used to be, yet it no longer feels like a church at all.

When participants arrived for sessions, they walked into an open room with good natural light that was easily accessibility. The space often displays art exhibitions,

[16] Link Centre, "History accessed (December 15, 2025), https://link-centre.org/history/

creating an atmosphere where creativity is already present and valued. Tables and chairs were arranged in a U-shape so that people could see one another. Upon arriving, everyone signed in and went to a table to pick up their journal and the day's materials. Instrumental jazz was often playing to set an inviting, contemplative tone from the moment people entered. The environment felt welcoming, spacious, and intentionally different from a traditional church setting.

The partnership with the Link Centre came about through a previous relationship with the executive director after I participated in some of their open mic nights and poetry workshops. It became clear that this project aligned with the Link Centre's mission and values. The executive director also served on my Doctor of Ministry Onsite Advisory Team (OSAT), providing both support and accountability throughout the research process. The Link Centre's stated values: trustworthy, respectful, creative, compassionate, quality-oriented, and responsible, matched the posture I wanted to cultivate in this work. They also deeply value inclusion, which was essential to this project.

The significance of the Link Centre as a neutral third space cannot be overstated. It was not a church I served, which meant it felt like a community offering rather than a church program. This allowed for diverse participation. Participants included members from my congregation, people from other churches, and individuals connected to the Link Centre. Multiple people came specifically because it was not held at a church building. The neutral space created a level playing field, disrupting the insider dynamics

that often characterize church-based programs. Participants didn't have to perform a particular version of themselves or conform to unspoken church expectations.

The Link Centre houses therapists, hosts PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meetings, offers concerts and arts education, and operates with an "all are welcome" ethos that creates safety for this kind of vulnerable, exploratory work. The space itself communicated permission. It gave permission to not know, permission to question, and permission to simply be present. For a project centered on embodied spirituality and decolonizing practices, the choice of a third space was not incidental. It was essential. It allowed people to encounter God, themselves, and one another in ways that might not have been possible within the familiar walls of a church.

Informed Personal Perspective

I bring a particular set of experiences, training, and social location to this work that shape both my perspective and my limitations as a researcher and facilitator. My own embodiment journey is central to why this project exists. As briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, I lived for years in a detached, dissociated, and hypervigilant state. My body was responding to systems and structures that demanded performance, productivity, and control.[17] Through therapy, spiritual direction, and contemplative practices like watercolor, journaling, prayer walks, meditation, and somatic exercises, I

[17] Deb Dana, *Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2021), 8.

began the work of integration and embodiment. This work fundamentally changed me. It changed who I am as a pastor and how I show up in the world.[18]

Before engaging in these practices, I was exhausted and burnt out, trying to control everything, produce unrealistic results, and meet unrealistic expectations. I knew in my bones that something was off, and that I was not living the way we were designed to live. My Doctor of Ministry program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary gave me language for what I already knew in my body. I am grateful for my Doctor of Ministry cohort and the books I read during that time, which exposed me to embodied spirituality and decolonizing theology. This learning affirmed and deepened the transformation I was already experiencing through my own creative and contemplative practice.

My embodiment journey taught me to feel safe in my own skin. I am no longer striving or trying to prove anything to anyone. I know I am enough because God says I am enough. This shift is significant because it informs how I facilitate this work. Many pastors, myself included at times, are trained to lead from certainty or expertise. I try to lead with curiosity. I participate in the group. I share my own thoughts, growth, and struggles. I say "I don't know" when I do not know something. I am always pointing back toward God rather than positioning myself as an expert with all the answers.[19]

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[18] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 26.

[19] Tod Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 60.

My training has equipped me for this work in multiple ways. I hold a master's degree in counseling, which taught me to listen deeply, to see things beneath the surface, to hold space without needing to fix problems, and to sit comfortably in silence. These skills are essential for facilitating spiritual direction and creating the kind of spacious, attentive environment this project requires. I have worked with my own spiritual director for years, learning what it means to listen for the presence and movement of God in my own life. I have cultivated practices of integration and embodiment in my spiritual life, which means I facilitate from lived experience rather than theory alone.

I have also been shaped by a posture of pilgrimage and curiosity from a young age. I traveled internationally as a youth and participated in mission trips throughout my teenage and young adult years. These experiences taught me how to be curious, how to listen, and how to recognize God at work in all places— not just the places I expect to see God at work. Early on, though I did not have language for it at the time, these experiences challenged some of the colonial assumptions I had inherited from growing up in the United States. I moved away from a Western savior mentality toward mutuality, listening, and recognizing God at work in other places.

At the same time, I must honestly acknowledge my social location and the power dynamics inherent in this work. I am a white woman serving as a United Methodist pastor in Mississippi. I am doing decolonizing work from a place of significant privilege. This comes with responsibility. As a white person facilitating this work with primarily white participants, I can name racism directly. I can ask hard questions and push the

boundaries of current ways of thinking. Other white people are more likely to hear these things from me than from people of color. That is the reality of white supremacy and the power I carry whether I want it or not. It is why, throughout this project, I intentionally lifted up marginalized voices. I used art, music, and poems created by people of color.[20]

I also cannot escape the fact that I was the pastor of several participants in this study. I facilitated from a posture of spiritual direction by creating space, asking questions, and inviting curiosity, but participants still viewed me as an expert because I am their pastor. We had previous relationships and experiences. I could tell from how people interacted with me that this dynamic was present. I could not control how people saw me, and I did not try to. However, holding sessions at the Link Centre rather than at the church made a difference. People saw me in a different light in that neutral space. The change of location was significant and opened up possibilities that might not have existed within my own church context.

When people who are marginalized were in the room, which did not happen often, I was aware of how the conversation went. I paid attention to whether they were included, whether people were respectful of everyone in the room, and whether the space felt safe. I tried to hold that awareness without being controlling or performative about it. This is ongoing work. None of us can escape colonialism. It is the air we breathe in the United States. I am complicit in systems I critique, but I believe that acknowledging these realities honestly is more faithful than pretending they do not

[20] Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience, 131.*

exist. This project is not about arriving at a decolonized place. It is about beginning the work, practicing mutuality, and creating space for transformation that I cannot manufacture or control.[21]

[21] Gil W. Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet: Bringing Spirit into the Workplace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 17.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Disembodiment as a Culture Problem

The disconnection between body and spirit that many Christians experience is not simply a personal failing or an individual spiritual struggle. It is a cultural inheritance, a way of seeing and being in the world that has been taught, reinforced, and normalized across generations. This is especially true in the Western world. To understand why so many people struggle to pray with their bodies, to notice God's presence in physical sensation, or to trust their embodied knowing, we must examine the cultural systems that produce and require disembodiment in the first place.

Randy Woodley and Bo Sanders name this inheritance directly: "The Western person is possessed by a deep, uncritical allegiance to Western ideals, values, and assumptions… This is why we call it a Western consciousness. It controls, possesses, and ultimately colonizes our way of thinking."[1] This colonization is not metaphorical. Colonialism, in its historical sense, refers to the political and economic domination of one people by another, typically involving the seizure of land, resources, and labor. While formal colonial structures may have ended, colonialism continues to operate by what Woodley and Sanders describe as a consciousness, a way of organizing that persists over time. This consciousness divides the world into hierarchies such as civilized

[1] Randy Woodley and Bo Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism: An 11:59pm Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 51–52.

and savage, rational and emotional, mind and body, and sacred and secular. These binaries do not simply describe difference; they create and justify domination.

This history matters for how we understand art itself. Much of the art we have inherited, and much of the art we no longer have, is the result of colonial power. Throughout history, entire artistic traditions were destroyed, dismissed, or stripped of meaning, while others were preserved, elevated, and displayed. These forces shaped which forms of creativity were valued, which stories were told, and which bodies were deemed worthy of representation. Still, the art that remains carries real beauty, wisdom, and truth. It bears witness to human longing, resistance, imagination, and survival. What we recognize as art today has been shaped by these colonial histories. It holds both loss and gift together, shaping the stories we hear and the ones we never encounter.

This colonial consciousness also shapes spiritual formation. Binary thinking keeps people spiritually immature by preventing integration. Spiritual maturity requires the ability to hold complexity, to recognize God's presence in paradox, and to integrate mind and body, reason and emotion. When faith is formed within rigid either-or frameworks, people remain fragmented and unable to develop the kind of wholeness that marks mature faith.

At the heart of Western consciousness lies what Woodley and Sanders identify as “a binary framework at work that divides reality into neat opposites: body/spirit, sacred/secular, male/female, objective/subjective, mind/heart… These binaries have

deeply infected the way we think, feel, relate, and engage with the world."[2] The body/spirit split is not incidental to this framework. It is foundational. When the body is positioned as inferior to the mind, as suspect and untrustworthy, it becomes something to be controlled. This is the logic that allows exploitation: of land treated as mere resource, of bodies treated as labor units, of entire peoples dismissed as "less than" because they did not conform to colonial standards.

Cláudio Carvalhaes connects this binary thinking directly to the systems it serves. He describes this Western consciousness as Empire, "a modern reality that absorbs many countries and people in a totalizing set of political, ideological, and economic machines in which we are formed, buy, consume, produce, work, live, and which sustains and protects itself through military power."[3] Empire is not just a political structure; it is a totalizing system that shapes how we understand ourselves, our worth, and our purpose. Under Empire, value is determined by productivity. Bodies exist to produce, consume, and comply. Rest becomes suspect. Creativity without marketable outcomes becomes frivolous. The imagination itself, our capacity to envision something beyond what currently exists, is suppressed because it threatens the status quo.

This is where capitalism intersects with colonialism to create what Tricia Hersey calls "grind culture." Capitalism, as an economic system, is built on the extraction of surplus value from labor. It requires workers to produce more than they consume, to

[2] Woodley and Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism*, 69–70.

[3] Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 38.

give more than they receive, and to keep grinding— while simultaneously creating dependency. Workers remain tethered to employers and systems for healthcare, income, and basic survival. Hersey writes, "Grind culture is the idea that one's worth is directly connected to productivity… This disconnection from our bodies and disconnection from the natural world has led us to exist in a constant state of exhaustion." [4] The exhaustion is not accidental. The dependency is not accidental. Both are designed by Empire. When people are too tired to think critically, too depleted to imagine alternatives, too disconnected from their bodies to notice what they need, and too economically strapped to leave, then they are easier to control.

The cost of this cultural inheritance is profound. Cindy S. Lee in *Our Unforming*, traces how Western individualism, the idea that persons are autonomous, self-sufficient units rather than interconnected beings, compounds the harm. When we are taught that spiritual growth is a private, individual matter, we lose the corrective power of community. When we are told that our bodies are merely vessels for our souls, we lose access to the wisdom our bodies carry. This is the wisdom of ancestors, the memory of trauma, the knowledge of what brings life and what brings death.[5] We become strangers to ourselves.[6]

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[4] Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022), 9.

[5] Cindy S. Lee, *Our Unforming: Breaking Free from the Molds that Bind Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 7.

[6] Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), 58.

Yet even as these authors name the scope and depth of cultural disembodiment, they also point toward hope. Hersey insists that reclamation begins with imagination: "The first step to beginning to reclaim our bodies, our rest, and our connection is to imagine… We have to be willing to dream about something better."[7] This is not wishful thinking. It is a prophetic act. To imagine rest in a culture of grinding, to imagine wholeness in a system built on fragmentation, to imagine bodies as sacred in a world that treats them as expendable, this is the work.

This is resistance, but resistance at the individual level is not enough. If disembodiment is a cultural and collective problem produced and sustained by interlocking systems of Empire (colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy), then the path forward must also be cultural and collective. Personal therapy, while valuable, cannot dismantle a worldview. Individual spiritual practices, while necessary, cannot transform a communal consciousness.

What is needed is cultural-level intervention. This means practices, diverse communities working toward common liberation, and ways of being that actively disrupt the logic of Empire. Decolonizing work is inherently communal.[8] Empire depends on isolation. It teaches us that transformation is a private matter, that we must heal alone before we can act together. Decolonizing work refuses this logic. It insists that healing and resistance happen in community, not before it. Western individualism treats

[7] Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance*, 16–17.

[8] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 27.

personal transformation as sufficient and positions the self as the primary site of spiritual growth. This individualism is itself a product of Empire. True transformation requires communities that bring together different perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing in pursuit of shared freedom. It requires communities that embody a different imagination.[9] It requires practices that reconnect body and spirit. It requires theological frameworks that refuse the binary and embrace the whole.

Embodied Spiritual Formation

If disembodiment is a cultural inheritance that fragments us into hierarchies of mind over body and spirit over flesh, then what does wholeness actually look like? These systems create hierarchies among people groups, usually racialized, gendered, and classed. The logic is the same: some bodies are deemed more valuable, more rational, or more worthy of care than others. Disembodiment is never only personal. It is always also communal, shaping who is seen as fully human and who is not. What would it mean to heal, to refuse these binaries, and to inhabit our lives as integrated beings? The Christian tradition, despite its frequent complicity in body-denying theologies, actually holds resources for a more holistic vision. This vision is rooted in Scripture, modeled by Jesus, and practiced by communities who understand that God meets us in and through our embodied existence.

Flora Slosson Wuellner offers a crucial correction to centuries of misreading what scripture says about the body. When Scripture speaks of "the body," particularly in

[9] Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 19.

the New Testament, the word used is often the Greek soma. Soma, Wuellner explains, "usually implies the whole human self: body, emotion, intelligence, will."[10] This is not the body as mere flesh, as the inferior vessel that carries around a more superior soul. This is the body as the totality of who we are. It is the thinking, feeling, choosing, relating, praying self. When Paul writes about bodies, Wuellner notes, "he usually means the whole person in relationship… The whole self becomes a member of Christ's body and takes on a new identity."[11] We do not have bodies; we are bodies. When we come to Christ, our whole selves, soma, are incorporated into the body of Christ. There is no part of us left out, no aspect deemed too physical or too messy for inclusion.

This integrated vision stands in stark contrast to the binary framework Woodley and Sanders identified. Where Empire thinking divides body from spirit and assigns value accordingly, biblical soma refuses the division entirely. Embodied spiritual formation, then, is not about adding bodily practices to an otherwise intellectual faith. It is about recognizing that all spiritual formation is embodied, whether we acknowledge it or not. We are always praying with our bodies through our posture, our breath, our tension, and our exhaustion. The question becomes whether we are paying attention.

Cindy S. Lee takes this further, arguing that decolonizing spiritual formation requires what she calls "sacramental consciousness:" a way of seeing that refuses the sacred/secular split and instead finds "the holy in the ordinary, the sacred in the

[10] Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Prayer and Our Bodies* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1987), 15.

[11] Wuellner, *Prayer and Our Bodies*, 16.

mundane."[12] This is not pantheism, the belief that everything is God. It is the practice of noticing where God is already present and active in our everyday lives: in bread broken, in bodies embraced, in soil turned, and in tears shed. Sacramental consciousness is a refusal to relegate God to Sunday mornings or to mystical experiences separated from the material world. It is an insistence that God meets us here, in the ordinary and the physical.

Lee also offers a crucial distinction between contradictions and dualisms. "A spirituality of uncertainty," she writes, "holds contradictions, not dualisms. Contradictions allow for complexity and the coexistence of multiple truths."[13] Dualisms demand we choose body or spirit, sacred or secular, and justice or mercy. Contradictions, on the other hand, invite us to live in the tension. They invite us to hold both/and rather than either/or. This is the work done in spiritual direction. This is the space where transformation happens, not in the resolution of ambiguity but in the willingness to embrace it. Embodied spiritual formation, then, is not about achieving some final state of integration where everything makes sense. It is about developing the capacity to live faithfully in a body that holds mystery, paradox, and unresolved longing.[14]

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[12] Lee, *Our Unforming*, 89.

[13] Lee, *Our Unforming*, 124.

[14] Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, Newly Revised Ed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 7-11.

Jesus himself models this kind of embodied spiritual life. In *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director*, Wendy Miller explores how Jesus practiced spiritual direction not by providing answers or solving problems, but by paying attention to people's actual lives and asking questions that opened space for them to encounter God. Miller defines a spiritual director as someone who "looks for and listens for the presence and guidance of the Spirit of God within the person sharing his or her story."[15] This is precisely what Jesus does throughout the Gospels. He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" He tells stories that engage the body and imagination. He touches lepers, eats with sinners, weeps at gravesides, and overturns tables in fury. He prays in gardens, sweats blood, and rises from the dead with a body that bears scars. Jesus is not a disembodied teacher dispensing timeless truths. He is God incarnate, showing us what it looks like to be fully human and fully alive.

Miller reminds us that "throughout the scriptures we discover that God is the One who comes, who speaks, who stays in conversation with people whether they recognize it or not. Spiritual direction is part of this conversation."[16] The God who became flesh is not confined to sanctuaries or spiritual mountain tops. This is the God who shows up in burning bushes and ordinary meals, in wrestling matches and whispered questions, and in bodies broken and bodies raised. To follow this God requires that we show up too, not just with our minds fixated on doctrine, but with our

[15] Wendy Miller, *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director: A Pilgrimage Through the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 22.

[16] Miller, Jesus, *Our Spiritual Director*, 23.

whole selves: our doubts and desires, our grief and joy, our bone-deep weariness, and our wild hope.

Embodied spiritual formation, then, looks like this: learning to see the whole self (soma) as the site of God's presence and activity. It means cultivating sacramental consciousness that finds the holy in the ordinary. It means holding contradictions rather than collapsing into dualisms. It means following Jesus, who asks questions, tells stories, and invites us into relationship rather than mere compliance. It is a spirituality rooted not in escape from the body but in a deeper inhabitation of it. It is trusting that God is already at work in our flesh, our feelings, and our fumbling attempts to pray.[17]

This, however, raises a pressing question: If this is what embodied spiritual formation looks like, how do we actually get there? What practices cultivate this way of being? For people who have been formed by grind culture and binary thinking, who have learned to distrust their bodies and dismiss their creativity, what kind of intervention can interrupt those patterns and open space for something new? The answer, it turns out, lies in practices that are themselves embodied, invitational, and imagination expanding — practices like APL.

Arts-Based Practice and Research

If embodied spiritual formation requires practices that reconnect body and spirit, cultivate sacramental consciousness, and hold contradictions rather than collapse into dualisms, then what kinds of practices actually do this work? Both ancient Christian

[17] Kat Armas, *Liturgies for Resisting Empire: Seeking Community, Belonging, and Peace in a Dehumanizing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025), 57-58.

tradition and contemporary research point toward a consistent answer: creative practices. Art making, poetry, music, and movement all create the space for this deeper work, because they engage us in ways that verbal, analytical methods cannot. Creative practices cultivate transformation in the body, imagination, and meaning-making centers simultaneously.[18] They function contemplatively, neurologically, incarnationally, prophetically, and pastorally.

Christine Valters Paintner has spent decades exploring the intersection of art and contemplative practice, and her work reveals why creative expression is not optional for spiritual formation but essential. She writes, "Art making and contemplation share much in common… Both art and prayer invite us into a deeper seeing of the world… When we make art as prayer, we move beyond thinking about our spiritual life to embodying it."[19] This shift from thinking about to embodying is critical. Disembodied faith lives in the space of ideas: doctrines to be understood and beliefs to be defended. Embodied faith lives in the space of experience: creativity to be explored and the body's knowing to be trusted. When art making happens in communion with others, it becomes more than individual expression. It becomes shared witness, collective meaning-making, and a communal encounter with the Spirit.

Paintner identifies another crucial dimension of art making, naming it as a practice of surrender. "The creative process," she notes, "is one of surrender and letting

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[18] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, 50th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), 129.

[19] Christine Valters Paintner, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), xi–xii.

go of our need to control outcomes."[20] In a culture that prioritizes productivity and measurable results, art making offers a radically different posture. We cannot force creativity. We cannot manufacture inspiration. We can only show up, make space, and see what emerges. This is spiritual formation at its most fundamental. It is learning to trust a process we cannot control and learning to collaborate with the Spirit rather than attempting to direct it.

Paintner also names art making as a kind of pilgrimage, "a threshold experience… a crossing over into liminal space where transformation happens."[21] Pilgrimage has always been one of Christianity's core practices for transformation. Pilgrimage is the willingness to leave familiar territory, to journey into the unknown, and to allow the experience itself to change you. Not everyone can travel abroad to walk ancient pilgrimage paths like the Camino De Santiago. Art making makes pilgrimage accessible. When we pick up a paintbrush or mold clay, when we let ourselves play with words or move to music, then we enter a threshold space. We step into the liminal, that in-between place where old patterns can loosen and new possibilities can emerge.

This language of threshold and transformation might sound abstract, but it has a neurological basis. Neuroaesthetics, the scientific study of how art affects the brain, confirms what artists and mystics have long known: creative engagement literally changes us. Dorcus Cheng-Tozun's research on neuroaesthetics shows that

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[20] Christine Valters Paintner, *The Artist's Rule: Nurturing Your Creative Soul with Monastic Wisdom* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2011), 23.

[21] Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul's Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018), 45.

encountering and making art activates multiple brain regions simultaneously, creating new neural pathways and shifting us physiologically.[22] When we engage with art, we are not just thinking different thoughts; we are rewiring our brains, creating new connections between cognition, emotion, sensation, and memory. This helps explain why art can bypass the defenses that keep us stuck. Rational argument rarely changes deeply held beliefs or an embodied trauma, but a song, a painting, or a poem can slip past our intellectual gatekeeping and touch something deeper. This whole-person engagement is precisely what theological education often lacks.

Maria Liu Wong picks up this thread in *On Becoming Wise Together*, arguing that "formation and learning engage our whole beings and all our senses— both the physical ones and our spiritual discernment of how the Spirit moves."[23] Theological education that happens only in classrooms, through books and lectures, is incomplete. We cannot bear witness to God's presence in the world if we have no embodied experience of it. Liu Wong calls this "incarnational ministry, a translation of the gospel truth in an embodied way."[24] Just as Jesus translated the invisible God into a visible, touchable, human form, we are called to translate our faith into embodied practice. This can look so many different ways. It is not just talking about love but making soup, not just studying justice but showing up, not just believing in beauty but creating it.

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[22] Dorcas Cheng-Tozun, *Social Justice for the Sensitive Soul: How to Change the World in Quiet Ways* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023), 139.

[23] Maria Liu Wong, *On Becoming Wise Together: Learning and Leading in the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 70.

[24] Liu Wong, *On Becoming Wise Together*, 70.

Liu Wong also recognizes that art does distinctive work in the face of trauma. "The creative process," she writes, "holds space for grief, lament, and communal processing of trauma in ways that purely verbal methods cannot… Art becomes resistance."[25] When words fail, when the pain is too deep or too complex for explanation, art can hold it. A collage can contain contradictions. A song can carry both rage and hope. A painting can express what the conscious mind does not yet know how to name. This is not therapy, though it can be therapeutic. This is the prophetic work of truth-telling, of refusing to pretend that everything is fine, and of insisting that our grief and our hope both matter.

This brings us to Walter Brueggemann, whose work on prophetic imagination provides the theological framework for understanding why art is not just nice but necessary for faithful resistance to Empire. Brueggemann argues that the dominant culture, what he calls the "royal consciousness," operates by managing reality, controlling the narrative, and shutting down imagination. The Empire's power depends on our inability to imagine anything different. The prophet's task is to penetrate this numbness, to break through the despair of "that's just how things are," and to energize hope. The prophet's primary tool is not rational argument or political strategy; those are the tools of Empire. The prophet's tools are things like poetry, lyric, and the kind of language that inspires the imagination.

[25] Liu Wong, *On Becoming Wise Together*, 112.

"The prophet engages in futuring fantasy," Brueggemann writes. "The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined."[26] This is a stunning claim. Before we can change anything, we must be able to imagine it changed. Empire does everything in its power to foreclose imagination, to convince us that the way things are is the way things *must be*. Poetry and art break that spell. They show us what we could not see before. They help us feel what we have been taught not to feel. They energize hope by opening space for new possibility.

Brueggemann insists that "prophetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality."[27] When every other form of resistance has been co-opted, when protest is commodified and dissent is managed, poetry remains. Art remains. Not because it is harmless, but because it operates at a level Empire cannot control. It operates with imagination, emotion, and embodied knowing. Prophetic imagination refuses the world as it is presented and dares to name the world as it could be, disrupting the scripts of inevitability and scarcity that Empire depends on. The way of the prophet, Brueggemann concludes, is the way of poetry and lyric. Not because poets are nicer or gentler than activists, but because poetry does what analysis cannot: it moves us, body and soul, toward a hope we can feel even when we cannot yet fully articulate it.

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[26] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, 2nd ed*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

[27] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 40.

These threads, neurological, spiritual, prophetic and pastoral, come together in creative practice. This is why the Artful Awakening intervention used APL as its medium. It works neurologically, activating multiple brain regions and creating new pathways. It works spiritually, functioning as prayer and pilgrimage. It works prophetically, energizing imagination and hope. It works pastorally, holding space for grief and trauma that words cannot carry. It works communally, creating shared experience and meaning-making that transcends individual interpretation.

At the same time, art alone is not enough. Creativity without a container can become chaotic and overwhelming. Imagination without community can drift into escapism or reinforce isolation. Transformation requires not just an arts-based practice but a specific kind of communal container. This is the work of spiritual direction. A container that holds space for the Spirit's work, that prioritizes witnessing over fixing, and that invites people into possibility rather than problem solving. The question, then, is not just what practices we use, but how we hold them and who we become in the process.

Community and Participatory Methods

Arts-based practices activate imagination, create new brain pathways, and energize prophetic hope, but creativity alone does not guarantee transformation. Without the right container, art making can become performance, encourage comparison, or demand more productivity. Without community, individual insight remains isolated, unwitnessed, and fragile. Transformation, the kind that lasts, that reshapes not just understanding but identity and belonging, requires a specific kind of

communal holding.[28] It requires practices that honor the Holy Spirit as the true agent of change and communities structured around possibility rather than problem-solving.

Group spiritual direction offers such a container. Unlike therapy groups focused on diagnosis and healing, or Bible studies focused on correct interpretation, group spiritual direction begins with a radically different premise. God is already at work in each person's life. Our task is simply to notice and name that movement. Daniel Prechtel describes how "in group spiritual direction, the group becomes a sacred container where the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation. Our role is to witness, not to fix or analyze."[29] This is a profound shift. In a culture trained to solve problems, offer advice, and produce outcomes, spiritual direction invites a countercultural posture: attentive presence without an agenda.

The facilitator's role in this model is not to teach or direct, but to trust. The facilitator trusts that God is already at work in each person's life. We simply create space for people to notice and name that movement. This trust is not passive. It requires active resistance to the cultural pressure to be helpful, to have answers, and to manage outcomes. It requires the discipline of silence, of waiting, of letting the Spirit lead rather than rushing to fill uncomfortable pauses with reassurance or interpretation. Something shifts when a group learns to listen deeply without judgment and reflect back what they hear without fixing. When a group learns to practice this kind of holy

[28] Kat Armas*, Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 27.

[29] Daniel L. Prechtel, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Spiritual Direction for Small Groups* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 24.

witnessing, people discover they are not alone. They realize that their struggles, doubts, and longings are not shameful secrets but shared human experience. They encounter God not through someone else's expertise but through their own embodiment.

This communal container matters especially when working with art. Creative expression can surface emotions, memories, and insights that surprise or overwhelm. Art making can feel exposing or unsafe without the tools of spiritual direction. Tools like a non-anxious presence, trust in the Spirit's work, and witnessing rather than rescuing. However, when a group has been formed in these practices, art becomes a shared threshold experience. One person's painting or poem can awaken something in another. A collective silence after someone shares can hold more than any words of encouragement. The group itself becomes a representation of the body of Christ, differentiated members attending to the Spirit's movement in and among them.

Peter Block's work on community offers complementary wisdom, particularly around how communities form and sustain themselves through the questions they ask and the conversations they create. Block makes a stunning claim: "All transformation is linguistic, which means that we can think of community as essentially a conversation."[30] If we want to change community, then we change the conversation. The shift he calls for is from "problems, fear, and retribution to one of possibility, generosity, and restoration."[31] This aligns beautifully with spiritual direction's practice of discernment

[30] Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging, 2nd ed.* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 62.

[31] Block, *Community*, 62.

through questioning, but Block goes further, identifying what makes a question truly transformative.

"A great question has three qualities," Block writes, "It is ambiguous… It is personal… It evokes anxiety."[32] Questions like *Where have you noticed God's presence this week?* or *What are you afraid to hope for?* cannot be answered with simple a yes or no. They require us to bring our own experience and our own vulnerability into the room. They make us uncomfortable precisely because they matter. Block warns against "questions that are designed to change other people," calling them "the cause of the very thing we are trying to shift: the fragmented and retributive nature of our communities."[33] The right questions create space for authentic connection rather than reinforcing problem-solving patterns.

Block also makes a critical distinction between problem-focused and possibility-focused communities. "Possibility," he explains, "is a declaration of what we create in the world each time we show up. It is a condition, or value, that we want to occur in the world, such as peace, inclusion, relatedness, or reconciliation. A possibility is brought into being in the act of declaring it."[34] This is not denial or toxic positivity. It is a refusal to let deficit and blame define our common life. When we focus on problems, what is wrong and who is responsible, we stay stuck. When we focus on possibility, what we long for and what we are willing to create, we open space for transformation.

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[32] Block, *Community*, 160.

[33] Block, *Community*, 158.

[34] Block, *Community,* 41.

Then Block makes his most direct claim about art: "There can be no transformation without art."[35] He means this literally, not metaphorically. "Theater, movies, song, literature, and art are storytelling of the highest order. These are the mediums for building an individual sense of what it means to be human. The arts are an essential part of the story of what it means to be a human being and a community."[36] Art gives permission to express what cannot be said in other ways. It holds complexity and ambiguity. It invites rather than demands. This is not decoration; it is essential architecture for belonging.

This is why the Artful Awakening intervention deliberately combined spiritual direction practices with Peter Block's community-building principles. The spiritual direction framework provided the theological grounding: trust in God's presence and activity, attentiveness to the Spirit's movement, and witnessing rather than fixing. Block's framework provided the practical structure: great questions that are ambiguous and personal, focus on possibility rather than problems, invitation to imagine collective action rather than individual solutions, and art as essential (not optional) for transformation. Together, these approaches created a container strong enough to hold the vulnerability of art making and spacious enough to let the Spirit work in unexpected ways.

Without this communal container, arts-based spiritual formation risks becoming just another individualistic practice – one more thing people do alone, in private, and for

[35] Block, *Community*, 229.

[36] Block, *Community*, 67.

personal benefit. When creativity is detached from shared reflection and mutual presence, it can unintentionally reinforce the isolation it seeks to heal.[37] When held within a community committed to holy witnessing and possibility-focused conversation, however, art becomes what it has always been in the Christian tradition. It becomes a communal practice of meaning-making and a shared encounter with the holy. In this kind of container, beloved community emerges. It is not built through uniformity or agreement, but through careful listening, attention to difference, and the faithful holding of one another's stories.

Conclusion

This literature review has traced a pathway from diagnosis to possibility and from problem to practice. We began by naming disembodiment as a cultural problem, not an individual failing but a colonial inheritance. Empire, capitalism, and binary thinking have conspired to fragment us, severing the body from spirit, sacred from secular, and productivity from rest. Woodley and Sanders showed us how Western consciousness colonizes our thinking. Hersey revealed how grind culture disconnects us from our bodies and the natural world. Carvalhaes named the Empire as the totalizing system that forms us to consume, produce, and comply. Lee traced how Western individualism compounds the harm by isolating us from communal wisdom and correction. The scope of the problem is cultural, which means individual therapy or

[37] Vivek H. Murthy, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: Harper Wave, 2020), XVI.

private spiritual practice, while valuable, cannot alone undo what generations of formation have inscribed on our bodies and imaginations.

Having diagnosed the cultural roots of disembodiment, we then explored what embodied spiritual formation actually looks like. We looked at what wholeness means in practice. Drawing on Wuellner's biblical scholarship, we recovered soma, the whole self, undivided and integrated. Lee's sacramental consciousness gave us eyes to see the holy in the ordinary and to hold contradictions rather than collapse into dualisms. In *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director*, we found the model: God incarnate, asking questions, telling stories, touching bodies, and trusting that the Spirit is already at work in people's lives. This vision of wholeness is not abstract theology. It is an invitation to inhabit our lives differently, to trust our embodied knowing, and to find God present in the very flesh we've been taught to transcend.

Knowing what wholeness looks like does not automatically produce it, however. We then turned to the question of method: why arts-based practices work as a means of transformation. Paintner showed us that art making is prayer, pilgrimage, and surrender. Neuroaesthetics confirmed that creative engagement literally rewires our brains. Liu Wong named art as incarnational ministry and resistance to trauma. Brueggemann gave us the prophetic framework: imagination is the most powerful way to challenge the Empire's grip. Poetry and lyric energize hope not by offering blueprints but by opening space for possibility. Art works because it is embodied, invitational, ambiguous, and prophetic. These are precisely the qualities needed to interrupt colonial consciousness and cultivate something new.

Art alone is not enough, though. Transformation requires community. It requires a specific kind of container where we can notice the Spirit's work. Group spiritual direction teaches us to witness rather than fix and to trust God's presence rather than manage outcomes. Peter Block's community-building principles complement this spiritual framework, showing us that great questions are ambiguous and personal, that possibility-focus liberates us from problem-obsession, and that art is essential for building belonging. The Artful Awakening intervention combined these approaches deliberately, creating a communal container strong enough to hold vulnerability and spacious enough to let the Spirit surprise us.[38]

Together, this body of literature reveals why arts-based practices, held within intentional community, can interrupt the patterns of disembodiment that Empire insists on. This is not simply adding creative activities to existing ministry. These are practices and communal structures that actively resist the Empire's logic and cultivate a different way of being in the world. It is embodied, imaginative, communal, and ultimately prophetic: a way of formation that trusts God is already at work in our bodies, our creativity, and our life together.

However, these practices and principles need theological grounding. Why does God care about embodiment? What does Scripture say about bodies, creativity, and prophetic imagination? How does the Christian tradition, in all its complexity and contradiction, resource this vision of embodied, art-engaged, communally held spiritual

[38] Roslyn G. Weiner, *Seeking in the Company of Others: The Wisdom of Group Spiritual Direction* (Bethesda, MD: SDI Press, 2021), 31.

formation? Chapter 3 turns to these questions, exploring the biblical and theological foundations that make this work not just effective but faithful.

Chapter 3

Theological and Biblical Grounding

Creation and Original Goodness

The first words of Scripture establish a theological truth, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1, NRSV) This opening verse introduces the reader to a God who creates, who brings forth something out of nothing, and who delights in the work of making. The creation narrative moves through a rhythm of divine speech and materialized creation including light, land, vegetation, and creatures. Each was met with God's assessment: "it was good." Then we get to the culmination of this creative work in Genesis 1:27: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (NRSV) Then, after surveying all that had been made, including embodied human beings, God declares it not just good, but "very good." (Genesis 1:31, NRSV)

This "very good" is theologically significant. It is God's pronouncement over physical bodies, over flesh and bone, and over the material world. Bodies are not afterthoughts in the divine design. They are not accidents or necessary evils. They are intentional creations, blessed and called very good by their Creator. Richard Rohr writes that most of the world's great religions "start with some sense of primal goodness in their creation stories," and the Judeo-Christian tradition "beautifully succeeded at this, with the Genesis record telling us that God called creation 'good' five times in Genesis

1:10–25, and even 'very good' in 1:31."[1] Before there is any talk of disobedience, before the entrance of sin or brokenness, there is what Rohr calls "original blessing" or "original innocence."[2] Creation precedes the fall. Blessing precedes any curse. Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that the body's goodness is more fundamental than its brokenness.

Yet this is not the story many Christians have internalized. We have often been taught to focus on original sin, the fall, the fracture, and the brokenness as the defining reality of human existence. Rohr traces this theological shift to Augustine in the fifth century, noting that the concept of original sin "does not match the way we usually think of sin, which is normally a matter of personal responsibility and culpability."[3] Rather than something we did, it became something done to us, passed down from Adam and Eve. This reframing had profound consequences. As Rohr observes, "after Augustine, most Christian theologies shifted from the positive vision of Genesis 1 to the darker vision of Genesis 3— the so-called fall."[4] Instead of beginning with blessing, we began with brokenness. Instead of original goodness, we emphasized original sin. "Sin management," Rohr argues, "has dominated the entire religious story line and agenda to this day."[5]

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[1] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 61.

[2] Rohr, *Universal Christ*, 60.

[3] Rohr, *Universal Christ*, 61.

[4] Rohr, *Universal Christ*, 61.

[5] Rohr, *Universal Christ*, 61.

When we make the fall the defining story rather than creation, we learn to see our bodies as problems to be managed, desires to be suppressed, or prisons from which our souls long to escape. We privilege the spiritual over the physical, the soul over the body, and the afterlife over this earthly life. As Rohr warns, "Even a good theology will have a hard time making up for a bad anthropology."[6] If we begin with the assumption that human beings are fundamentally broken, then even the grace of Christ only covers the problem rather than restoring the goodness that was there from the beginning.

This theological misstep has profound consequences. When we dismiss our bodies as inferior to our souls, we disconnect from the very site where God chose to dwell and reveal Godself. We lose access to the wisdom our bodies carry. We become numb to physical sensations, disconnected from emotions, and detached from the embodied experience of being human. We live as disembodied souls rather than whole persons.

The creation narrative calls us back. It reminds us that embodiment is not a problem to overcome but a gift to steward. Our bodies are not obstacles to spiritual life; they are essential to it. As Jeremy Punt writes, "Christian theology has always perceived itself as an embodied theology, with the body as the site and recipient of revelation."[7] If this is true, if the body is where revelation happens, then any spiritual practice that

[6] Rohr, *Universal Christ*, 67.

[7] Jeremy Punt, "Paul, Body and Health: The Significance of Soma in 1 Corinthians," Neotestamentica 46, no. 2 (2012): 360.

ignores or bypasses the body is incomplete. More than that, it contradicts one of the foundational claims of the Christian faith.

The implication for this project is clear: helping people reconnect with their bodies is not merely therapeutic work. It is theological work. It is the work of remembering what God declared from the beginning: that bodies are good, that they matter, and that they are worthy of attention, care, and celebration. APL becomes tools for this remembering. It inivites people to feel again, to sense again, to inhabit their bodies as the good gift they were always meant to be. People are creative, because they are made in the image of the Creator.

Imago Dei and Creativity

If God called creation good and declared bodies "very good," then what does it mean that these bodies are made in God's image? The imago Dei, the image of God, has been understood in many ways throughout Christian history as rationality, as dominion over creation, and as the capacity for relationship. Each of these interpretations holds some truth, but you can also apply the theology of Imago Dei to the characteristics of God. Being created in the image of God means that we inherently embody, at least in part, God's character. Therefore, if God is the creator, then we are also creative.

The first truth Scripture reveals about God is that God creates. The first chapter of Genesis unfolds as a symphony of divine creativity. We see God speaking light into existence, separating waters, calling forth vegetation and creatures, shaping and forming with intentionality and delight. When God makes human beings in the divine image, we inherit this creative capacity. We are not merely creatures; we are co-

creators. We imagine, innovate, dream, and bring new things into being. Creativity is not simply an action but a reflection of God's character. It is woven into the fabric of what it means to be human.[8]

This creative capacity is not reserved for artists, musicians, or writers. It is fundamental to every human being. To acknowledge God as Creator is to become aware of our own inherent creative potential. We create when we solve problems, when we build relationships, when we prepare a meal, when we tend a garden, when we compose a song, paint a canvas, or write a poem. Every act of making, of imagining something new and bringing it forth, reflects the image of the God who made us.

Scripture affirms this ongoing creative work of God and invites us to participate in it. Isaiah 43:19 reminds us that God is "doing a new thing." (NRSV) God is continuously at work in the world, bringing forth what has not yet been. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (NRSV) This is the language of transformation, of newness, and of creative possibility. God is not finished with creation. The work continues, and we are invited to join in the holy work of imagining, building, and reimagining.

This transformational work is linked to the experience of art both by witnessing and by creating. When we engage with poetry, when we listen to music, when we stand before a painting or shape clay with our hands, we tap into this inherent creative capacity that reflects the Imago Dei. APL becomes means of grace through which we

[8] Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 50-51.

experience God's presence and participate in God's ongoing creative work. It awakens something deep within us, something that has always been there: the image of the Creator, calling us to create.

In the context of this project, engaging APL is not simply an aesthetic exercise or a therapeutic technique. It is a theological practice. It activates the creative capacity that is fundamental to being made in God's image. It invites people to remember that they are not passive recipients of grace but active participants in God's creative, transforming work in the world.

The Incarnation

The Creator did not remain distant from creation. God became flesh and dwelt among us. In the United Methodist Articles of Religion, we affirm that "we believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, in whom the divine and human natures are perfectly and inseparably united. He is the eternal Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit."[9] This belief is called the incarnation. The word comes from Latin, meaning something like "embodiment" or to "become flesh." Even the language itself signals something powerful and positive about flesh and bodies. God did not merely tolerate embodiment or use it as a temporary disguise. God chose it, embraced it, and sanctified it. The doctrine of the incarnation is one of the most foundational, and perhaps most

[9] United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, (2012), ¶104.

scandalous, claims of the Christian faith: that the God who created all that is and sustains the universe came to us on planet Earth in the person of Jesus.

God did not simply inspire Jesus or speak through Jesus as God might speak through people today. The Gospel of John is clear: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14, CEB) God actually became flesh, and this is significant. The incarnation tells us that God intimately knows our experience. When we talk about God’s love, grace, and mercy, we are not talking about abstract ideas. We are talking about real, tangible experiences. God is not some far-off God. The Word became flesh and made his home among us.

It is common for Christians to focus more on Jesus’s divinity rather than his humanity. When speaking with congregants, it is clear that there is a deeply held belief that the physical world is understood as inherently inferior to the spiritual world. As a consequence, this theological framework places more importance on the afterlife than this earthly life. When these messages are internalized, they lead Christians to devalue their physical bodies. They learn to ignore pain, dismiss pleasure, distrust intuition, and push through exhaustion as if the body's signals do not matter. The body becomes something to overcome rather than something to inhabit.

This tendency to privilege soul over body did not, however, originate within Christianity. It entered through Greek philosophical influence. Biblical scholar L. Roig Lanzillotta traces how Platonic dualism, which viewed the soul as a captive in the prison of the body, became the dominant way of understanding what it means to be human in

the centuries surrounding Jesus's life and the early church.[10] In this framework, the soul gradually acquired "a higher status than the body," coming to be seen as "the real self of the person," while the body was reduced to a temporary and inferior dwelling place.[11] This view became so widespread it seemed natural. It was treated as unquestioned truth rather than a theological choice.

Though widely accepted, this is not the biblical view. The Hebrew scriptures present the human person as an inseparable whole, body and soul together. Paul, though writing in Greek, did not adopt Greek dualism. As Jeremy Punt observes, "Paul did not construct a body and soul or spirit dichotomy."[12] Instead, Paul's theology shows "the body as an important theological point of departure, for it is the body which constitutes for him the site of divine revelation."[13] In other words, the body is where we begin. It is the starting place for encountering God. The body is not a problem to escape. It is the very location where God meets us. This means that the work of spiritual formation is necessary embodied work where we are not trying to escape from the body, but return to it.

The doctrine of the Incarnation makes this unmistakably clear. God did not merely inhabit a body temporarily. God became flesh. Jesus's body mattered. He

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[10] L. Roig Lanzillotta, "One Human Being, Three Early Christian Anthropologies: An Assessment of Acta Andreae's 'Tenor' on the Basis of Its Anthropological Views," *Vigiliae Christianae* 61, no. 4 (2007): 421.

[11] Lanzillotta, "One Human Being," 420.

[12] Jeremy Punt, "Paul, Body and Health: The Significance of Soma in 1 Corinthians," *Neotestamentica* 46, no. 2 (2012): 367.

[13] Punt, "Paul, Body and Health," 380.

touched people. He wept. He ate. He grew tired. He died, and his body rose. The resurrection was not the escape of a soul from a body but the restoration and transformation of the whole person. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?” (NRSV) If our bodies are temples, sacred spaces where the Holy Spirit dwells, then any spirituality that dismisses or degrades the body contradicts the heart of the gospel.

Paul understood this. For him, the body was never merely individual. In the Eucharist, the soma of Christ connects the soma of believers with the corporate soma of the Church.[14] Body, bread, and community are all woven together in the mystery of Christ’s presence. There is no disembodied faith here. There is only incarnation: God with us, God in us, and God revealed through flesh and blood. The temple is not only personal but corporate. We are built together into the dwelling place of God.

The theology of the incarnation invites us to do the work of decolonization. The same Greek dualism that separated body from soul was carried into colonial Christianity, providing theological cover for the exploitation of bodies deemed less rational, less spiritual, or less human. It reminds us that how we care for ourselves and other people on this side of heaven is sacred work. Colonialism taught us to distrust our bodies, to see them as obstacles to spiritual growth, and to privilege mind over flesh. This body-denial served Empire's purposes because disembodied people are easier to control, extract from, and exploit. If God became flesh, then a project designed to help people reconnect with their bodies is theological work and decolonial work.

[14] Punt, “Paul, Body and Health,” 381.

It is the work of restoring what God called good from the beginning and what God affirmed again in Christ: that bodies are not obstacles to a spiritual life but essential for a holistic faith. To reclaim the body as sacred, to trust embodied knowing, and to honor physical experience as a site of God's presence is to resist the colonial consciousness that fragmented us in the first place. This is the foundation on which the Artful Awakening intervention is built. Jesus did not just validate embodiment. He modeled prophetic ministry.

Prophetic Tradition

The prophetic tradition in Scripture begins with a God who pays attention to bodies in pain. In Exodus 3:7, God says to Moses, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings." (NRSV) God hears the people when they cry out for help. This is the foundation of prophetic ministry: God listens to the cries of those suffering under oppression. God sees, God knows, God responds, and God calls others to do the same.

The prophets carry this ministry forward. They speak God's word into contexts where people have grown numb to injustice, where systems of power silence the voices of the marginalized, and where the status quo is presented as unchangeable. As Walter Brueggemann writes, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[15] Prophetic ministry is not about predicting the future. It is about using the imagination to help people see that something new is possible.

[15] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

Empires, whether ancient or modern, depend on numbness. Numbness is the disconnection from our bodies, our emotions, and the suffering of others. It is a state of going through the motions without truly feeling or experiencing the world around us. Brueggemann observes, "Empires live by numbness. Empires in their militarism expect numbness about the human cost of war. Corporate economies expect blindness to the cost in terms of poverty and exploitation."[16] When people are numb, they do not resist. They do not imagine alternatives. They accept their current realities as if those realities are the only option. "The task of prophetic imagination," Brueggemann argues, "is to cut through the numbness."[17]

Jesus embodies this prophetic work. He does not stand at a distance from suffering. Brueggemann writes, "Jesus enters into the hurt and finally comes to embody it… Jesus and his solidarity with the marginal ones is moved to compassion. Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism."[18] To feel compassion or to suffer with is to reject the Empire's demand for numbness. It also insists that bodies matter, that pain matters, and that all people matter. Compassion is resistance.

Prophetic ministry invites people to imagine that something new is possible. It says, I hear you. I see you. Let's create something different together. This work requires both justice and compassion, both truth-telling and deep listening. One of the ways prophetic ministry opens new possibilities is through listening. Dominant systems are

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[16] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 40.

[17] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 41.

[18] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 88–89.

not interested in listening to people's lived experience. They want to manage behavior, to maintain control, and to keep people in line. Prophetic ministry is interested in the cry of the people, and compassion is deeply connected to listening. To listen is to resist. It says: your experience matters, your body knows something, and your voice deserves space.

This is where APL become tools of prophetic ministry. APL cuts through numbness. It creates space for people to feel again, to sense again, and to pay attention to what they have been trained to ignore. APL does not give people answers, rather it gives them permission to ask questions. It does not tell people what to think. Instead, it invites people to notice what they already know in their bodies but have been taught to dismiss. In this way, APL teaches a different kind of listening, both to ourselves and to one another. APL creates what Brueggemann calls an "alternative consciousness," a way of seeing and being that resists the dominant narrative.

In the context of this project, APL serves as an energizing force of prophetic ministry. It helps people recover their capacity to imagine. When participants in Artful Awakening engaged with poetry, visual art, and music, they were not simply having aesthetic experiences. A participant might sit with a poem and suddenly name a grief they had been carrying for years. Another might create a collage and discover hope they did not know was there. They were participating in counter-formation, in the work of decolonization. They were doing it together, in community, witnessing one another's becoming. Empire depends on our inability to imagine anything different. It needs us to

see the current reality as fixed and inevitable. Colonialism narrows imagination by insisting on binaries and certainty.

APL breaks this open. Poetry and art invite multiple interpretations. They hold contradiction and ambiguity. They engage the body and emotions, not just the intellect. By awakening imagination, APL creates space to envision what Empire says is impossible: bodies as sacred, rest as resistance, and mystery as trustworthy. Participants were learning to pay attention. They were beginning to trust the wisdom of their own bodies. They were stepping into the freedom that comes when we remember that we are not machines to be managed but whole persons made in the image of God.

This brings us back to the imago Dei. Empire wants cogs, interchangeable parts in a system designed to extract value and maintain control. Empire wants workers who do not ask questions, consumers who do not resist, and bodies that always comply. God wants creators. God wants people who imagine, who build, who dream, and who make new things. God wants human beings who reflect the creative, compassionate, justice-seeking character of their Maker.

Prophetic ministry, then, is not only about speaking truth to power. It is also about awakening people to their own creative agency. It is about helping people remember that they were made for more than compliance. APL participates in this work. It energizes hope, it creates space for lament and for joy, and it invites people to imagine a world shaped not by Empire's numbness but by God's compassion. This imagination is not escape. It is resistance, and it happens best when we do it together.

Conclusion

These four theological anchors: creation, Imago Dei, incarnation, and prophetic tradition provide the theological framework for Artful Awakening. They are not separate doctrines but interconnected truths that work together to reclaim what colonialism fragmented and what Empire continues to deny: the sacred wholeness of embodied human life. Creation establishes that our bodies are good from the beginning. Imago Dei insists that we carry God's creative character in our very being. The Incarnation declares that God chose embodiment. The prophetic tradition invites us to use our embodied wisdom and creative agency to resist injustice and imagine alternatives. When held together, these four anchors form a unified theological vision of what embodied spiritual formation actually means: it is the recovery of our belovedness, the activation of our creativity, the restoration of our wholeness, and the courage to answer our prophetic calling.

God created bodies and called them good. This original goodness precedes the fall. It is more fundamental than brokenness. When we help people reconnect with their bodies, we are not fixing what is broken. We are helping them remember what God declared from the beginning: that embodiment is good, that bodies are worthy of attention and care, and that physicality is not a problem to overcome but a gift to steward.

We are made in the image of a creative God. Creativity is not optional. It is not reserved for artists. It is woven into the fabric of what it means to bear God's image. Empire wants people who comply, who do not ask questions, and who fit into systems

designed to extract value. God wants people who imagine, who build, who dream, and who bring new things into being. This matters because when we remember we are creators, we remember we are not defined by what we produce for Empire. We are free to imagine alternatives. We reclaim agency. We participate in God's ongoing work of making all things new. When we invite people to engage with APL, we are activating this inherent creative capacity. We are awakening them to their identity as image-bearers so that they can live as whole persons rather than fragmented selves.

God became flesh and dwelt among us. The Incarnation is the ultimate validation of embodiment, and the theological framework that our bodies matter. Jesus did not merely inhabit a body; he became flesh. He touched people. He wept. He ate. He grew tired. He died, and his body rose. The resurrection was not the escape of a soul from a body but the restoration and transformation of the whole person. If God became flesh, then our work to help people reconnect with their bodies is not a therapeutic technique. It is theological work. It is the work of honoring what God affirmed in Christ: that bodies are not obstacles to spiritual life but essential to it.

Finally, God calls us to prophetic ministry. The prophets remind us that God hears the cry of the people, that God pays attention to bodies in pain, and that God responds to suffering with compassion. Prophetic ministry is not about predicting the future. It is about cutting through numbness and evoking an alternative consciousness. It is about helping people imagine that something new is possible. APL serves as a tool of prophetic imagination. It creates space for people to feel again, to notice what they have been trained to ignore, and to trust the wisdom of their own bodies. It resists the

dominant narrative that tells us we are machines to be managed rather than whole persons made in the image of God.

This is why Artful Awakening is theological work. It helps people reclaim the good bodies God gave them. It activates their creative capacity as image-bearers. It honors the Incarnation by taking embodiment seriously. Finally, it resists Empire's numbness through prophetic imagination. This is not therapy. This is not an art class. This is spiritual formation.[19]

[19] Heather Parkinson Webb, *Small Group Leadership as Spiritual Direction: Practical Ways to Blend an Ancient Art into Your Contemporary Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

Chapter 4

Methodology and Research

Research Design and Questions

This research started with one main question and three related questions. These questions are not listed in any particular order because they work together, woven into the same concern. Each one approaches the central truth from a different angle: APL cultivates embodiment, and embodied experience is decolonizing work.

Primary Research Question: How can the use of art, poetry, and lyric (APL) cultivate, embrace, and deepen embodied spirituality for individuals and small groups?

Secondary Research Questions:

- How can APL be used as non-threatening tools to begin the work of decolonization?
- What impact does the use of APL have on participants' levels of embodiment and spiritual awareness over the course of a group intervention?
- How can the use of APL in a group spiritual direction setting provide practical pathways for addressing issues of embodiment and decolonization?

The question about "non-threatening tools" comes from a specific pastoral reality. In a mostly white congregation in Mississippi, words like colonization, white supremacy, and Empire, even when accurate, often shut people down. People can feel attacked and stop listening. Confronting privilege is hard. It can close people off before

any real transformation begins. This research explored whether art could do something that direct language cannot: Could people experience embodied awareness through creative practice without first deconstructing their entire worldview? What emerged was this—APL does not argue. It invites. It creates space. It lets people ask questions and sit with not knowing.

The study also held space for change to occur on multiple levels, in individuals and/or in the group as a whole. Both outcomes seemed likely. Embodiment and decolonization are not only personal. They are not solely communal either. The goal was to learn whether APL could function as bridge work, a first step in a lifelong journey of decolonizing work. How might creative practices open people up to embodied spirituality without bypassing the hard work of confronting systems of oppression? How could this intervention meet people where they are while still calling them toward something different?

Mixed-Methods Approach

This research used both numbers and stories, quantitative assessments and qualitative data, because people grow in different ways and show that growth differently. The numbers showed that change happened. The stories showed how and why. The study drew on two methodological frameworks: Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and Arts-Based Participatory Action Research (PABR). These approaches fit the work because they both challenge systems of oppression and center the voices of participants rather than treating them as subjects to be studied.

The pre and post assessments (the Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness and the Need for Cognitive Closure Scale) did double duty. They measured change, but they also taught. The assessments asked participants to notice things they may not have paid attention to before: How does your body feel right now? Do you trust what your body tells you? How comfortable are you with uncertainty? Answering these questions became part of the intervention. It gave participants language and categories for paying attention to their own experience throughout the six weeks.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is "a systematic investigation, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change."[1] What makes PAR different is not the specific methods but "the attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by, and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted."[2] It is about who holds power at every stage of the research process.

Critical Participatory Action Research takes this further by focusing on systemic change. The goal of this project, decolonizing spirituality and reconnecting people with their bodies, aligns with CPAR's commitment to challenging oppressive systems like capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Everyone living in Western culture has

[1] L. W. Green et al., "Study of Participatory Research in Health Promotion in Canada" (Ottawa: Royal Society of Canada, 1995), quoted in Meredith Minkler, "Using Participatory Action Research to Build Healthy Communities," *Public Health Reports* 115 (2000): 192.

[2] A. Cornwall and R. Jewkes, "What Is Participatory Research?," *Social Science & Medicine* 41, no. 12 (1995): 1667–76, quoted in Minkler, "Using Participatory Action Research," 192.

been shaped by these systems, whether they realize it or not. The researcher is not exempt. In this methodology, every participant is a researcher. The researcher participated in the intervention alongside everyone else.

Arts-Based Participatory Action Research (PABR) brings creative processes into the work. Visual art, music, poetry, theater are used to explore and address social issues.[3] PABR treats participants as co-creators. It uses artistic expression to help people reflect, to amplify voices that are usually marginalized, and to drive action for change. Karen Keifer-Boyd describes arts-based research as involving "continual critical reflexivity in response to injustice" and as work that can "excavate the recurrent patterns of inequity and oppression, as well as the acts of transformation and activism."[4]

In this project, APL created space for participants to explore their own experiences without judgment. It invited them to speak truths they might not have previously had words for. It opened up possibilities for seeing things differently. Together, CPAR and PABR shaped a research approach where transformation was not something done to participants but something everyone engaged together. PAR approaches share "a commitment to consciously blurring the lines between the researcher and the researched" by recognizing that community members bring knowledge and wisdom to the process of creating understanding and taking action.[5] The

[3] Karen Keifer-Boyd, "Arts-based Research as Social Justice Activism: Insight, Inquiry, Imagination, Embodiment, Relationality," *International Review of Qualitative Research* 4, no. 1 (2011): 3–20.

[4] Keifer-Boyd, "Arts-based Research as Social Justice Activism," 3.

[5] Minkler, "Using Participatory Action Research," 192.

quantitative data provided benchmarks. The qualitative data provided depth. The creative practices provided the pathway.

Response-Shift Bias as Methodological Reality

Response-shift bias occurs when participants' understanding of what is being measured changes between pre-test and post-test. For example, someone might rate their body awareness as "5 out of 7" at the beginning of a study, then rate it as "3 out of 7" at the end. This is not necessarily because their awareness decreased, but because their understanding of what "body awareness" means has deepened. Response-shift bias was especially likely in this intervention because the idea of embodiment and APL practices were new to most participants. They had no prior framework for understanding what it meant to engage the body through creative practice, so their baseline self-assessments reflected limited awareness of what embodied spirituality could even look like. In traditional research, this is considered a validity problem. For this study, it was an expected outcome and a meaningful finding.

Most participants had never encountered terms or concepts related to embodied spirituality before the intervention. When they completed the pre-assessments, they were answering questions about experiences they had not yet learned to notice or name. They did not know what it meant to “trust body sensations” or to “notice subtle body signals” because these were not categories in their conscious awareness. They answered as best they could, but essentially, they were guessing.

By the time participants completed the post-assessments, something had shifted. Six weeks of contemplative practice, creative engagement, and reflective

conversation had given them experiential reference points. They now understood more of what the questions were asking. They could answer from lived experience rather than abstract interpretation. This shift is not a measurement problem. It is evidence of learning. It shows that the intervention shifted understanding. Participants developed new awareness and new vocabulary for their own embodied experience.

Response-shift bias, in this context, becomes a window into transformation itself. The change in how participants understood the questions reflects a change in how they understood themselves and their relationship to their bodies. Rather than undermining the validity of the findings, it demonstrates that the intervention accomplished one of its core goals: helping people develop embodied awareness that was not present before. This aligns with the participatory nature of the research. CPAR assumes that the research process itself is formative. Participants are not passive subjects but active learners whose understanding evolves through engagement.

Intervention Design

The intervention consisted of six weekly 90-minute sessions followed by a seventh week art exhibition featuring art from the experience. Sessions took place at the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi, with approximately 25 participants attending across the weeks. The design combined contemplative practices from spiritual direction with creative engagement through APL. Each week stood alone, participants could attend any session and have a complete experience, but the six weeks together followed a thematic arc of Wonder, Empathy, Growth, Curiosity, Integration, and Presence, designed to deepen awareness and integration over time. Not everyone who

attended Artful Awakening participated in the research portion of the project. Some people attended as they could, while those who participated in the study attended at least 5 sessions and completed both pre and post assessments.

Thematic Arc

The intervention progressed through six themes: Wonder → Empathy → Growth → Curiosity → Integration → Presence. This progression was intentional but not rigid. Wonder set the posture for the whole journey, learning to listen differently to words, silence, and body responses. Empathy invited participants to connect emotionally, using art to enter into what someone else might be feeling and experiencing. Growth focused on personal transformation and the courage to claim one's own agency. Curiosity challenged binary thinking and encouraged multiple ways of seeing. Integration brought together the various practices and insights. Finally, presence grounded participants in their embodied awareness, trusting that the work of the intervention has already begun shaping who they were becoming.

The seventh week exhibition displayed participant-created artwork alongside curated pieces from the intervention. This was not simply a showcase but an act of communal witnessing. The visual display allowed participants to see their individual journeys as part of a larger collective transformation. It invited the broader community into what had happened, making visible what words alone could not convey. The exhibition honored the creative work participants had done while also extending the invitation to embodied spirituality beyond the original group.

Session Structure

Each session followed a consistent contemplative structure drawn from spiritual direction practices:

- Opening Ritual (candle lighting, singing bowl, centering breath)
- Grounding/Centering Practice
- Introduction to the Week's Creative Practice
- Engagement with APL
- Tangible Processing (journaling, creating)
- Verbal Processing (invited to share, but it was never a requirement)
- Closing Ritual (extinguish candle, singing bowl, spoken liturgy)

This structure provided both consistency and spaciousness. The rituals created a container. The silence created room for noticing. The invitation to share honored both the need for witness and the need for privacy.

Spiritual Direction and Community-Building Principles

The facilitation approach drew from two frameworks explained more fully in Chapter 2. Spiritual direction provided the theological and relational grounding: trust in God's presence and activity, attentiveness to the Spirit's movement, witnessing rather than fixing, and deep listening. The facilitator's role was to create a spacious, attentive environment rooted in trust and curiosity rather than to offer advice or answers. This posture shaped not only how the facilitator engaged but how participants learned to hold space for one another.

Peter Block's community-building principles provided practical structure for the group dynamics. As discussed in the literature review, Block's framework emphasizes transformative questioning, possibility-focus rather than problem-focus, and the essential role of art in building community.[6] These principles shaped how sessions were facilitated. Questions were ambiguous and personal, inviting participants to speak from their own experience rather than repeat taught answers. The focus remained on what participants were discovering, and art was centered as the primary mode of meaning-making. Together, spiritual direction practices and Block's community principles created a container strong enough to hold vulnerability and spacious enough to let the Spirit work in unexpected ways.

Weekly Practices

Each week engaged different creative practices:

- Week 1 (Wonder): Lectio Divina with poetry— multiple readings with silence, listening for phrases and words, journaling reflection
- Week 2 (Empathy): Art stations with photography— four stations with poster-sized photographic images, participants moved between stations, contemplative viewing and creative response
- Week 3 (Growth): Music listening and poetry writing— listening to songs, guided reflection, 8-word poem writing exercise

[6] Block, *Community,* 101-111.

- Week 4 (Curiosity): Visio Divina with individual art pieces— each participant received their own piece of art, practiced contemplative seeing, explored multiple ways of interpreting
- Week 5 (Integration): Collage-making and reflective writing— created visual collages, writing exercises exploring different parts of the self, bringing together insights from previous weeks
- Week 6 (Presence): Sound bath and neurographic art— crystal singing bowls tuned to 432Hz, guided meditation, spontaneous line drawing as embodied integration practice
- Week 7: Exhibition of participant artwork and curated pieces, communal witnessing of transformation

The practices intentionally varied sensory engagement and modes of participation. Some weeks emphasized contemplation, inviting participants to practice mindfulness. Others emphasized making, giving participants materials and permission to create. The variety was deliberate because not everyone connects through the same medium, and embodiment requires multiple entry points. All weeks included silence, journaling, and shared conversation, creating space for personal discovery and communal reflection.

Participants and Recruitment

The intervention took place at the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi, a repurposed church building that serves as a neutral, third space for community gatherings. Hosting the intervention at the Link Centre allowed for participation beyond

the researcher's congregation and created an environment where people could explore spirituality outside traditional church walls.

Recruitment happened through multiple channels. The researcher co-hosted the event with the Link Centre, which expanded the reach beyond a single congregation. Invitations went out to members of St. Luke United Methodist Church, where the researcher serves as pastor. Announcements were also made through the Link Centre's network and on social media platforms. Participation was entirely voluntary. People signed up based on interest in exploring creativity and embodied awareness.

Approximately 25 individuals participated across the six weeks, though attendance varied from week to week. The session design allowed people to attend individual weeks and still have a complete experience, which meant not everyone attended all six sessions. This created challenges for data collection but honored the reality of people's lives and schedules.

For the quantitative assessments, six participants completed both pre and post intervention MAIA (Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness), ten completed both pre- and post-intervention NFCS (Need for Cognitive Closure Scale), and six completed both assessments. Additional participants attended sessions and contributed qualitative data through journals, reflections, and artwork but did not complete the assessments.

The demographic composition reflected the context of the intervention: predominantly white participants from a Southern, mostly middle-class background. This was precisely the population for whom APL might serve as bridge work. Most had

little to no experience with contemplative practices, arts-based spiritual formation, or the work of decolonization. Many came from Christian traditions that emphasized cognitive engagement with Scripture, doctrinal correctness, or practical service over embodied awareness. This unfamiliarity was part of what the research explored: how people without prior contemplative training respond to APL as an invitation to embodied spirituality.

Data Collection

The researcher used multiple methods to capture data for both measurable change and lived experience. The mixed-methods approach gathered quantitative assessments, qualitative reflections, and facilitator observations.

Quantitative Instruments

Two standardized assessments were administered before the first session and after the sixth session. The Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA) measures body awareness across eight subscales: Noticing, Not Distracting, Not Worrying, Attention Regulation, Emotional Awareness, Self-Regulation, Body Listening, and Trusting. Participants rated statements on a 6-point scale from “Never” to “Always.” The MAIA provided numerical data on shifts in embodied awareness.

The Need for Cognitive Closure Scale (NFCS) measures tolerance for ambiguity and preference for certainty. It includes subscales for Preference for Order and Structure, Emotional Discomfort with Ambiguity, Closed-Mindedness, and Decisiveness. Participants rated statements on a 6-point scale. The NFCS measured whether engagement with APL shifted participants’ capacity to sit with not-knowing. Both

assessments were completed on paper or online and assigned unique participant IDs to protect confidentiality.

Qualitative Data

Participants were invited to keep journals throughout the six weeks, responding to prompts or writing freely about their experiences. Journal entries were collected with participant permission. Pre and post intervention questionnaires asked open-ended questions about spiritual practices, connection to embodiment, experiences with creativity, and hopes for the program. Post-intervention questions explored significant moments, shifts in awareness, and integration of practices into daily life. During sessions, participants created artwork, poetry, and written reflections. These creative outputs were collected (with permission) as qualitative data showing how participants processed their experiences through APL.

Observational Data

The researcher kept detailed facilitator notes during and immediately after each session. These notes documented group dynamics, participant responses, moments of resistance or breakthrough, and adjustments made in real time. Observational notes captured what could not be measured by assessments or self-reported by participants. This includes observations like the energy in the room, body language, silence, laughter, tears, and the quality of presence.

All data including assessments, journals, creative work, and facilitator notes were stored securely with password protection. Handwritten materials were scanned and digitized, then given back to the participants or destroyed. Electronic files will be

maintained for six years following completion of the research. All participant names used in reporting findings are pseudonyms.

Facilitator Role and Positionality

The researcher served as both facilitator and participant in the intervention. This dual role is consistent with Critical Participatory Action Research, which recognizes that the researcher is not a neutral observer but an active participant in the research process. The researcher was shaped by the same systems of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy that the intervention sought to address. Participating alongside others honored this reality.

As facilitator, the researcher drew on multiple areas of training and experience. A master's degree in counseling provided skills in deep listening, holding space without fixing, sitting comfortably with silence, and recognizing what lies beneath surface responses. Years of working with a personal spiritual director taught what it means to attend to the presence and movement of God in one's own life and in the lives of others. Training in spiritual direction and contemplative practices meant facilitating from lived experience rather than theory alone.

The researcher's posture was one of curiosity rather than expertise. Instead of positioning herself as the authority with answers, the researcher participated in the practices, shared personal thoughts and struggles, and acknowledged uncertainty when it was present. This approach countered the hierarchical dynamic often present in

pastoral ministry and research settings. It modeled the mutuality that the intervention sought to cultivate.[7]

At the same time, power dynamics cannot be erased through good intentions. The researcher is a white woman serving as a United Methodist pastor in Mississippi. Most participants were also white and middle-class. The researcher held institutional authority as a pastor and as the person designing and leading the intervention. These realities shaped what participants felt free to say, how they engaged the practices, and what they chose to share or withhold.

The researcher's social location also shaped what was visible and what remained unseen. A white facilitator working primarily with white participants in the South cannot fully recognize all the ways whiteness operates in the room. The intervention attempted to create space for decolonizing work, but it did so from within systems of power that the researcher both critiques and benefits from. This contradiction cannot be resolved, only named honestly.

Data Analysis

Data analysis happened in two phases: quantitative analysis of assessment scores and qualitative analysis of narrative data.

Quantitative Analysis

MAIA and NFCS scores were calculated for each participant who completed both pre and post intervention assessments. For the MAIA, subscale scores were computed by averaging responses within each of the eight domains (Noticing, Not Distracting, Not

[7] Beaumont, *How to Lead,* 23-24.

Worrying, Attention Regulation, Emotional Awareness, Self-Regulation, Body Listening, and Trusting). Changes in scores from pre to post were calculated to identify areas of growth or decline. For the NFCS, subscale scores for Preference for Order and Structure, Emotional Discomfort with Ambiguity, Closed-Mindedness, and Decisiveness were computed. Changes in total scores and subscale scores indicated shifts in tolerance for ambiguity and need for certainty.

Because only a small number of participants completed both the beginning and ending assessments (six for MAIA, ten for NFCS), traditional statistical tests weren't appropriate. Instead, the analysis looked at the size of changes and overall patterns. Each participant's responses were also examined individually to understand the full range of experiences. The goal was not to prove a hypothesis but to notice what emerged.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data including journals, open-ended questionnaire responses, creative work, and facilitator observations were analyzed using thematic coding. The researcher read through all qualitative data multiple times to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and insights. Initial codes emerged from the data itself rather than from predetermined categories. These codes were refined and grouped into broader themes. For example, early codes like “permission to not know,” “process over product,” and “no right answer” clustered into the larger theme of “Perfectionism → Permission.”

Themes were compared to the full dataset to ensure they accurately represented participant experiences. Contradictions and outliers were noted rather than ignored. Themes that appeared in multiple data sources, appearing in both participant journals and facilitator observations, for instance were considered particularly robust. The analysis also attended to what was absent. Silence in group sharing, blank journal pages, or minimal responses on questionnaires were treated as meaningful data rather than gaps to be filled.

Replicability and Transferability

This intervention is transferable to other ministry contexts but not directly replicable in a formulaic way. The specific practices, structure, and facilitation approach can be adapted, but the work depends on contextual awareness and relational trust that cannot be scripted.

What Can Be Replicated

The basic framework is portable: a six-week intervention using APL in a group spiritual direction setting, with a thematic arc moving from wonder to presence. The session structure: opening ritual, centering, engagement with creative practice, tangible and verbal processing, closing ritual provides a consistent container that can be adapted with different art forms, poems, music, or images. The combination of spiritual direction posture and community-building principles (transformative questions, possibility-focus, witnessing without fixing) can be learned and practiced by facilitators with appropriate training. The emphasis on process over product, permission to not know, and honoring multiple interpretations can guide facilitation in any context. The data collection

instruments (MAIA and NFCS) are publicly available and can be used by others exploring embodied spirituality and tolerance for ambiguity.

What Cannot Be Replicated

Several factors shaped this particular intervention in ways that cannot be exactly reproduced. The Link Centre provided a neutral third space that allowed diverse participation beyond a single congregation. Not all communities have access to such spaces. The facilitator's training in both counseling and spiritual direction informed how sessions were held and how participants were accompanied. Others attempting this work would need similar formation or should work collaboratively with trained spiritual directors. The demographic context was predominantly white, Southern, middle-class participants unfamiliar with contemplative practices shaped what resistance emerged, what language worked, and what practices felt accessible. A different population would require different adaptations.

Guidance for Adaptation

Those adapting this work should begin with their context. What does the community already know? What would feel threatening versus invitational? What creative practices are already present in the culture? The specific APL used matters less than the posture of invitation, the space for ambiguity, and the trust that the Spirit is already at work. To adapt this intervention, start small, build trust, and let the practices teach you what the community needs.

Holding Complexity

Because this project names embodiment and creative practice as sites of transformation, it is important to pause and name the complexity within that claim. Embodiment, as framed here, is not naïve self-trust or automatic authority. Our bodies have also been shaped by trauma, by culture, and by the quiet logic of Empire. They carry both wisdom and distortion. The work of Artful Awakening was not to canonize every sensation, but to cultivate discernment. It was about the practice of noticing what felt expansive and what felt constricted, what moved toward freedom and what tightened into fear. The contemplative rhythm of the intervention created space for that kind of attention. Embodiment, in this context, was prayerful listening shaped by theological grounding.

In the same way, APL is not inherently liberative. In many situations, creative expression has been used as propaganda, as reinforcement of dominant narratives, and as a tool of exclusion. APL functioned as bridge work in this project not simply because art was present, but because of the posture and structure surrounding it. The neutral third space, the rhythm of reflection, and the commitment to non-extractive participation shaped how art functioned. The container mattered. Without intentional framing, creative practices alone do not guarantee transformation.

Finally, because this project draws from Critical Participatory Action Research, mutuality was central. Knowledge was generated within the community rather than delivered from the front of the room. At the same time, power does not disappear simply because hierarchy is named. As facilitator, I shaped the structure, selected

materials, and grounded the work theologically. Mutuality did not mean the absence of leadership. It meant leadership functioned as container rather than control and as stewardship rather than dominance. My authority was real, and I exercised it by holding the container with care.

These tensions do not weaken the claims of this project. They clarify them. Embodiment requires discernment. Art requires container. Mutuality requires humility and attentiveness to power. Holding these complexities is not a detour from transformation but part of it. This work asks leaders to resist simplicity and instead cultivate the kind of maturity that can hold freedom and responsibility together.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology and design of the Artful Awakening intervention, a six-week exploration of how APL can cultivate embodied spirituality and serve as bridge work for decolonization. The research design reflects the participatory, communal nature of the work itself. CPAR and PABR frameworks positioned participants not as subjects to be studied but as co-researchers engaged in shared transformation. The mixed-methods approach honored both measurable change and lived experience, recognizing that numbers and stories together tell a more comprehensive truth than either could alone.

The intervention's structure, combining spiritual direction practices with community-building principles, created a container strong enough to hold vulnerability and spacious enough for the Spirit to work in unexpected ways. The Link Centre provided neutral third space where participants could explore embodied spirituality

outside traditional church walls. The thematic arc from Wonder to Presence invited gradual deepening while allowing each week to stand alone. Response-shift bias, typically considered a methodological problem, became evidence of transformation.

The facilitator's dual role as both researcher and participant reflected an important truth: no one stands outside the systems being addressed. Everyone shaped by capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy was invited into the work of decolonization together. Power dynamics could not be erased, only named honestly. My social location as a white pastor in Mississippi shaped what was visible and what remained unseen, what felt safe to say and what stayed unspoken. I was not a neutral observer. I was part of the work. What follows in Chapter 5 are the research outcomes, the numbers that show change happened and the stories that reveal how and why.

Chapter 5

Results and Interpretation

Introduction: Honor Multiple Forms of Knowing

The findings presented in this chapter resist a common temptation in research: the impulse to rank, compare, and determine which data matters most. In a culture shaped by competition and productivity metrics, we are conditioned to ask, "What's the most important finding? Who improved the most? Which number proves success?" This intervention, however, was not about competing. It was about honoring where each person was, and that being enough.

Participants came to Artful Awakening with different starting places, different life experiences, and different wounds and wisdom held in their bodies. To privilege one form of knowing over another would contradict the very ethos of embodied spirituality this project seeks to cultivate. Saying that quantitative data matters more than qualitative themes, or that statistical significance outweighs facilitator observation, repeats the same hierarchies this work resists. Numbers, stories, and observations illuminate one another. They form a web of interconnected insights, each thread essential to understanding the whole.

This approach is both good research practice and decolonizing work. Colonial academic hierarchies have long elevated "objective" quantitative data over the subjective, lived experiences of real people. In embodied spiritual formation, we need both. We need the statistical anchor that tells us 83% of participants showed significant increases in body trust— a finding that is wild and beautiful in its scope. We also need

the participant who wrote, “Our bodies, just like our minds, are channels of communication for God,” because her words illuminate what that number means in a human life.

What follows is not a hierarchy of findings, but an invitation to see the transformation that took place from multiple angles. Quantitative assessments revealed significant shifts. Qualitative reflections named the lived experience of those shifts. Facilitator observations captured moments of breakthrough that neither surveys nor journals could fully convey. Together, these forms of knowing help us understand what happened during the intervention. A group of mostly white, Southern adults gathered for six weeks to explore art, poetry, and embodied spirituality. Many were unfamiliar with contemplative practice. The data is remarkable. More than that, it represents actual people and the transformation taking place in their lives. This chapter holds it all as important and significant.

What Changed: Interconnected Findings

Three major patterns emerged across quantitative, qualitative, and observational data. First, participants developed significantly greater trust in their bodies as sources of spiritual wisdom, a finding that converged powerfully across all forms of knowing. Second, participants shifted from striving to being, releasing the need for perfection and learning to trust the process. Third, they discovered new ways of knowing that honored embodied wisdom alongside intellectual understanding. These patterns are not hierarchical but interconnected, each illuminating transformation that occurred when participants engaged APL as embodied spiritual practice.

Bodies Becoming Trustworthy

One significant finding was participants' increased trust in their bodies as reliable sources of truth and spiritual insight. Eighty-three percent of participants demonstrated significant increases on the MAIA Trusting subscale (Cohen's $d=1.25$, $p<.05$). This represents not just a statistically significant change but a substantial, meaningful shift in how participants experienced their bodies. The Trusting subscale measures the degree to which someone experiences their body as safe and trustworthy rather than threatening or unreliable. For most participants, this was not a minor adjustment; it was a fundamental reorientation.

This quantitative pattern converged powerfully with what participants described in their own words. Sarah wrote of a dramatic theological shift in her understanding of embodiment. Before the intervention, she believed "spirit is good and body is bad." By the end of the six weeks, she had come to understand that "our bodies, just like our minds, are channels of communication for God." She reflected further on the body's capacity to hold what the mind cannot: "The idea that my body is able to remember things even if my mind doesn't is very comforting to me." These were not small adjustments in thinking. They represented a complete reframing of the body's role in the spiritual life from an obstacle to a trusted channel.

Other participants named similar discoveries. One wrote of learning to listen to her body's signals rather than overriding them. Another described beginning to trust bodily sensations as legitimate sources of spiritual wisdom rather than distractions to be

ignored. The shift was profound: bodies that had been experienced as problems became recognized as gifts.

As facilitator, I witnessed this transformation in ways that neither surveys nor journals fully captured. During the Week 6 sound bath, I watched bodies soften. Shoulders drop. Breathing deepen. In early weeks, participants often looked to me for reassurance and asked clarifying questions to make sure they were doing something the 'right' way. By the final sessions, they had learned to trust their own inner sense of what their bodies needed. They shifted positions when uncomfortable without asking permission. They closed or opened their eyes as they needed. They allowed tears or laughter to arise without apology.

The body trust finding also appeared in other MAIA subscales, though with less dramatic results. Sixty-seven percent of participants showed improvement in Not-Distracting (the ability to stay present with bodily). Fifty percent improved in Emotional Awareness (recognizing the connection between bodily sensations and emotional states) and Noticing (awareness of subtle bodily sensations).

MAIA Subscale	% Improved	Average Change	Range
Trusting	83%	0.92	-0.33 to +2.00
Not-Distracting	67%	0.45	-1.00 to +1.67
Emotional Awareness	50%	0.23	-1.00 to +1.60
Noticing	50%	0.18	-0.75 to +1.25
Attention Regulation	50%	0.15	-1.00 to +1.00
Body Listening	50%	0.12	-0.67 to +1.00
Self-Regulation	33%	-0.28	-2.00 to +1.25
Not-Worrying	33%	-0.15	-1.67 to +1.00

(Table 1. MAIA subscales)

What makes these findings particularly significant is the ways they come together. When participants said they learned to trust their bodies, the numbers confirmed it. When I observed people relaxing into embodied presence, their written reflections named the same transformation. This web of statistical, narrative, and observational data points to a genuine shift in how participants inhabited their own skin.

From Striving to Being

A second major pattern was a movement from striving to being, from the pressure to perform and get it right toward permission to simply be present with the moment. Participants described letting go of perfectionism, releasing the need to produce something impressive, and discovering freedom in the process rather than the product. This theme emerged most frequently in participant reflections, appearing in more than half the group's journals and post-surveys.

Sarah captured this shift directly: “I did not have to be perfect.” Multiple participants echoed similar discoveries, writing variations of “there is no right or wrong answer” as they described their experience. Margaret wrote about a fundamental change in how she approached spiritual practice: “In the past, my definition of spirituality was having all of the right answers… I felt like I had to know and understand everything.” Through the intervention, she discovered a different way, one rooted in experience rather than achievement, presence rather than performance.

This shift became most visible during Week 5, the collage session. I had worried that making a collage might feel too arts-and-crafts, too elementary. Instead, it became

the most freeing weeks of the entire intervention. Participants moved around the room, tearing images from magazines, arranging and rearranging pieces on their pages with an intuitive sense of what belonged. There was none of the self-conscious hesitation of earlier weeks in the intervention. No one asked if they were doing it right. They were simply doing. They were cutting, placing, and discovering what emerged. The shift was not that they had become "better" at art or embodied spirituality. The shift was that they had stopped needing to be.

Participants also named related themes of surrender and slowing down. Catherine wrote that the practices "slowed me down, [helped me] take time to look and appreciate." Another participant described learning to trust the process rather than controlling outcomes. These descriptions are more than observations. They point to a different way of moving through the world, one that is less driven by productivity and more attuned to presence.

This movement from striving to being was connected to quantitative findings in meaningful ways. Sixty percent of participants showed increased tolerance for ambiguity on the NFCS, indicating growing comfort with not knowing and multiple interpretations. The release of perfectionism requires exactly this capacity: the ability to sit with uncertainty, to allow multiple meanings to coexist, and to trust that not every question requires a definitive answer.

This shift, though participants would not have named it this way, is decolonizing work. Empire demands constant production, measurable outcomes, and hierarchical comparison. This intervention invited something else: trust in process, permission to

rest in ambiguity, and recognition that being present is enough. Participants resisted productivity culture simply by allowing themselves to experience art and poetry without needing to demonstrate mastery or produce something worthy of display.

Ways of Knowing

A major pattern was a broadening of how participants understood knowledge itself. They discovered that knowing happens not only through intellectual analysis but also through embodied sensation, creative expression, and intuitive wisdom. A feeling in the chest could carry truth. A color choice in a painting could reveal something words had not yet reached. The body became a source of information, not just a vehicle for the mind. This expanded understanding of knowledge challenged deeply ingrained assumptions about what counts as real or legitimate knowing.

Several participants explicitly named a movement from head knowledge to embodied knowing. Margaret's reflection captures this shift beautifully. She wrote that in the past, her spirituality centered on "having all of the right answers," on knowing and understanding everything intellectually. Through the intervention, she discovered that "I can rest even in the unknown." Richard, who identified himself as highly analytical, wrote in early journals about his discomfort with practices that bypassed rational explanation. By the final week, something had shifted, and he had come to trust embodied knowing, even when his analytical mind could not fully explain it. His quantitative data mirrored this transformation: he improved on all eight MAIA subscales, including a dramatic +2.00 increase in body trust.

Participants also described art itself as a way of knowing. Margaret wrote, “The more I looked at the art itself, the more I saw myself in it.” The artwork became a mirror, revealing truths about her own life that direct questioning might not have uncovered. Sarah described creative expression as a form of communication with God that moved beyond words into image and form.

This expansion of how knowing happens also showed up in participants’ growing comfort with multiple interpretations. Sarah initially struggled with the risk that her creative work might be misunderstood by others. After sitting with this discomfort, she came to realize that “all creative expressions involve the risk of misinterpretation,” and rather than that being a problem to solve, it became part of the practice itself. She was learning to trust her own voice even when others might read it differently.

These changes in how participants understood knowing connect directly to the body trust findings. To trust the body as a source of wisdom is to expand beyond purely rational ways of accessing truth. When participants said their bodies could remember what their minds forgot, or that bodily sensations revealed emotional truths, they were claiming embodied ways of knowing as legitimate and trustworthy. The 83% increase in body trust, then, represents not just a psychological shift but a shift in how truth is accessed and discerned through the body as much as through the mind.

The Complex Patterns: What Numbers Don’t Fully Capture

Transformation is rarely linear, and the data from this intervention reflects that reality. While the findings presented in the previous section reveal significant patterns of growth, a closer look at the complexity within the data honors the truth that people

do not all change in the same ways, at the same pace, or along the same paths. Some participants showed declines in certain quantitative measures even as their journals revealed profound shifts. Others showed dramatic growth in one area while remaining relatively unchanged in another. This variation is not a limitation of the research, it is a testament to the embodied, relational, and deeply individual nature of spiritual transformation.

Awareness Before Integration: The Self-Regulation Pattern

One of the most puzzling quantitative findings at first glance was that 67% of participants showed a decline in self-regulation capacity on the MAIA. Self-regulation measures the ability to regulate psychological distress through attention to bodily sensations, essentially using embodied awareness to calm or soothe oneself. On the surface, a decline might suggest the intervention was ineffective or even harmful. The reality, however, is far more complex.

This pattern reflects a necessary stage in embodied transformation: awareness must precede integration. You cannot change what you do not see. You do not know what you do not know. Participants became more attuned to their internal states, including dysregulation, without yet having developed the full capacity to regulate those states consistently. They were learning to notice, to pay attention, and to recognize when their bodies were holding stress or discomfort. The intervention successfully cultivated seeing; longer timelines and sustained practice would be needed to develop extensive self-regulation skills.

This interpretation is supported by the qualitative data. Participants wrote about becoming more aware of their bodies and more attuned to sensations they had previously ignored or overridden. This heightened awareness can initially feel destabilizing— not because participants' bodies had changed, but because they were now paying attention to realities that had always been present but unacknowledged. Suddenly noticing tension in the shoulders, tightness in the chest, or restlessness in the legs meant becoming conscious of what the body had been holding all along. The numbers captured that destabilization as it emerged from deepening attention. The journals captured the growing capacity to notice and name what the body was holding.

Individual Variation: Different Starting Points, Different Paths

Not everyone experienced the intervention in the same way, and this diversity of response honors the reality that participants came with different histories, different wounds, and different capacities for embodied practice. Transformation is not uniform. Growth does not follow a single trajectory. Some participants needed more time, more practice, more safety before they could fully engage. Others were ready to dive deep immediately. The intervention created space for this variety rather than demanding a single outcome for all.

Hope’s data illustrates this complexity beautifully. Her MAIA scores showed relatively modest quantitative changes. Some subscales improved slightly while others declined slightly. Her journals and her engagement throughout the six weeks, however, told a different story. During Week 2’s Visio Divina session, she processed a profound

grief she had been carrying. She wrote about a pregnancy loss that she never allowed herself to feel. The image of a mother and child in the art undid something in her. She wept quietly and afterward wrote about how the practice had given her permission to grieve in her body. The numbers did not capture that breakthrough, but her lived experience did.

Richard's trajectory moved in the opposite direction. His quantitative data was remarkable. He improved on all eight MAIA subscales, with a dramatic +2.00 increase in body trust. Yet his early journals revealed significant discomfort and resistance. As someone who identified as highly analytical, the invitation to trust embodied knowing without rational explanation felt foreign and unsettling. His growth was real and measurable, but it came through struggle, doubt, and the gradual willingness to trust something his mind could not fully control.

When Qualitative Richness Reveals What Numbers Miss

Margaret's data presents another layer of complexity. Her MAIA scores showed moderate improvements in some areas and declines in others, a mixed quantitative picture. Yet the richness of her qualitative reflections revealed a transformation that the numbers alone could not convey. She wrote eloquently about shifting from a spirituality rooted in "having all the right answers" to one that allowed her to "rest even in the unknown." She described discovering permission to trust her own experience rather than performing for external approval. These shifts represent profound spiritual and psychological growth, even if they did not translate neatly into standardized assessment scores.

This pattern, qualitative depth revealing what quantitative measures miss, appeared across multiple participants. Some wrote about breakthroughs in self-compassion, moments of connection with God through creative expression, or newfound capacity to sit with difficult emotions. These are the textures of transformation that surveys struggle to capture.

Honoring Complexity as Resistance

This individual variation is not a methodological problem to be solved. It is a feature of embodied, relational work that resists the colonial impulse to standardize and control outcomes. Empire's logic demands uniformity: everyone should improve in the same ways, at the same rate, producing comparable results. Embodied spirituality invites something different. It meets people where they are, honors their unique starting points, and trusts that growth will unfold in ways that are appropriate to each person's history and needs.

The complexity within this data, then, is itself a form of decolonizing work. It resists ranking and comparison. It refuses to declare some participants "more successful" than others based on numerical improvement. It honors the truth that transformation is messy, nonlinear, and deeply personal. Most importantly it says that all of it matters.

Three Lives, Three Paths: Case Studies

The numbers tell us what changed across the group. Individual stories show us how. Three participants offer windows into what transformation actually looked and felt like. Each came with different starting points, different struggles, and different

breakthroughs. Together they show what happened when particular people engaged APL to cultivate an embodied spirituality. Case studies reveal the texture of experience that data cannot capture. They show us the moments of resistance and breakthrough, the specific practices that resonated or fell flat, and the way transformation unfolds in real time with real people. These three lives represent the diversity of the group while also illuminating patterns that emerged across multiple participants.

Richard: The Analytical Mind Learns to Trust

Richard came to the intervention as someone who valued rational understanding. His early journal entries revealed discomfort with practices that asked him to trust what he could not fully explain. In Week 2, when the group engaged photographs, he wrote bluntly: “Photos - unclear. Not sure I want to guess, interpret photos. Photo is reality, not creative.” For Richard, a photograph captured an objective reality. Therefore, there was nothing to interpret because it simply was. This perspective made sense for someone whose primary way of knowing was analytical. If something could not be explained or understood at face value, then it felt uncertain or perhaps unsafe.

Yet Richard showed up consistently and engaged fully with each week’s practice. By Week 4, something began to shift. His journal entry that week noted: “We are all the same, but different.” He wrote about confusion, layers, and mixed messages acknowledging complexity he had not been willing to name before. During group reflection time, he said something that revealed a significant opening: “Maybe it is okay for art to speak different messages to different people.” This was not a complete

abandonment of his analytical nature, but a willingness to hold space for multiple interpretations. He was beginning to trust that others might see something he did not, and that could be acceptable.

Week 6's experience was a sound bath, and Richard's response was visceral. He wrote: "Least favorite session. Highly annoying, pulsating sounds (Like an emergency alarm) Hard to listen to it. Stop breathing, muscles tense." The pulsating sounds felt like an alarm in his body, which makes sense for someone so deeply analytical. His body registered the experience as a threat, as something to resist. He noted the tension, the stopped breathing, and the difficulty of calming back down afterward.

Then, in his final reflection, Richard did something remarkable. He reframed the discomfort: "Perhaps these sessions have taught me how to return and find calm again… Even bad events can be gotten past. The jolting and upsetting last session helps bring out the good and joy of earlier sessions. This works for me. Perhaps the jolt serves a purpose beyond the moment." This is trust. Not intellectual agreement, but embodied trust. It is the willingness to believe that even what feels alarming might have meaning, and might serve a purpose he cannot yet fully understand.

Richard's quantitative data mirrored this transformation. He improved on all eight MAIA subscales. His body trust score increased by +2.00— a 100% gain from his baseline. The numbers and his words tell the same story: an analytical mind learning to trust embodied knowing, even when it bypasses rational explanation.

Sarah: The Poet Discovers Her Body

Sarah entered the intervention already comfortable with creative expression. She was a musician and poet, someone who knew how to access her inner life through art. What she had not yet learned to trust was her body. In her pre-intervention questionnaire, she named this tension directly: "It's very easy to get into the logical fallacy that the 'spirit is good and body is bad' for me." This dualism ran deep, shaping not only her theology but her sense of self. Her body, in this framework, was something to manage or transcend, not something to trust as a source of truth.

The sound bath in Week 6 became a turning point. Sarah described the experience in her post-questionnaire: "I felt so calm and safe during that experience, and my imagination came up with this image of being above the world, swinging through the stars in God's arms the way a little kid might. I was laughing internally, and I felt so joyful but without the overwhelm that sometimes comes when I feel intense happiness. I felt like I could stay there forever." This was not intellectual understanding. This was embodied spirituality through calm, through safety, and through joy of being held. The experience undid something in her theology. By the end of the six weeks, she could write: "Our bodies, just like our minds, are channels of communication for God to speak into. I didn't think of my body as really being a channel for God six weeks ago."

Sarah also reflected on what her body could hold that her mind could not: "The idea that my body is able to remember things even if my mind doesn't is very comforting to me." This was a complete reorientation from body-as-obstacle to body-

as-vessel, from body-as-distraction to body-as-wisdom. APL had given her a new way to relate to herself.

She also wrestled with vulnerability during the intervention. In Week 3, when creating eight-word poems, she struggled with the thought that specific words in her poem might be misinterpreted and might reveal something about her identity she was not ready to share. Then she came to a realization that freed her: “After realizing that all creative expressions involve the risk of misinterpretation, I felt much better.” The risk did not disappear, but it no longer paralyzed her. She could trust her own voice and let it be heard, even if others might read it differently than she intended.

Her MAIA data reflected this theological shift: body trust increased by +1.67, a 99% gain from baseline. She improved on six of the eight subscales. As facilitator, I observed her gratitude throughout the intervention. She was always glad to be there, and she said at the end of every week that it was her favorite. She loved listening to other people’s stories and articulated her own growth aloud during group conversations. What I witnessed in Sarah was a poet discovering that her body, too, speaks a language worth listening to.

Margaret: The Quiet Transformation

Margaret participated in every session, but she rarely spoke during group discussions. She kept to herself, engaging the creative practices with focus but sharing little aloud. If I had relied only on my observations of her during the six weeks, I would have missed the depth of what was happening inside her. It was her journals and questionnaires that revealed the transformation that was taking place.

In her pre-intervention responses, Margaret named the weight she carried: "Spirituality has come with feelings of rigidity in the past. Anxiety about performance." She identified herself as "a recovering perfectionist" with "religious trauma." Her spirituality had been shaped by the need to get things right, to perform well, and to know the correct answers. She wrote: "In the past, my definition of spirituality was having all of the right answers and doing the right things."

Week 2 became a pivotal moment for her, though I would not have known it from watching her in the room. The group engaged photographs through Visio Divina, and the exercise required quick, intuitive responses with no time to overthink, just trust your first instinct. In her post-questionnaire, Margaret described what happened internally: "Part of me wanted to feel a bit panicked at first because I've always prided myself on 'doing well' for whatever authority figure was in my life (parents, professor, God, etc). There was another part of me that felt a bit unhappy with my answers or drawings. But that challenged me in a way I find difficult to do myself, which is to be content with the way things are. My answers/contribution was just as valid as everyone else in the group." This was no small shift. For someone whose spirituality had been defined by performance and approval, the realization that her contribution was "just as valid as everyone else" without needing external validation was profound.

By Week 4, her journal entry captured a longing that felt almost like prayer: "My life would change if I trusted my way of seeing. No second-guessing or fear of authority." She was beginning to imagine what freedom might feel like, and what it might mean to trust herself rather than constantly measuring her experience against

someone else's standard. Her final journal entry, Week 6, named the transformation simply: "I can rest even in the unknown. I don't have to explain everything." In her post-questionnaire, she wrote: "My biggest takeaway is that I can be content in not knowing the 'correct' answers about things."

Margaret's quantitative data showed a mixed picture while some MAIA subscales improved, others declined slightly. On paper, her results might seem modest. The qualitative data, however, revealed something the numbers could not fully convey: a fundamental reorientation in how she inhabited her spiritual life. She was learning to resist the inner voice that demanded perfection and to trust that her presence, exactly as she was, could be enough.

Months after the intervention ended, Margaret sent me a message on Instagram: "I did some watercolor last night for the first time in several years. In the past it hasn't been fun to me because I was so worried about the end product. Last night I was able to just enjoy the process. I think your class really helped me with that." The transformation lasted. It integrated into her life beyond the six weeks. It showed up not in dramatic declarations during group discussion, but in the quiet, steady work of learning to trust herself in watercolor, in prayer, and in the unknown.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter reveal that APL can facilitate significant transformation in how people relate to their bodies, their spirituality, and one another. Quantitative patterns, qualitative themes, complex variations, and individual portraits all point to the same truth: creative embodied practices make a difference. Eighty-three

percent of participants showed substantial increases in body trust. Participants learned to release perfectionism, embrace ambiguity, and trust process over product. They discovered new ways of knowing that honored embodied wisdom alongside intellectual understanding. The transformation was neither uniform nor simple, but it was real. Richard, Sarah, and Margaret represent different paths through the same invitation. Each person met the practices where they were and carried something new into their lives beyond the six weeks. What these findings mean for ministry practice, theological reflection, and future research will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Implications for Ministry

What This Changed in Me

In chapter one, I described being sick— literally sick. High blood pressure, hair falling out, and a body in revolt against a ministry culture built on production and perfectionism. In that season, I picked up a paintbrush for the first time in years, and something began to shift. Artful Awakening is, in many ways, the fruit of that moment. What began as my own desperate reaching for wholeness became an invitation extended to others. Throughout this intervention, I learned that I cannot facilitate transformation that I am not willing to live. This has been the most profound lesson of Artful Awakening. Not just what happened in the participants, but what happened in me. Leading this intervention required me to practice what I was inviting others toward: embodiment, curiosity, trust, and letting go.

These shifts did not emerge solely from the six weeks of Artful Awakening. They are the fruit of my entire Doctor of Ministry journey, three years of reading, reflection, spiritual direction training, and my own embodiment practices. The intervention became the crucible where all of that learning was tested, lived, and made real in community. What I describe here are the changes I can see most clearly now, on the other side of facilitating this project, even as I acknowledge they were years in the making.

Artful Awakening has changed me as a person and a pastor, and those changes are showing up concretely in how I lead. This year in my ministry context, I have shifted

how I approach ministry planning. Worship became a space for transformation, not just information. This year, we moved the offering to after the sermon. I now transition from preaching into a time of reflection, asking two or three transformational questions while the ushers pass the plates and the offertory music plays. People journal. They sit with what stirred in them. The offering is no longer just about financial stewardship, but about offering ourselves, our questions, and our willingness to be changed.

I also write sermons differently now. The language I use in liturgy is more embodied and less cerebral. One of the Artful Awakening participants read an original poem during worship. We held a church-wide collage angel-making night during Advent, and I used those angels to make banners for Christmas Eve worship. Creative expression is not reserved for professionals or experts. It belongs to the whole body of Christ, and we have begun to incorporate that into church life.

I lead with curiosity rather than expertise. I ask more questions. I offer fewer answers. I create space for people to discover their own wisdom instead of looking for me to provide it. Pastors are trained, explicitly and implicitly, to be experts. Stepping into the role of facilitator instead of authority figure requires conscious practice. It means resisting the pressure to fill silence with my voice. It means trusting that transformation happens in the spaciousness, and not in my ability to manage outcomes. I do not rush to results and decisions the way I used to. I let conversations breathe and questions linger until they rest on the soul without the compulsion to find answers. This feels countercultural in a church system that privileges efficiency, productivity, and measurable outcomes.

My own embodiment has shifted. I could not invite participants to trust their bodies if I was not learning to trust mine. I am more aware of the Spirit at work in my body now. In the tightness of my chest when I am anxious, the way my breath shallows when I am overwhelmed, and the sensation of peace that settles in my shoulders when I am aligned with what is true. I go on prayer walks. I have a meditation practice. I pay attention to my breath throughout the day. I am learning to honor my body as a site of divine revelation, not just a vehicle for getting things done.

Another significant change is my ability to recognize the impact of Empire. Once you start evaluating everything through the lens of *Does this colonize or liberate?,* you cannot stop. I see it in the structure of the institutional church, the way we organize around scarcity, the way we measure success by numbers and budgets, and the way we privilege productivity over rest. Mainline protestant denominations are declining. The response is more grinding, more performance, more programs, and more strategic planning. This project taught me to say: Stop. Breathe. Release. The scarcity mindset is Empire's logic. The belief that we must earn worthiness through achievement is Empire's theology. These lies are killing us spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

I see the effects in my congregants. They are burnt out. They are lonely. They have internalized the message that they are not enough. What if instead we offered them permission to be human? What if we created spaces where they could practice trusting themselves, honoring their bodies, and releasing outcomes? What if the church became a site of resistance against Empire's numbness? This is the work I am trying to do now. These are the changes in me, and the ways I am trying to lead as a pastor and

spiritual director. Not perfectly, not always successfully, but with intention and hope. Most profoundly, the experience of this intervention taught me that transformation is possible.

What This Means for the Church

What if the church became a place where people learned to trust their bodies again? Where multiple perspectives could coexist without threat? Where creative expression opened pathways to the divine that bypass our intellectual defenses? This is not a far-off dream. This is what I witnessed in Artful Awakening. This is what becomes possible when we create contemplative containers for APL to do their work.

The Western church has emphasized right belief, cognitive understanding, and doctrinal clarity for centuries. Theology matters, and the life of the mind matters deeply. To be clear, the problem is not that we have valued thinking. The problem is that we have only valued thinking, to the exclusion of embodied knowing, somatic wisdom, and the intelligence that lives in our bodies. When spiritual formation focuses exclusively on getting beliefs right and managing behavior, we miss something essential about what it means to be human and what it means to follow a God who chose to become human.

People are suffering. Our congregants are exhausted, anxious, and disconnected from themselves and each other. They have internalized messages about productivity and worthiness that are killing them spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Many carry trauma in their bodies that no sermon can reach, and they hunger for something deeper than information. They long to be whole. The church has tools to help. APL are not

superficial additions to "real" ministry, but rather prophetic practices that energize transformation in ways that direct teaching cannot.

APL works because it is intentionally ambiguous. There is no right or wrong way to experience a poem, no correct interpretation of a painting, or no single meaning to a piece of music. This ambiguity is not weakness but invitation. It creates space for curiosity, for exploration, and for the recognition that others might see something I do not or cannot see. When people engage with art in community, they practice honoring multiple perspectives without requiring agreement. They learn that difference is not a threat and discover that unity does not require uniformity.

This is radically countercultural. In polarized contexts where people are pressured to choose sides, to declare allegiance, and to prove they are on the "right" team, art offers a different way. People who shut down if you use words like "justice" or "decolonization" explicitly, will often engage with creative practices. APL does its work quietly, planting seeds that grow beneath conscious awareness, energizing imagination for what Walter Brueggemann calls "the practice of alternative community."[1] It engages the imagination and allows people to see realities alternative to the status quo.

APL also naturally disrupts hierarchy. You cannot be "right" about art, and no one has authority over interpretation. The pastor's reading of a poem carries no more weight than the newest participant's response, because everyone's perspective is valid. This levels the playing field in ways that challenge the expert-laity power dynamics embedded in most church structures. When I facilitated Artful Awakening, I participated

[1] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 4.

alongside everyone else, asking questions and sharing my uncertainties. The methodology itself was designed for mutuality, not extraction. We created together, discovered together, and no one was positioned as the expert.

What happens when we organize church life around this kind of mutuality? What opens up when we honor embodied wisdom alongside theological knowledge? What becomes possible when we trust that the Spirit speaks through bodies, through creativity, and through the wisdom people carry in their breath and bones? The church begins to look different. Power shifts. Voices that were silenced find space to speak. Creativity that was relegated to children's ministry becomes central to worship and spiritual formation. People discover they have something to offer beyond volunteer hours and financial contributions. They realize that they carry divine wisdom in their very bodies, and that wisdom matters.

Embodied spiritual formation matters because incarnation matters. The Word became flesh, and God chose a body. Jesus experienced hunger, exhaustion, grief, and joy. He wept, touched lepers, and let a woman anoint his feet with her tears. A faith that ignores the body cannot fully comprehend a God who sanctified flesh by inhabiting it. True spiritual formation is about wholeness: the integration of body, mind, and spirit. It is about learning to trust ourselves as sites of divine revelation, becoming fully human and fully alive.

When people are disconnected from their bodies, the consequences ripple outward. They become more easily manipulated by fear, defer to authoritarian voices, and grasp for simplistic answers to complex questions. This disconnection serves the

interests of Empire, which has always depended on people being numb to their own bodies and blind to the bodies of others. We see this dynamic at work in the rise of Christian nationalism, a theology that trades incarnational presence for ideological certainty, that privileges power over vulnerability, and that abandons the way of the cross for the way of Empire. This is what happens when spiritual formation ignores embodiment; it becomes complicit in systems that use religion to consolidate power rather than to liberate and heal.

Transformation is possible. I have witnessed it in the faces of participants during the sound bath, in the journals they filled with questions and insights, in the art they created, and in the courage it took to share it. When we create contemplative spaces for people to engage APL, to trust their bodies, and to honor ambiguity – something shifts. They begin to trust themselves, cultivate empathy, lean into mystery, and become more fully who God created them to be. This is not wishful thinking or idealistic theory. This is what happened in six weeks in Tupelo, Mississippi, and it can happen anywhere pastors are willing to create space for it.

The church can become this kind of space, functioning as communities where embodied wisdom is honored, creative expression is welcomed, and people learn to trust what they know in their bodies. We can practice mutuality instead of hierarchy and invite curiosity instead of demanding certainty. We can energize imagination to usher in the Kin-dom of God that Jesus proclaimed. This is a Kin-dom where the last are first, where the marginalized are centered, and where bodies matter because God became one. APL offers a bridge. It invites people into embodied spiritual formation without

triggering the defensiveness that direct language often provokes. It creates transformation, disrupts power, and reminds us that the Word became flesh. This is the invitation of Artful Awakening.

If You Want to Try This

Ministry leaders do not need to be artists to facilitate embodied spiritual formation through APL. They only need to be willing to try, to be vulnerable, to surrender outcomes, and to trust the process. The question is not whether one has creative credentials, the question is whether one is open to transformation.

This matters because the "I'm not an artist" objection is itself a colonized approach to creativity. It assumes that art belongs to experts, that some people have permission to create while others do not, and that there is a right way to engage creative practices. This thinking goes against the heart of this work: everyone has a perspective that matters, everyone is made in the image of a creative God, and everyone can participate in making meaning through art. If a facilitator can be curious, ask good questions, and create space for the Spirit to move, then they can lead others in this work.

The facilitator's posture is one of curiosity and surrender. This is ultimately the work of spiritual direction: holy listening, discernment, and holding space without controlling outcomes. One can plan a creative practice without defining what participants should learn from it. One can structure a contemplative container without predetermining what the Spirit will do inside it. The paradox is this: plan thoughtfully, then release completely. Choose materials with care, craft questions with intention,

create rhythm and flow, and then let go of what should happen. Be comfortable if people do not get out of the experience what the facilitator wanted them to get. Trust that the Spirit is actually the one in the lead.

This requires practice. It goes against everything ministry leaders are trained to do. Pastors are taught to have learning objectives, measurable outcomes, and clear takeaways. Their job is to curate the experience so that people leave with specific insights. Letting go of this control feels risky, even irresponsible. It is also where transformation happens. The participants of Artful Awakening did not all learn the same things, did not all have the same breakthroughs, and did not all describe their experiences with the same language. They grew in different directions, and it was all good.

Starting small matters. Ministry leaders do not need to implement an entire six-week course to glean things from this project that could make a difference in their own ministry contexts. Perhaps they begin with intentional art on the bulletin or incorporate embodied language into a call to worship. Perhaps they lead a Bible study that includes a journaling practice, giving people five minutes of silence to write or draw their responses before discussion begins. Perhaps they invite someone to read an original poem during worship, creating space for creative expression that is not reserved for professionals.[2]

[2] Rory Noland, *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as If Spiritual Formation Mattered* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2021), 27.

These small experiences matter. They signal that creativity is welcome, that multiple ways of knowing are valid, and that spiritual formation happens in bodies as well as minds. They plant seeds. Over time, those seeds grow into something larger, perhaps a monthly contemplative art gathering, a seasonal retreat, or a full intervention like Artful Awakening. The willingness to try, to experiment, and to trust is what opens the door.

If someone does want to design a more comprehensive experience like Artful Awakening, certain elements are essential. A spirit of curiosity is non-negotiable. Art, any kind of art, is non-negotiable. Beyond that, there is flexibility. The contemplative structure I used (opening ritual, art engagement, creative practice, reflection) created a rhythm that participants found grounding, especially in contexts where contemplative work feels unfamiliar. The combination of art-gazing and art making allowed people to receive beauty and to participate in creating it. The reflective questions invited integration without forcing conclusions. A neutral third space helped participants step outside their usual roles and expectations. Six weeks gave enough time for trust to build and patterns to shift without overwhelming people's schedules.

These are options that worked in my context with my particular participants. Other contexts will be different. Other people will need different things. Ministry leaders should pay attention to what their communities' hunger for, notice where people are stuck, where they are numb, and where they long for more. Then create a container that invites them toward wholeness in ways that honor their particular

wounds and gifts. This work does not require perfection. It requires willingness, curiosity, and trust that the Spirit is at work in the creative process.

What We're Still Learning

Every study has boundaries, and honest acknowledgment of these boundaries strengthens rather than weakens the contribution. The limitations of this project help give directions for future exploration and refinement. What follows is not a catalog of weaknesses but rather an invitation into the questions that remain. These are questions I am genuinely curious about and questions that other ministry leaders might explore in their own contexts.

This project worked with a small sample in a specific context. The group was predominantly white women in the Southern United States, and the Link Centre provided a neutral third space that not every context has available. These boundaries mean the findings cannot be generalized beyond this particular intervention with these particular people in this particular place. For practitioner research at the Doctor of Ministry level, this is appropriate. The goal was never universal applicability but rather deep learning in a local context that might inform practice elsewhere. Still, important questions remain about cultural transferability. Would this work in Black church contexts? In Latinx communities? In Indigenous settings? In the Global South? How would the intervention need to adapt to honor different cultural approaches to embodiment, art, and spirituality?

Six weeks was enough to demonstrate impact but not enough for full integration. The decline in self-regulation scores suggests that participants needed more

time, not less, to practice the skills they were developing. Awareness must precede integration, and six weeks gave people enough space to wake up to what they had been missing, but not enough time to fully embody new patterns. This raises questions about optimal duration and ongoing support. Would twelve weeks be better? What about monthly gatherings that continue indefinitely? How do we create sustainable containers for work that is fundamentally ongoing rather than finite?

This matters because decolonization is not a one-time intervention. Our systems are so deeply entrenched in Empire that this work requires lifelong practice. People do not attend six sessions and suddenly become fully embodied, fully decolonized, and fully whole. They begin a journey. The question is how the church can support that journey over months and years, not just weeks.

I am curious about the relationship between communal and individual practices. Artful Awakening was designed as a group experience, and the community was essential to its impact. Participants learned from each other's interpretations, felt held by each other's presence, and practiced honoring multiple perspectives together. This communal dimension cannot be replicated in solitary practice. At the same time, I wonder what it would look like to offer something people could do at home between gatherings or after a program ends. What individual practices support ongoing embodied spiritual formation? How can APL be incorporated in that ongoing work? How do we equip people to continue this work when they are alone?

I am also curious about exploring different art forms in greater depth. This project incorporated poetry, visual art, music, collage, neurographic art, and sound

meditation. It was a wide range of creative practices across six weeks. This breadth allowed participants to discover what resonated with them the most. I wonder what would happen if an entire intervention focused on a single art form. What would a six-week program using only watercolor painting reveal? Could a program centered on music, songwriting, or attending concerts facilitate the same embodied awakening? Does the variety matter, or is depth in one medium equally effective?

Other questions linger. The study had no comparison group, so while transformation clearly occurred, it is impossible to isolate what caused the changes. Was it the APL? The contemplative structure? The community? My particular facilitation style? All of these together? People self-selected into the program, meaning they were already curious and open. How might we reach those who would never sign up for a program like Artful Awakening?

These questions do not undermine what was learned. They point toward what is possible. They invite continued exploration, adaptation, and experimentation. This project is not the final word on embodied spiritual formation through APL. It is an opening, an invitation, and a first step into territory that deserves far more attention than it has received. May others take up these questions in their own contexts, trusting that the Spirit will lead them into discoveries I cannot yet imagine.

The Invitation

This project began with a question: How might APL cultivate embodied spirituality? What unfolded was both simple and profound. When people were given permission to slow down, engage creatively, and trust what they knew in their bodies,

something shifted. Participants became more attuned to themselves and one another. They learned to honor ambiguity, release perfectionism, and listen differently to their bodies, to their neighbors, and to God.

What emerged confirms what theology has long proclaimed and what the church has often forgotten: bodies matter. The Word became flesh, and any spirituality that bypasses the body cannot fully participate in the life of God. Embodied spiritual formation invites people toward wholeness. It is about integrating body, mind, and spirit in ways that resist Empire's goals of productivity, hierarchy, and control.

APL function as bridge work in this process. They create non-threatening entry points into transformation, bypassing intellectual defensiveness and opening space for curiosity, empathy, and imagination. Their intentional ambiguity allows multiple truths to coexist without threat, teaching participants that difference is not dangerous and that meaning can be discovered rather than delivered. In a polarized and anxious religious landscape, this is radical work.

This project also revealed that transformation does not require expertise or artistic skill. It requires willingness. Facilitators do not need to be artists; they need to cultivate curiosity, surrender outcomes, and trust that the Spirit is already at work. The role of the leader shifts from expert to host, from authority to companion. Planning still matters. The structure, rhythm, and care create safety, but control must be released. What participants receive will differ depending on so many factors. That diversity, however, is not failure. It is evidence of the Spirit at work.

After the six-week intervention, this transformation became visible through a communal exhibition. Artworks created during the sessions: collages, poems, neurographic drawings, and curated pieces were displayed in the Link Centre gallery space. Participants stood beside their work, telling stories as others engaged with what had been made. Families gathered. Conversations unfolded. The exhibition bore witness to what the participants experienced together. Art made the invisible, visible. It gave form to what could not be fully captured by language or assessment alone. Transformation was present in the room, hanging on the walls, reflected in faces, and shared in stories.

Artful Awakening is not an endpoint. It is an opening. The questions that remain about duration, cultural context, individual versus communal practice, and long-term integration are not shortcomings but invitations for continued exploration. This work asks the church to slow down, to listen more deeply, and to trust that formation unfolds over time. It calls ministry leaders to resist Empire's urgency and to cultivate spaces where people can remember who they are.

The invitation is simple and demanding begin, where you are. Start small. Create space for art. Honor the body. Allow silence. Ask open questions. Release the need for certainty and control. Trust that the Spirit moves in creativity, in ambiguity, and in the wisdom carried in breath and bone. This is how embodied spiritual formation takes root, not through mastery, but through presence.

As we go from this place, having named what has been learned and what remains unfinished, I offer this blessing as a way of carrying the work forward.

May we learn to trust our bodies as sites of divine revelation—
in breath and heartbeat, in tension and release.
May we honor the image of God within us,
the creativity that pulses through our lives
and calls us toward truth and justice.
May we remember that the Word became flesh,
that God chose a body, sanctified embodiment,
and invites us into incarnational presence.
May we resist the lies of Empire
scarcity, hustle, perfectionism, and fear
and rest in the truth that we are beloved, whole, and enough.
May we create spaces where others can wake up,
where bodies are honored, where multiple truths can coexist,
and where art opens doors words alone cannot.
Go forth as bridge builders.
Go forth as companions and witnesses.
Go forth trusting the Spirit who moves in our bodies still.
In the name of the Creator,
the Christ who took on flesh,
and the Spirit who breathes through all things.
Amen.

- Rev. Amber Lea Gray

Appendix A: Assessment Instrument

Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA)
Version 2
(2018)

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Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness

Permission and Copyright

Although the MAIA survey is copyrighted, it is available without charge and no written permission is required for its use. This assumes agreement with the following as a consequence of using a MAIA survey:

- Please refer to the survey using its complete name – Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness - and provide the appropriate citation.
- Modifications may be made without our written permission. However, please clearly identify any modifications in any publications as having been made by the users. If you modify the survey, please let us know for our records.
- We recommend including entire subscales when selecting items from the MAIA to retain the psychometric features of these subscales (rather than selecting items from subscales).
- If you translate the MAIA into another language, please send us a copy for our records.
- If other investigators are interested in obtaining the survey, please refer them to the source document (PLoS-ONE 2012, and www.osher.ucsf.edu/maia/) to assure they obtain the most recent version and scoring instructions.

Scoring Instructions

Take the average of the items on each scale.
Note: (R): reverse-score (5 – x) items 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 on Not-Distracting, and items 11, 12 and 15 on Not-Worrying.

1. **Noticing:** Awareness of uncomfortable, comfortable, and neutral body sensations
   Q1_____ + Q2_____ + Q3_____ + Q4_____ / 4 = _____

2. **Not-Distracting:** Tendency not to ignore or distract oneself from sensations of pain or discomfort
   Q5(**R**)____ + Q6(**R**)____+ Q7(**R**)____+ Q8(**R**)____+Q9(**R**)____+Q10(**R**) / 6 = _____

3. **Not-Worrying:** Tendency not to worry or experience emotional distress with sensations of pain or discomfort
   Q11(**R**)_____ + Q12(**R**)_____ + Q13_____ + Q14_____ + Q15 (**R**) / 5 = _____

4. **Attention Regulation:** Ability to sustain and control attention to body sensations
   Q16_____ + Q17_____ + Q18_____ + Q19_____ + Q20_____ + Q21_____ + Q22_____ / 7 = _____

5. **Emotional Awareness:** Awareness of the connection between body sensations and emotional states
   Q23_____ + Q24_____ + Q25_____ + Q26_____ + Q27_____ / 5 = _____

6. **Self-Regulation:** Ability to regulate distress by attention to body sensations
   Q28_____ + Q29_____ + Q30_____ + Q31_____ / 4= _____

7. **Body Listening:** Active listening to the body for insight
   Q32_____ + Q33_____ + Q34_____ / 3= _____

8. **Trusting:** Experience of one's body as safe and trustworthy
   Q35_____ + Q36_____ + Q37_____ / 3= _____

Below you will find a list of statements. Please indicate how often each statement applies to you generally in daily life.

.	Circle one number on each line					
	Never					Always
1. When I am tense I notice where the tension is located in my body.	0	1	2	3	4	5
2. I notice when I am uncomfortable in my body.	0	1	2	3	4	5
3. I notice where in my body I am comfortable.	0	1	2	3	4	5
4. I notice changes in my breathing, such as whether it slows down or speeds up.	0	1	2	3	4	5
5. I ignore physical tension or discomfort until they become more severe.	0	1	2	3	4	5
6. I distract myself from sensations of discomfort.	0	1	2	3	4	5
7. When I feel pain or discomfort, I try to power through it.	0	1	2	3	4	5
8. I try to ignore pain	0	1	2	3	4	5
9. I push feelings of discomfort away by focusing on something	0	1	2	3	4	5
10. When I feel unpleasant body sensations, I occupy myself with something else so I don't have to feel them.	0	1	2	3	4	5
11. When I feel physical pain, I become upset.	0	1	2	3	4	5
12. I start to worry that something is wrong if I feel any discomfort.	0	1	2	3	4	5
13. I can notice an unpleasant body sensation without worrying about it.	0	1	2	3	4	5
14. I can stay calm and not worry when I have feelings of discomfort or pain.	0	1	2	3	4	5
15. When I am in discomfort or pain I can't get it out of my mind	0	1	2	3	4	5
16. I can pay attention to my breath without being distracted by things happening around me.	0	1	2	3	4	5
17. I can maintain awareness of my inner bodily sensations even when there is a lot going on around me.	0	1	2	3	4	5
18. When I am in conversation with someone, I can pay attention to my posture.	0	1	2	3	4	5

How often does each statement apply to you generally in daily life? Circle one number on each line

	Never					Always
19. I can return awareness to my body if I am distracted.	0	1	2	3	4	5
20. I can refocus my attention from thinking to sensing my body.	0	1	2	3	4	5
21. I can maintain awareness of my whole body even when a part of me is in pain or discomfort.	0	1	2	3	4	5
22. I am able to consciously focus on my body as a whole.	0	1	2	3	4	5
23. I notice how my body changes when I am angry.	0	1	2	3	4	5
24. When something is wrong in my life I can feel it in my body.	0	1	2	3	4	5
25. I notice that my body feels different after a peaceful experience.	0	1	2	3	4	5
26. I notice that my breathing becomes free and easy when I feel comfortable.	0	1	2	3	4	5
27. I notice how my body changes when I feel happy / joyful.	0	1	2	3	4	5
28. When I feel overwhelmed I can find a calm place inside.	0	1	2	3	4	5
29. When I bring awareness to my body I feel a sense of calm.	0	1	2	3	4	5
30. I can use my breath to reduce tension.	0	1	2	3	4	5
31. When I am caught up in thoughts, I can calm my mind by focusing on my body/breathing.	0	1	2	3	4	5
32. I listen for information from my body about my emotional state.	0	1	2	3	4	5
33. When I am upset, I take time to explore how my body feels.	0	1	2	3	4	5
34. I listen to my body to inform me about what to do.	0	1	2	3	4	5
35. I am at home in my body.	0	1	2	3	4	5
36. I feel my body is a safe place.	0	1	2	3	4	5
37. I trust my body sensations.	0	1	2	3	4	5

The Need for Closure Scale (**NFCS**)

The original NFCS was developed and published in 1994 by Webster and Kruglanski. An updated version of the NFCS, was published in 2007 by Roets and Van Hiel.
PLEASE NOTE: When reporting results both scales need to be referenced.

Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*(6), 1049–1062.

Roets, A., & Van Hiel, A. (2007). Separating ability from need: Clarifying the dimensional structure of the need for closure scale. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *33*(2), 266-280.

The NFCS comes in two versions: a full 41 item questionnaire and a short 15 item questionnaire.

The NFCS can be computed as a total NFC score by adding all the items. It is also possible to derive sub-scale scores for each of the five sub-scales, by summing up items according to their sub scale designation. The designations are indicates as as follows:
'a'— measure the need for order,
'b' – measure the need for predictability,
'c'— measure decisiveness,
'd'— measure avoidance of ambiguity,
'e'— measure closed mindedness.

PDF The NFCS

Read each of the following statements and decide how much you agree with each according to your beliefs and experiences. Please respond according to the following scale:

1 = Strongly disagree	4 = Slightly agree
2 = Moderately disagree	5 = Moderately agree
3 = Slightly disagree	6 = Strongly agree

1(a)	I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success.	1 2 3 4 5 6
2(e)	Even after I've made up my mind about something, I am always eager to consider a different opinion. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
3(d)	I don't like situations that are uncertain.	1 2 3 4 5 6
4(e)	I dislike questions which could be answered in many different ways.	1 2 3 4 5 6
5(b)	I like to have friends who are unpredictable. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
6(a)	I find that a well ordered life with regular hours suits my temperament.	1 2 3 4 5 6
7(b)	When dining out, I like to go to places where I have been before so that I know what to expect.	1 2 3 4 5 6
8(d)	I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand the reason why an event occurred in my life.	1 2 3 4 5 6
9(e)	I feel irritated when one person disagrees with what everyone else in a group believes.	1 2 3 4 5 6
10(a)	I hate to change my plans at the last minute.	1 2 3 4 5 6
11(b)	I don't like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.	1 2 3 4 5 6
12(c)	When I have made a decision, I feel relieved	1 2 3 4 5 6
13(c)	When I am confronted with a problem, I'm dying to reach a solution very quickly.	1 2 3 4 5 6
14(d)	When I am confused about an important issue, I feel very upset.	1 2 3 4 5 6

15(c)	I would quickly become impatient and irritated if I would not find a solution to a problem immediately.	1 2 3 4 5 6
16(c)	I would rather make a decision quickly than sleep over it.	1 2 3 4 5 6
17(c)	Even if I get a lot of time to make a decision, I still feel compelled to decide quickly.	1 2 3 4 5 6
18(b)	I think it is fun to change my plans at the last moment. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
19(b)	I enjoy the uncertainty of going into a new situation without knowing what might happen. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
20(a)	My personal space is usually messy and disorganized. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
21(d)	In most social conflicts, I can easily see which side is right and which is wrong.	1 2 3 4 5 6
22(c)	I almost always feel hurried to reach a decision, even when there is no reason to do so	1 2 3 4 5 6
23(a)	I believe that orderliness and organization are among the most important characteristics of a good student.	1 2 3 4 5 6
24(e)	When considering most conflict situations, I can usually see how both sides could be right. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
25(b)	I don't like to be with people who are capable of unexpected actions.	1 2 3 4 5 6
26(b)	I prefer to socialize with familiar friends because I know what to expect from them.	1 2 3 4 5 6
27(a)	I think that I would learn best in a class that lacks clearly stated objectives and requirements. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
28(e)	When thinking about a problem, I consider as many different opinions on the issue as possible. **R**	1 2 3 4 5 6
29(d)	I like to know what people are thinking all the time.	1 2 3 4 5 6
30(d)	I dislike it when a person's statement could mean many different things.	1 2 3 4 5 6
31(d)	It's annoying to listen to someone who cannot seem to make up his or her mind.	1 2 3 4 5 6
32(a)	I find that establishing a consistent routine enables me to enjoy life more.	1 2 3 4 5 6
33(a)	I enjoy having a clear and structured mode of life.	1 2 3 4 5 6

34(e)	I prefer interacting with people whose opinions are very different from my own. **R**	1	2	3	4	5	6
35(a)	I like to have a place for everything and everything in its place.	1	2	3	4	5	6
36(d)	I feel uncomfortable when someone's meaning or intention is unclear to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
37(e)	I always see many possible solutions to problems I face. **R**	1	2	3	4	5	6
38(d)	I'd rather know bad news than stay in a state of uncertainty.	1	2	3	4	5	6
39(e)	I do not usually consult many different opinions before forming my own view.	1	2	3	4	5	6
40(b)	I dislike unpredictable situations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
41(a)	I dislike the routine aspects of my work (studies). **R**	1	2	3	4	5	6

Scoring Notes

1. The NFCS can be computed as a total NFC score by adding all the items. In addition, if factors are required, sub-scale scores can be computed for each of the five scale components by summing items designated by a letter to each sub scale component. The designations are as follows:
items marked by the letter:
'a'— measure the need for order,
'b' — measure the need for predictability,
'c'— measure decisiveness,
'd'— measure avoidance of ambiguity,
'e'— measure closed mindedness.

2. Items indicated with R are reverse scored.
3. Scores up to 82 mean low NFC. Scores from 205-246 mean high NFC.

For support, please contact Dr. Erica Molinario (molie@umd.edu)

Artful Awakening - Pre Questions

Response Length: Please write as much or as little as feels authentic to your experience. Some questions might prompt a sentence or two, others might inspire several paragraphs. Follow your instincts about what feels important to share.

Reflection Time: Feel free to sit with these questions over several days rather than completing everything in one sitting. Sometimes our most meaningful insights come when we return to questions with a fresh perspective.

Honesty Encouraged: There are no "right" answers. Your authentic experience - including moments of confusion, resistance, or unexpected responses - is valuable data for this research.

PRE-INTERVENTION QUESTIONNAIRE (6 Questions)

1. How do you currently connect with what feels meaningful or significant in your life? This might include spiritual practices, but could also be time in nature, relationships, creative activities, or anything else that brings depth to your experience.
2. Tell me about a time when you felt deeply connected to something larger than yourself. This could be in nature, through art, music, community, love, or any other experience. What was happening? How did you know you were having this experience? What did it feel like in your body, emotions, and thoughts?
3. When you hear the phrase "embodied spirituality," what comes to mind? How would you define this in your own words? (It's okay if this phrase feels unfamiliar - just share whatever thoughts or images come up for you.)
4. What role do creative expressions (art, music, poetry, writing, dance, etc.) currently play in your life? Can you give a specific example of a time when creativity felt particularly meaningful or moving to you?
5. What draws you to participate in this 6-week program exploring creativity and embodied awareness? What hopes or expectations do you have for this experience?

POST-INTERVENTION QUESTIONNAIRE (6 Questions)

1. How would you describe your overall experience with this 6-week program? What stands out most as you look back on it?
2. Describe the most significant or meaningful moment you had during the program. What happened? What creative practice were you engaged in? How did you experience this in your body, emotions, and spirit?

3. Has your understanding of "embodied spirituality" changed through this program? How would you define it now, and what's different from how you understood it six weeks ago?
4. Which creative practices (art making, poetry writing, engaging with lyrics, etc.) resonated most deeply with you? Why do you think these connected with you?
5. How do you anticipate integrating what you've learned into your ongoing spiritual life? What practices might you continue, and what would you want others to know about combining creative practices with spiritual exploration?

Appendix B: Intervention Protocol

Welcome & Context Setting for Week One of the Intervention:

Creating Our Container:

- These next six weeks, we're creating a space of possibility to explore how art and poetry might speak to us. Whatever is said here or shared here – stays here. You are welcome to share your experience with others, but please don't share someone else's story without permission.
- We share from our own perspective using "I" statements. We listen without fixing or offering advice. Each voice matters.
- Right off the bat I want to say that there is no right way to experience art or to respond to what we encounter - trust yourself throughout the process. At the same time, I invite you to gently stretch into openness.
- You're invited to participate each week as it feels authentic to you. We will have time to share and process and create and listen together, but there's no pressure to share if you don't want to.
- The thing about art is that there are no right or wrong answers. Whatever you notice, see, experience, create, feel is welcome. Think of this as permission to play and explore, not pressure to produce.

Research Transparency:

- As many of you know, this experience is part of my doctoral research on how creative practices might deepen our sense of connection and presence. Your participation helps explore these questions.
- Participation is completely voluntary - you can step back from any activity at any time.
- If you don't want to participate in the research part, you are still invited to participate in the experience. If you do want to participate in the research part, then I have consent forms and things for you to fill out.

Honoring Discomfort & Growth:

- This kind of experience—mixing art, listening, spirituality, and mindfulness practices—might feel unfamiliar or even uncomfortable. That's not only okay, but it's also often where transformation begins.
- If you notice resistance, curiosity, or even skepticism arising, those are all welcome here. Your honest response—whatever it is—is part of the process.
- We're not asking you to believe anything or change your beliefs. We're simply inviting you to notice what happens when you engage with art with curiosity and mystery. Part of what we're doing is practicing how to hold complexity—to let ambiguity be a teacher.

Embracing Silence & Contemplation:

● We'll be spending some time in silence together - listening to poetry, contemplating art, reflecting inwardly. For many of us, this much quiet can feel uncomfortable at first. If you feel restless, fidgety, or uncomfortable in the silence, that's completely normal. Notice it without judging it. This time is for you - if you need to shift in your chair, take a deeper breath, or even cough, please do. Don't suffer in silence to be polite.
● When we ask questions, there's no pressure to respond immediately or at all. Let the question sit with you. Sometimes the most profound responses come after we've had time to listen.
● Silence isn't empty - it's full of possibility. It's where we can hear what our hearts and bodies are telling us. [1]
● One tip is to breathe through whatever comes up - discomfort, insight, emotion, or even boredom. Your breath is your anchor to this present moment.

Practical Boundaries:

● We begin and end on time to honor everyone's commitment.
● Please silence phones to maintain our contemplative space.
● If you need to step away for any reason, feel free - and know you're welcome back.
● Everyone is always invited to have a journal with them to write or draw during our time together.[2]
● Your body belongs to you. If you need to stand, stretch, shift, get water, or care for yourself in some way, please do. Part of embodiment is honoring what you need in the moment.

ARTFUL AWAKENING: SIX-WEEK INTERVENTION PROTOCOL

Intervention Arc: Wonder → Empathy → Growth → Curiosity → Integration → Presence

WEEK ONE: WONDER

Materials

- Name tags, journals, stickers, pens
- Candle and crystal singing bowl
- Copies of 'Remember' by Joy Harjo (optional—can listen without text)
- Art postcards (60+ diverse global artists)
- Markers, crayons, drawing paper
- Fine-tip markers and quality paper for word lettering

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[1] Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*, exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 145-158.

[2] Helen Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 9.

Session Structure (90 minutes)

Welcome (15 min)

- Context Setting
- Intervention Description
- Setting Expectations and Answering Questions (Appendix X)

Opening Ritual (5 min)

- Light candle, ring singing bowl once
- All stand in circle
- Call-and-response with gestures:[3]
    - Leader: 'We gather in this space of possibility' | All repeat [hands on heart]
    - Leader: 'Breathing in the gift of presence' | All repeat [arms rise]
    - Leader: 'Breathing out what we do not need' | All repeat [arms lower]
    - Leader: 'Our bodies hold wisdom' | All repeat [touch shoulders, then heart]
    - Leader: 'Our hearts are open' | All repeat [arms open, then prayer position]
    - Leader: 'We are here. We are present. We begin.' | All repeat [bow, look up]

Lectio Divina with Poetry (40 min)

- Introduction: Lectio Divina explained as ancient contemplative listening practice adapted for contemporary poetry
- Poem: "Perhaps the World Ends Here" by Joy Harjo (1994) Poem was read aloud by Harjo herself (audio recording), allowing participants to experience the poet's voice and Indigenous cadence.
- Reading One - Listen (5 min)
    - Read full poem slowly
    - Invitation to notice what stands out
    - Silent reflection
- Reading Two - Notice (5 min)
    - Read poem again
    - Prompt: 'What word, phrase, or image calls to you?'
    - Brief sharing
- Reading Three - Feel (5 min)
    - Third reading
    - Prompt: 'What stirs in you? What do you notice in your body, heart, or spirit?'

[3] Roy DeLeon, *Praying with the Body: Bringing the Psalms to Life* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), ix.

    - Silent reflection, then sharing
- Reading Four - Rest (5 min)
    - Final reading
    - Invitation to let words settle without needing to understand or capture them
- Journaling (5-10 min)
    - Prompts:
        - What did you notice during the readings?
        - What word or phrase is still with you?
        - What stirred in your body or heart?
        - What are you feeling right now?

Closing (20 min)

- Closing reflection: *Who would like to share something from your experience - not about what the poem means, but about what you noticed in yourself? What word is staying with you? What you felt in your body? What surprised you?*
- Facilitator names collective word strips as first layer of larger piece
- Closing ritual that mirrors opening ritual

WEEK TWO: EMPATHY

Materials

- Candle and singing bowl
- Large-scale photographs (printed or projected—contemplative subject matter)
- Audio system for music
- Journals
- Markers, crayons, drawing paper
- Fine-tip markers and quality paper for word lettering

Session Structure (90 minutes)

Opening Ritual (3 min)

- Brief grounding:
    - 'We gather in this space of possibility'
    - 'Breathing in what we need'
    - 'Breathing out what we do not'
    - 'Our hearts are open to receive'
    - 'We are here. We are present. We begin.'
    -

Multi-Station Creative Response (40 min)

- Divide participants into 4 groups
- Rotate through 4 stations, 8 minutes each

- Each station features different photograph with specific creative activity

Timing: 8 minutes per station (32 minutes total)

- Ring the singing bowl once as a "2-minute warning"
- Ring it three times when it's time to rotate to the next station
- Allow 1 minute between rotations for people to move and settle

Movement Pattern: Groups rotate clockwise through all four stations:

- Group 1: Station 1 → Station 2 → Station 3 → Station 4
- Group 2: Station 2 → Station 3 → Station 4 → Station 1
- Group 3: Station 3 → Station 4 → Station 1 → Station 2
- Group 4: Station 4 → Station 1 → Station 2 → Station 3

Station 1: Color Mixing & Feeling (Holi Photo)[4]

- Materials: Tempera paints, brushes, water cups, heavy paper
- Step 1 - Just Looking (2 min)
    - What do you see in this photo?
    - What catches your eye first?
    - Are there people? A place? Objects?
    - Just notice - there's no right answer
- Step 2 - Getting Started with Paint (2 min)
    - Pick up a brush and try mixing two colors together on your paper
    - Don't worry about making anything specific - just see what happens
    - Try blending colors - what new colors appear?
    - Notice how the paint feels as you mix it
- Step 3 - Connecting Colors to Feelings (3 min)
    - As you look at the photo, what mood does it have?
    - Happy? Peaceful? Energetic? Something else?
    - Mix colors that feel like that mood to you
    - Maybe warm colors for happy feelings, cool colors for calm feelings ○ Trust whatever feels right
- Step 4 - Your Own Colors (1 min)
    - What colors remind you of good times in your life?
    - Mix a little bit of those colors too
    - Create patches of color - they don't have to look like anything
    - Before leaving: Write one word on sticky note about how this felt
- Note: These colors become part of collective creation in final session

Station 2: Lines & Movement (Dancing)

- Materials: Markers, crayons, paper

[4] Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2019), 5.

- Step 1 - What Do You See? (2 min) Look at this photo - what's happening here? ○ Does it feel busy or calm?
    - Are there people moving or sitting still?
    - Does anything in the photo seem to have energy?
- Step 2 - Try Moving Your Body (1 min)
    - Stand up for a moment
    - If you were in this photo, how might you move?
    - If you want, move how it feels natural - would you reach up? Lean forward? Relax?
- Step 3 - Drawing Movement (4 min)
    - Pick up a marker or crayon
    - Don't try to draw what you see - instead, draw how it feels
    - If the photo feels energetic, make energetic lines
    - If it feels calm, make gentle, flowing lines ○ Fast lines, slow lines, curvy lines, straight lines - whatever feels right ○ Let your hand move the way the photo makes you feel
- Step 4 - Your Own Movement (1 min)
    - Think about your own life - are you in a busy season or a quiet season?
    - Add some lines that show how your life feels right now
    - Maybe zigzag lines for busy, wavy lines for going with the flow
- Before leaving: Write one word on sticky note about what you discovered
- Note: These lines help create structure for group artwork

Station 3: Words & Beautiful Writing (Art Gallery)

- Materials: Fine markers, quality paper
- Step 1 - Looking and Listening (2 min)
    - Look at this photo quietly
    - What story might it be telling?
    - What words come to mind when you look at it?
    - Don't overthink it - just notice what pops into your head
- Step 2 - Finding Your Words (2 min)
    - If this photo could talk, what might it say?
    - What word describes how it makes you feel?
    - Is there a word that this photo reminds you of from your own life?
    - Maybe words like: "home," "joy," "peace," "adventure," "family"
- Step 3 - Choosing Words to Write (1 min)
    - Pick 2-3 words that feel important to you
    - They can be about the photo, or about something it reminds you of
    - Trust your first instincts
- Step 4 - Beautiful Writing (3 min)
    - Write your words slowly and carefully on the paper
    - Take your time with each letter
    - Your handwriting is unique and beautiful - don't worry about perfect

    - Think about what these words mean to you as you write
    - This slow writing can be almost like meditation
- Before leaving: Write on sticky note why you chose these particular words
- Note: These words become part of final group creation

Station 4: Patterns & Repeated Shapes (Quilts)

- Materials: Markers, crayons, paper
- Step 1 - Finding Patterns (2 min)
    - Look for things that repeat in this photo
    - Maybe it's shapes, or colors, or textures
    - Do you see circles, lines, or other shapes?
    - Even if you don't see obvious patterns, what shapes do you notice?
- Step 2 - Simple Shape Making (3 min)
    - Pick one simple shape you see or that the photo makes you think of
    - It could be: circles, squares, lines, curves, triangles ○ Start drawing that shape over and over on your paper
    - Don't worry about making them perfect
    - Let the repetition be relaxing
- Step 3 - Adding Your Own Pattern (2 min)
    - Think about patterns in your own life
    - Maybe the routine of morning coffee, or hugs with family
    - What simple shape or mark could represent something you do regularly?
    - Add those marks to your paper too
- Step 4 - Enjoying the Rhythm (1 min)
    - Notice how it feels to make the same mark over and over
    - Is it calming? Satisfying? ○ Let yourself enjoy the simple rhythm of creating
- Before leaving: Write one word on sticky note about what you noticed
- Note: These patterns add beautiful details to group artwork

Closing Reflection (3 minutes)

Closing Ritual (2 minutes)

WEEK THREE: GROWTH

Materials

- Candle and singing bowl
- Audio system
- Printed lyric sheets for all three songs
- Songs: 'Loosen' by Aly Halpert, 'With My Own Two Hands' by Ben Harper, 'Lean on Me' by Bill Withers
- Journals and pens
- Timer

Session Structure (90 minutes)

Opening Ritual (2 min)

- Light candle, ring singing bowl once
- 'We gather in this space of possibility'
- 'Our hearts are open to receive'
- 'Let us begin'
- Ring bowl three times

Centering Meditation (10 min)

- Guided body awareness meditation
- Notice shoulders, jaw, hands
- Release tension carried into the space
- Permission to set burdens down temporarily
- Breathing in presence, breathing out distraction

Listening Experience (25-30 min)

- Three songs with reflection prompts after each
- After each song: 10-15 seconds silence, then 90 seconds journaling
- Song 1: 'Loosen' by Aly Halpert
    - Theme: Releasing control, softening, letting go
    - Prompts:
        - Take a moment to notice what's present in your body right now
        - What are you carrying? What weight do you feel in your muscles, bones, chest?
    - 90 seconds to write
- Song 2: 'With My Own Two Hands' by Ben Harper
    - Theme: What we have power to create and change through what we build together
    - Prompts:
        - Think about your own life, your own hands
        - What kind of person are you becoming as you create and grow with others?
        - Where in your life do you feel led to build or create?
    - 90 seconds to write
- Song 3: 'Lean on Me' by Bill Withers
    - Theme: We don't do this alone—we lean on each other; we hold each other up
    - Prompts:
        - Think about the people in your life
        - Who holds you up? Who do you lean on?
        - Who leans on you? Who do you have the privilege of supporting?

    - 90 seconds to write
    - Full lyrics not reproduced due to copyright. Songs available via standard streaming platforms.

Deeper Writing (8 min)

- Reflection question:
    - Think about a time when you released something that was weighing you down
        - What changed? What became possible?
        - Could be something big or small: relationship, job, belief, grudge, expectation
    - Write about that time:
        - What did it feel like to let go?
        - What opened up afterward?
        - What grew in that space?
- 8 minutes of free writing[5]

8-Word Story Creation (15 min)[6]

- Step 1 - Circle 50 Words (3 min)
    - Go through all writing (including quick journaling after songs)
    - Circle 50 words that jump out
    - Don't overthink—follow instinct
- Step 2 - Narrow to 20 Words (3 min)
    - From 50 circled words, choose 20
    - Put star or check mark next to top 20
    - Which words feel most essential?
- Step 3 - Select Final 8 Words (3 min)
    - From 20 words, choose 8
    - These will become your story
    - Should capture something true about your experience
- Step 4 - Arrange Your 8-Word Story (6 min)
    - Arrange 8 words into a story
    - Can use in any order
    - Can repeat a word if needed
    - Can add small connecting words ('and,' 'the,' 'to')
    - Play with different arrangements until something feels right
    - Write clearly to read aloud if sharing

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[5] Ed Cyzewski, *The Contemplative Writer: Loving God through Christian Spirituality, Meditation, Daily Prayer, and Writing* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017), 37.

[6] John Fox, *Finding What You Didn't Lose: Expressing Your Truth and Creativity through Poem-Making* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 1995), xiv.

Sharing Circle (12 min)

- Invitation to share 8-word stories (optional)
- No commentary on stories—simple acknowledgment

Closing Reflection (3 min)

- Growth is messy, slow, non-linear
- Happens when we release what no longer serves
- Happens when we claim our agency
- Happens in community when we lean on each other
- 8-word story is a gift—to self and to those who heard it
- Invitation to keep story visible this week

Closing Ritual (2 min)

- Stand together, deep breath
- 'As we leave, we carry what we have received and release what is not ours to hold'
- Ring singing bowl three times
- Extinguish candle

WEEK FOUR: CURIOSITY

Materials

- Candle and singing bowl
- Laminated art cards (one per person) with spiritual figure artwork on front
- Reflection questions printed on back of each card
- Journals and pens
- Comfortable seating where participants can see artwork easily

Session Structure (90 minutes)

Opening Ritual (3 min)

- Light candle, ring singing bowl
- Call-and-response:
    - 'We gather with open minds and curious hearts'
    - 'We trust what we notice, even when we don't understand it'
    - 'We are here. We are present. We begin.'

Introduction to Contemplative Art Viewing (5 min)

- Today: practicing curiosity through sustained contemplation with visual art
- Inquiry-based approach—questions rather than answers
- Multiple valid interpretations welcomed
- Notice responses without judgment

Contemplative Art Viewing - Part 1 (30 min)[7]

- Each participant receives an art card
    - Art was a piece by Alexandra Dzhiganska, Ukraine. Facilitator received written permission to use art.
- Round 1 - First Impressions (5 min)
    - Look at your card in silence
    - What do you see first?
    - What draws your attention?
- Round 2 - Deeper Looking (5 min)
    - Look again with fresh eyes
    - What details did you miss?
    - What's happening in the background? The margins?
    - What colors, symbols, gestures do you notice?
- Round 3 - Emotional & Embodied Noticing (5 min)
    - What feelings arise?
    - What sensations in your body?
    - If you were inside this image, what would you hear, smell, feel?
- Round 4 - Questions & Wonder (5 min)
    - What questions does this artwork raise for you?
    - What mysteries does it hold?
    - What does it invite you to consider?
- Sharing (10 min)
    - Optional sharing using 'I notice...' statements
    - No definitive interpretations—honoring multiple perspectives

Reflection Questions on Card Backs

- Participants turn cards over to find printed reflection questions:
    - What about this person's life speaks to you?
    - Where do you see yourself in their story?
    - What quality or characteristic do they embody that you're drawn to?
    - What question would you ask them if you could?
    - How does their life challenge or comfort you?

Journaling (10 min)

- Write in response to the card and reflection questions
- Prompts:
    - What stays with you from this image?
    - What image or symbol wants to emerge from you?
    - How does this artwork speak to your own life?
    - What are you noticing in your body and heart?

[7] Finley Eversole, *Art and Spiritual Transformation: The Seven Stages of Death and Rebirth* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2009), 17.

Word Strip Contribution (5 min)

- Create word strip inspired by artwork or personal response

Closing Circle (10 min)

- Gather with art cards
- Invitation to share (optional):
  - One word or brief phrase describing experience
- Facilitator acknowledges multiple perspectives as gift of contemplative practice

Closing Ritual (2 min)

- Final breath together
- Ring singing bowl
- Extinguish candle

WEEK FIVE: INTEGRATION

Materials

- Candle and singing bowl
- Collage materials:
  - Magazines, printed images
  - Colored paper, fabric scraps, tissue paper, construction paper
  - Glue sticks, scissors
  - Markers, colored pencils, crayons
  - Drawing paper or cardstock for base
- Journals and pens
- Background music (ambient/instrumental)

Session Structure (90 minutes)

Opening Ritual (3 min)

- Light candle, ring singing bowl
- Grounding focused on gathering:
  - 'We gather in this space of possibility'
  - 'Today we gather the fragments'
  - 'We trust what wants to become whole'
  - 'We are here. We are present. We begin.'

Journaling - Before Creating (5 min)

- Open journal before touching materials
- Notice what you're carrying:
  - Reflection prompts:
    - What fragments are you bringing together?

        - What has shifted in you over these weeks?
        - What wants to be remembered?
        - What's becoming whole?

Collage as Integration (50 min)

- Each participant creates personal collage
- Process guidance:
- Begin by selecting word strips (5-10 that resonate)
    - Don't overthink—trust first instinct
- Gather images, colors, textures representing your experience
- Arrange without gluing first
    - Let pieces talk to each other
- This isn't about making something beautiful or perfect
    - About bringing fragments into relationship
- Notice what wants to be central, what belongs at edges
- Trust the process—your collage knows what it needs to become
- Silence with soft background music (30-40 min creative time)
- While Creating - Continue Sitting With:
    - What fragments are you bringing together?
    - What has shifted in you?
    - What wants to be remembered?
    - What's becoming whole?

Sharing Circle (15 min)

- Gather with completed or in-progress collages
- Invitation to share (optional):
    - What did you discover in this process?
    - What surprised you?
    - What are you noticing now?
- Facilitator honors both completion and incompletion

Looking Ahead (5 min)

- Brief preview of Week Six:
    - Sound bath and neurographic art
    - Invitation to bring openness to somatic/meditative experience
    - Can come prepared to lie down or sit comfortably

Closing Ritual (3 min)

WEEK SIX: PRESENCE

Sound bath and neurographic integration—embodied presence and synthesis.

Materials

- Crystal singing bowls (7 bowls: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, tuned to 432Hz)
- Striker or mallet for bowls
- Yoga mats, blankets, pillows
- Chairs for those who prefer seated position
- Heavy drawing paper or cardstock
- Black markers or pens
- Colored markers, colored pencils, crayons
- Journals and pens
- Background music (ambient/meditative) for art making

Session Structure (90 minutes)

Arrival & Setup (5 min)

- Soft ambient sound or silence as people arrive
- Help participants settle with mats, chairs, blankets
- Find comfortable positions—lying down or seated
- Brief welcome:
    - Acknowledge the journey
    - Introduce sound bath as meditative listening—no effort required, just receptivity
    - Nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to fix

Sound Bath (20-25 min)

- Seven crystal singing bowls, each corresponding to chakra/energy center:
- Bowl Setup & Sequence:
    - C Bowl (12", Root): Grounding, honoring the present
    - D Bowl (11", Sacral): Flow, creativity, emotional release
    - E Bowl (10", Solar Plexus): Personal power, confidence, transformation
    - F Bowl (9", Heart): Compassion, connection, opening
    - G Bowl (7", Throat): Expression, authenticity, voice
    - A Bowl (6", Third Eye): Intuition, inner seeing, wisdom
    - B Bowl (8", Crown): Unity, transcendence, integration
- Facilitator plays bowls in sequence with intentional pacing
- Allow tones to overlap and resonate
- Minimal spoken guidance between bowls
- Invitations offered:
    - Notice breath, sensations
    - Whatever arises is welcome—no judgment
    - Nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to fix

Transition to Art (3 min)

- Gentle invitation to return to upright seated position
- Brief silence before introducing neurographic art

Neurographic Art Practice (30-40 min)

- Introduction:
    - Neurographic art: intuitive drawing practice
    - Allow hand to move without predetermined plan, then soften sharp edges
    - Metaphor: life creates intersections and sharp points; practice is learning to soften them
- Materials distributed: heavy paper, markers/pens, coloring tools
- Step 1 - Draw the Line (3 min)
    - Close eyes
    - Let hand move across page in one continuous, flowing line
    - No predetermined shape—just movement
    - Let line wander, intersect with itself, loop, zigzag
    - When complete, open eyes
- Step 2 - Extend and Intersect (5 min)
    - Look at your line—where does it want to go next?
    - Add more lines: some connect, some cross, some branch off
    - Let hand lead
    - Create intersections, make it complex
- Step 3 - Soften the Edges (5 min)
    - Notice all sharp points where lines intersect
    - With small, gentle curves, round out sharp angles
    - Heart of practice: not erasing what's sharp, but softening it
- Step 4 - Fill and Color (20-30 min)
    - Notice shapes that have emerged
    - Some want color, some want pattern (dots, lines, cross-hatching, spirals), some want to stay empty
    - Follow instinct
    - No finishing point—keep going until it feels right
- Soft recorded sound bath or meditative music plays in background

Journaling (10-15 min)

- As participants complete art, move to journaling
- Prompts offered:
- Reflecting on Today:
    - What did you notice during the sound bath? In your body? In your heart?
    - What surprised you in the art making process?
    - What are you feeling right now?
- Reflecting on the Journey:
    - What has shifted for you over our time together?
    - What moment, image, or experience stands out?
    - What are you carrying forward?

        - What do you want to remember?
    - Looking Ahead:
        - How will this experience live in you?
        - What practice or awareness do you want to continue?
        - What is one small way you can honor what you've discovered?

Closing Circle (10-15 min)

- Gather with artwork
- Invitation to look at pieces without judgment—just curiosity
- Reflection questions for sharing (2-3 offered, space after each):
    - What surprised you today?
    - What are you noticing in your body right now?
    - If you could choose one word for what you're carrying forward, what would it be?
    - What do you want to remember from our time together?
    - How has this experience changed something in you—even something small

Closing Words

- Acknowledgments:
    - Pieces will be part of exhibition (if applicable)
    - What participants carry forward isn't just on the page
    - It's in body, breath, how they see and move through the world
- Gratitude for openness, courage, presence

Final Ritual

- Final moment of silence or singing bowl tone
- Extinguish candle

Week Two Station Instructions:

Station 1: Color Mixing & Feeling (Holi Photo)

Materials: Tempera paints, brushes, water cups, heavy paper

Welcome to Station 1!

Take a moment to look at the photograph in front of you.

Step 1: Just Looking (2 minutes)

- What do you see in this photo?
- What catches your eye first?
- Are there people? A place? Objects?

- Just notice - there's no right answer.

Step 2: Getting Started with Paint (2 minutes)

- Pick up a brush and try mixing two colors together on your paper
- Don't worry about making anything specific - just see what happens
- Try blending colors - what new colors appear?
- Notice how the paint feels as you mix it

Step 3: Connecting Colors to Feelings (3 minutes)

- As you look at the photo, what mood does it have?
- Happy? Peaceful? Energetic? Something else?
- Mix colors that feel like that mood to you
- Maybe warm colors for happy feelings, cool colors for calm feelings
- Trust whatever feels right

Step 4: Your Own Colors (1 minute)

- What colors remind you of good times in your life?
- Mix a little bit of those colors too
- Create patches of color - they don't have to look like anything

Before you leave: Write one word on your sticky note about how this felt - maybe "fun," "relaxing," "surprising" - whatever comes to mind.

These colors will become part of something we create together in our last session!

Station 2: Lines & Movement (Dancing)

Materials: Markers, crayons, paper

Welcome to Station 2!

Look at the photograph in front of you.

Step 1: What Do You See? (2 minutes)

- Look at this photo - what's happening here?
- Does it feel busy or calm?
- Are there people moving or sitting still?
- Does anything in the photo seem to have energy?

Step 2: Try Moving Your Body (1 minute)

- Stand up for a moment
- If you were in this photo, how might you move?
- If you want, move how it feels natural - would you reach up? Lean forward? Relax?

Step 3: Drawing Movement (4 minutes)

- Pick up a marker or crayon
- Don't try to draw what you see - instead, draw how it feels
- If the photo feels energetic, make energetic lines
- If it feels calm, make gentle, flowing lines
- Fast lines, slow lines, curvy lines, straight lines - whatever feels right
- Let your hand move the way the photo makes you feel

Step 4: Your Own Movement (1 minute)

- Think about your own life - are you in a busy season or a quiet season?
- Add some lines that show how your life feels right now
- Maybe zigzag lines for busy, wavy lines for going with the flow

Before you leave: Write one word on your sticky note about what you discovered while drawing.

These lines will help create the structure for our group artwork!

Station 3: Words & Beautiful Writing (Art Gallery)

Materials: Fine markers, quality paper

Welcome to Station 3!

Take a quiet moment with the photograph.

Step 1: Looking and Listening (2 minutes)

- Look at this photo quietly
- What story might it be telling?
- What words come to mind when you look at it?
- Don't overthink it - just notice what pops into your head

Step 2: Finding Your Words (2 minutes)

- If this photo could talk, what might it say?
- What word describes how it makes you feel?
- Is there a word that this photo reminds you of from your own life?
- Maybe words like: "home," "joy," "peace," "adventure," "family"

Step 3: Choosing Words to Write (1 minute)

- Pick 2-3 words that feel important to you
- They can be about the photo, or about something it reminds you of
- Trust your first instincts

Step 4: Beautiful Writing (3 minutes)

- Write your words slowly and carefully on the paper
- Take your time with each letter
- Your handwriting is unique and beautiful - don't worry about perfect
- Think about what these words mean to you as you write
- This slow writing can be almost like meditation

Before you leave: Write on your sticky note why you chose these particular words.

These words will be part of our final group creation!

Station 4: Patterns & Repeated Shapes (Quilts)

Materials: Markers, crayons, paper

Welcome to Station 4!

Look closely at the photograph.

Step 1: Finding Patterns (2 minutes)

- Look for things that repeat in this photo
- Maybe it's shapes, or colors, or textures
- Do you see circles, lines, or other shapes?
- Even if you don't see obvious patterns, what shapes do you notice?

Step 2: Simple Shape Making (3 minutes)

- Pick one simple shape you see or that the photo makes you think of
- It could be: circles, squares, lines, curves, triangles
- Start drawing that shape again on your paper

- Don't worry about making them perfect
- Let the repetition be relaxing

Step 3: Adding Your Own Pattern (2 minutes)

- Think about patterns in your own life
- Maybe the routine of morning coffee, or hugs with family
- What simple shape or mark could represent something you do regularly?
- Add those marks to your paper too

Step 4: Enjoying the Rhythm (1 minute)

- Notice how it feels to make the same mark over and over again
- Is it calming? Satisfying?
- Let yourself enjoy the simple rhythm of creating

Before you leave: Write one word on your sticky note about what you noticed while making patterns.

These patterns will add beautiful details to our group artwork!

General Reminders:

- There's no wrong way to do this
- You don't have to be "good at art"
- Trust what feels right to you
- It's okay to talk quietly with others, but also okay to work in silence
- Be mindful of those around you and their process
- If you finish early, you can keep adding to your creation or just sit quietly

Appendix C: Complete MAIA Scores

The following table presents pre-intervention, post-intervention, and change scores for all six participants who completed both Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA) assessments. Scores range from 0-6, with higher scores indicating greater interoceptive awareness in each subscale. Participants are listed with their case study pseudonyms in parentheses where applicable.

Participant	Noticing	Not Distracting	Not Worrying	Attention Regulation	Emotional Awareness	Self Regulation	Body Listening	Trusting	Phase
Hope	1.50	2.67	2.60	2.71	1.20	3.50	3.33	2.33	Pre
	3.00	3.00	2.50	3.00	3.67	2.75	3.00	4.33	Post
	+1.50	**+0.33**	**-0.10**	**+0.29**	**+2.47**	**-0.75**	**-0.33**	**+2.00**	**Change**
Richard	1.00	1.00	1.60	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	Pre
	2.50	3.17	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	Post
	+1.50	**+2.17**	**+1.40**	**+1.00**	**+1.00**	**+1.00**	**+1.00**	**+2.00**	**Change**
Catherine	4.75	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	4.50	4.00	4.67	Pre
	4.00	4.67	3.20	3.00	4.60	3.25	3.33	5.00	Post
	-0.75	**+0.67**	**+0.20**	**-1.00**	**-0.40**	**-1.25**	**-0.67**	**+0.33**	**Change**
Teresa	5.00	2.50	3.60	4.57	5.00	3.75	4.33	3.00	Pre
	5.00	2.67	3.40	4.29	5.00	3.50	3.33	3.00	Post
	0.00	**+0.17**	**-0.20**	**-0.28**	**0.00**	**-0.25**	**-1.00**	**0.00**	**Change**
Margaret	3.00	2.50	2.60	1.57	4.00	3.25	3.00	3.00	Pre
	3.75	2.33	3.00	3.14	4.80	4.25	3.33	4.00	Post
	+0.75	**-0.17**	**+0.40**	**+1.57**	**+0.80**	**+1.00**	**+0.33**	**+1.00**	**Change**
Sarah	3.50	4.67	2.40	3.14	3.80	3.75	2.00	1.67	Pre
	3.25	4.00	3.00	2.71	3.20	3.25	2.00	3.33	Post
	-0.25	**-0.67**	**+0.60**	**-0.43**	**-0.60**	**-0.50**	**0.00**	**+1.66**	**Change**

Note: Green values indicate increases of 0.5 or greater; red values indicate decreases of 0.5 or greater.

Appendix D: Complete NFCS Scores

The following table presents pre-intervention and post-intervention scores for all ten participants who completed both Need for Cognitive Closure Scale (NFCS) assessments. The NFCS measures preference for certainty and discomfort with ambiguity, with higher scores indicating greater need for cognitive closure. Negative change scores (shown in green) indicate decreased need for closure and increased tolerance for ambiguity.

Participant	Total Score Pre	Total Score Post	Change
Catherine	117	130	13
Cathy	151	158	7
Harper	127	126	-1
Hope	192	171	-21
Katie	136	152	16
Sunny	138	115	-23
Margaret	173	165	-8
Richard	156	165	9
Sarah	191	171	-20
Teresa	138	138	0

Appendix E: Thematic Qualitative Data

The following excerpts from participant journals, pre/post questionnaires, and facilitator observations are organized by the four major themes identified in Chapter 4. All identifying information has been de-identified using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. These excerpts represent the voices of 18+ participants across the six-week Artful Awakening intervention.

Data Sources:

- Weekly journal reflections (Weeks 1-6)
- Pre-program questionnaires (n=13)
- Post-program questionnaires (n=10)
- Facilitator observations and field notes
- Group discussion notes

Note: Pseudonyms are used throughout for confidentiality. [FO] indicates facilitator observations.

THEME 1: BODY AS TRUSTWORTHY CHANNEL/WISDOM

Moving from Body-Spirit Dualism to Integration

Sarah (Pre-Questionnaire):

> I have a hard time feeling comfortable with my body, so I'd like to work on forming a better relationship with it. It's very easy to get into the logical fallacy that the 'spirit is good and body is bad' for me.

Sarah (Post-Questionnaire):

> I think 'embodied spirituality' is about realizing that not everything spiritual has to be intellectualized or explained; our bodies, just like our minds, are channels of communication for God to speak into. I didn't think of my body as really being a channel for God six weeks ago.

Sarah (Post-Questionnaire continued):

> What stands out most to me is that I do feel more comfortable in my body. The idea that my body is able to remember things even if my mind doesn't is very comforting to me.

Sound Bath as Gateway to Embodied Trust

Sarah (Week 6 - Sound Bath Experience):

> I felt so calm and safe during that experience, and my imagination came up with this image of being above the world, swinging through the stars

in God's arms the way a little kid might. I was laughing internally, and I felt so joyful but without the overwhelm that sometimes comes when I feel intense happiness. I felt like I could stay there forever.

Cathy (Post-Questionnaire):

The sound bowls. At first I struggled to tune in because I have loud tinnitus. The sounds almost made me sick and then they came together and for the rest of the session the sounds and my tinnitus moved as one. It was beautiful because I didn't have to fight the tinnitus to hear. I was able to enjoy the pure tones and let my mind and body relax with them.

Diana (Week 6 - Sound Bath, from Journals):

I noticed that my body reacted with complete stillness. It was heavy. With some of the tones, my body felt trapped, unable to move. I was a complete surrender to stillness. It forced me to succumb to the pleasure of being still.

Body Wisdom in Creative Practice

Teresa (Pre-Questionnaire):

Often when I'm painting I get into a meditative trance (lol so it seems) and when I am done it looks like just abstract art, but when I look at the painting later it speaks to me differently and I see what it is. It feels very special and I say thank you.

Catherine (Post-Questionnaire):

I see now how engaging our feelings with our breathing and our perception of an activity makes it a whole experience.

Hope (Post-Questionnaire - Collage Week):

I was surprised and pleased that mine turned out as well as it did. This made me feel that perhaps I am more artistically astute than I had previously realized. I was proud of my work.

THEME 2: FROM STRIVING TO BEING (Perfectionism → Permission)

Religious Perfectionism and Performance Anxiety

Margaret (Pre-Questionnaire):

Spirituality has come with feelings of rigidity in the past. Anxiety about performance. I am a recovering perfectionist and have religious trauma. I am eager to approach creativity in a more free and awareness to myself.

Margaret (Week 4 - Visual Art Exercise, Journal):

It felt peaceful and freeing to not need to give the right answer. Not proving anything, just being. Just observing, taking. My life would change if I trusted my way of seeing. No second-guessing or fear of authority. No worrying or anxiety about whether I'm wrong. To live with nothing to prove.

Margaret (Post-Questionnaire - Most Meaningful Moment):

Part of me wanted to feel a bit panicked at first because I've always prided myself on 'doing well' for whatever authority figure was in my life (parents, professor, God, etc). There was another part of me that felt a bit unhappy with my answers or drawings. But that challenged me in a way I find difficult to do myself, which is to be content with the way things are. My answers/contribution was just as valid as everyone else in the group.

Margaret (Post-Questionnaire - Changed Understanding):

In the past, my definition of spirituality was having all of the right answers and doing the right things. I often felt paralyzed or trapped in a religious OCD cycle during my teen years up until my mid 20s. I think spirituality is more about seeking to learn vs. knowing the correct doctrine. I sought comfort in learning doctrines and creeds, as if holding to those 'right beliefs' would save me. This class helped me to continue to embrace the unknown.

Margaret (Post-Questionnaire - Biggest Takeaway):

My biggest takeaway is that I can be content in not knowing the 'correct' answers about things.

Releasing Control and Expectations

Kathy (Week 6 - Final Reflection):

I have learned how to let go of my curated image. That it doesn't need to be perfect to be Divine.

Emily (Week 2 - Creative Stations, Journal):

I think that I went into this creativity, thinking that it would be simple, but the perfectionist in me almost hindered me from letting me get to the full experiment. The paint challenged me because I was not in control of it like I had wished to be. It really made me realize how much I like things to be in order.

Emily (Week 6 - Final Reflection):

This process taught me that not every emotion/feeling has to be a fact, but every feeling deserved its own space, even if you need to make room for it.

Permission to Be Human

Catherine (Week 6 - Awareness Reflection):

I have learned that awareness of the feeling is as important as the doing.

Lexi (Reflection):

It is okay to not know the answer.

Richard (Group Reflection, Week 4) [FO]:

Maybe it is OK for art to speak different messages to different people. Started from confusion, typically see art as one message so this was a lot. Moved away from black and white concrete toward more mysterious, journey, path. It's OK to not know the answer.

THEME 3: WAYS OF KNOWING (Intellectual → Embodied)

From Analytical to Intuitive

Richard (Week 2 - Photography Exercise, Journal):

Photos - unclear. Not sure I want to guess, interpret photos. Photo is reality, not creative.

Richard (Week 4 - Ukrainian Art Exercise, Journal):

We are all the same, but different. Mixed messages. Lots of layers. Not body reaction. All in the mind. It consumes the mind. Perplexed, unsure. Confusion - but settle on wanting to reflect that people carry lots of confusion, lots of things at the same time.

Richard (Week 4 - Group Discussion) [FO]:

Started from confusion, typically see art as one message so this was a lot. Moved away from black and white concrete toward more mysterious, journey, path. Want to focus on one thing, but maybe the world is complex. It's OK to not know the answer.

Richard (Week 5 - Creative Freedom):

Part of me wants to explore, be random, spontaneous - but another part wants to plan, organize and get things just right.

Richard (Post-Questionnaire - Embodied Spirituality):

Not a term that means much to me. Sorry this didn't sink in with me.

[Note: Despite rejecting the conceptual framework, Richard showed the highest MAIA growth across all 8 subscales, including Trusting +2.0, demonstrating that bodily transformation can occur independently of cognitive-linguistic acceptance.]

Richard (Post-Questionnaire - Integration):

> I hope to incorporate occasional moments to stop and reflect on life and things around me.

Trusting Intuition

Helen (Post-Questionnaire):

> It was a wonderful and invigorating experience to refocus on intuition as opposed to the normal logical sequential process. Trusting intuition 'gut feelings' was liberating and invigorating...as pure creativity.

Slowing Down the Mind

Margaret (Post-Questionnaire - Poetry/Lectio Divina):

> I also really enjoyed listening to the poem being read aloud. The exercise of listening multiple times and then contemplating different questions about it after each listen resonated with me. My mind tends to race and try to immediately find answers to things. This practice helped me slow down and just listen. Then contemplate afterwards.

Teresa (Post-Questionnaire):

> creating is an expression of who you are and how you are divinely created... when someone can put that on paper or in some kind of artistic medium, it becomes sacred. Just as the breath is sacred. And when you combine those things together, there's so much healing that can take place.

Margaret (Post-Questionnaire - Integration):

> I hope to carry the overall idea of fully intaking new ideas without rushing to find answers or jumping to conclusions. Instead, I can sit and let the ideas wash over me.

THEME 4: AWARENESS BEFORE INTEGRATION

Becoming Aware of Previously Ignored Sensations

Richard (Week 6 - Sound Bath Experience):

> Least favorite session. Highly annoying, pulsating sounds (Like an emergency alarm) Hard to listen to it. Stop breathing, muscles tense. Then occasional soft ringing sounds, nice, great message- lost some by the pulsating, very loud, emergency alert sounds.

Richard (Week 6 - Reframing the Disruption):

> Perhaps these sessions have taught me how to return and find calm again. Even bad events can be gotten past. The jolting and upsetting last session helps bring out the good and joy of earlier sessions. This works for me. Perhaps the jolt serves a purpose beyond the moment.

Processing Suppressed Grief

Hope (Week 4 - Ukrainian Art Exercise, Visio Divina):

> I am wondering whether the mother is attempting to console her daughter's loss of an unborn baby. I do not like the red hands which lead me to think that the mother is crying while the daughter is not. I suppose that this is just brings back memories of our loss of an unborn baby. I'm not sad. Just surprised to have this memory brought back.

Hope (Week 4 - Processing 33-Year-Old Grief):

> Both ladies are expressing sadness, but in different manners. I am not judging, I am just surprised that this picture brought back this experience in our lives. I think it represents a mother and daughter coming together to deal with loss. The question asked by this image is, can I deal with this loss over time?

Hope (Week 4 - Resolution):

> I think that if this photo drives me to revisit this part of our past. I am coming to believe that it may have been the 'right or proper' way for it to have occurred. I was surprised about how this image made me look at myself. I think that I will always be curious about certain aspects of this experience, but I am now 33 years later better able to accept and deal.

Increased Awareness of Dysregulation

Facilitator Observation - Week 6 Sound Bath [FO]:

> Richard: was disturbed alarm pulsating was worse than a baby cry. I also noticed that Rob was very aggressive with the art project at first after the sound bath. Donna: saw green spiral, way down, wanted to race to get rid of it. Andrew: felt on edge, though physically relax. Donna and Tracey: felt heavy after sound bath.

Donna (Week 6 - Emotional Discovery):

> My experience with artful awakening has provided me with an inward search of who I am. How I react with different situation. One of my favorite episodes of the artful awakening was listening, being still, and taking in the lyrics of a song. It was so emotional, and it made me free!!

Integration Takes Time

Cindy (Week 6 - Awareness Shift):

> What has shifted during our time together? I am more aware of the colors and sounds around me. I feel more in tune with me.

Cindy (Week 6 - Self-Acceptance):

> A feeling of who I am scattered but happy with who I am. I want to remember the way I felt during the sound bath for once the sounds inside my head were one with the sounds outside me not at war.

Donna (Week 6 - Listening Discovery):

> I will carry the experience of listening with me. Not just half listening but being present and truly. I want to remember the stillness of life. There is so much in the quiet moment that I now can feel, talk about and feel free.

Note on Data Presentation:

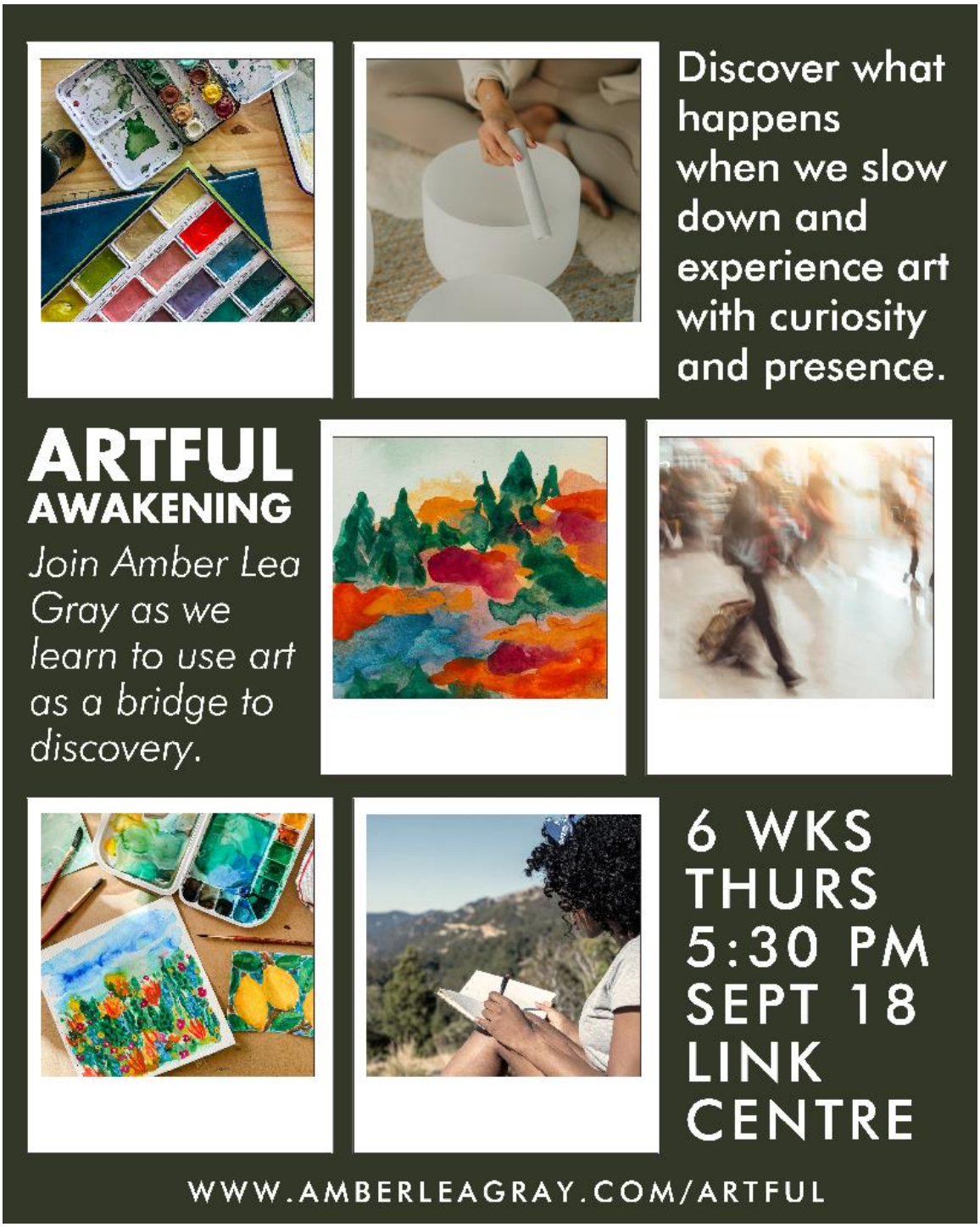
1. Participant Names: All names are pseudonyms. Some participants appear across multiple themes as their experiences touched on various aspects of the intervention.

2. Data Source Codes: [FO] = Facilitator Observation/Field Notes. No code = Direct participant journal or questionnaire quote.

3. Timing: Week numbers refer to the six-week intervention timeline. Pre-Questionnaire = before Week 1; Post-Questionnaire = after Week 6.

4. Thematic Organization: Individual excerpts may relate to multiple themes but are placed under the most prominent theme they represent. This categorization emerged through iterative thematic analysis rather than predetermined coding.

Appendix F: Recruitment Materials



ARTFUL AWAKENING

So often we move through life on autopilot, disconnected from what we really feel or need. Art has a way of interrupting that pattern. It slows us down, invites us to notice, and opens space for us to listen to both ourselves and to the sacred.

Artful Awakening is a 6-week group experience that blends creative practice with gentle reflection. Each week we'll engage poetry, image, writing, or sound as a doorway into presence. Together we'll breathe, create, sit with what stirs, and share in ways that honor each person's unique experience.

You don't need to be an artist. You just need to be open and curious.

Who Can Join

- Anyone 16+
- No cost to participate
- All materials provided
- No art experience needed
- RSVP Online

What to Expect

Each 90-minute gathering follows a simple rhythm: beginning in stillness, entering a creative practice like poetry, art, writing, or sound, taking time to notice what emerges, sharing our experience, and closing with gratitude. No two weeks are the same—each session offers a new way to pause, create, and connect with ourselves, one another, and the sacred. We'd love for you to be part of all six gatherings, but we know life happens, and you are welcome even if you miss a session. Participation is always invitational—share as much or as little as feels comfortable for you. That said, the more you lean in, the more you're likely to discover.

Why Participate?

Because creativity opens us.
Because our whole selves—not just our minds—long to be engaged.
Because we need spaces where questions, wonder, and mystery are welcome.
Because we are more alive when we pause, notice, and listen deeply.
Because slowing down helps us pay attention to what really matters.
Because beauty has the power to heal and surprise us.
Because art gives voice to things we cannot always say out loud.
Because sharing stories reminds us we are not alone.
Because imagination is a doorway to hope.
Because presence is a gift we rarely give ourselves.

SIGN UP

Email Amber Lea at hello@amberleagray.com with any questions!

Research Invitation

We'd love to invite you to be part of something meaningful beyond your own experience. This Artful Awakenings program is part of a Doctor of Ministry research study exploring a beautiful question: How do art, poetry, and lyrics help cultivate embodied spirituality?
If this resonates with you, you're invited to share your journey through:

- Brief reflections before and after our six weeks together
- Short weekly writings about what you're noticing and discovering
- Perhaps a brief conversation to go deeper into your experience

Your story and insights could help others discover the transformative gift of creative practices. Every reflection you share adds to our understanding of how creativity opens us to the sacred.

Of course, your participation in the research is completely voluntary and confidential. You're wholeheartedly welcome to join Artful Awakenings whether or not you choose to share your experience for research. The invitation is simply there if it feels meaningful to contribute your voice to this exploration.

Research Consent Form

Amber Lea Gray is asking you to participate in a research study titled "Artful Awakening: Using Art, Poetry & Lyric as an Invitation to an Embodied Spirituality." I will describe this study to you and answer any questions you may have. This study is being led by Amber Lea Gray, a Doctor of Ministry student at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Rolf Nolasco.

What the study is about

The purpose of this research is to explore how the use of art, poetry, and lyric (APL) may cultivate, embrace, and deepen embodied spirituality. The study seeks to understand how creative expressions can serve as a bridge for growth and transformation.

What we will ask you to do

You will be asked to participate in a 6-week group experience hosted at the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi. Each session will last approximately 90 minutes and will include an introduction to a creative spiritual practice, guided engagement with art, poetry, or lyric, opportunities for journaling, group reflection, and closing ritual.

In addition:

- You will be asked to complete a pre-survey and post-survey, including the Experience of Embodiment Scale, to measure shifts in embodied awareness.
- You may be asked to participate in a brief pre- and post-interview with the researcher.
- Group sessions will be facilitated by the researcher and may include audio or written notes for accuracy.

Risks and discomforts

There are minimal risks to participation. Some participants may experience emotional responses while reflecting on art, poetry, lyric, or personal spirituality. You may choose not to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits

Through participation, you may:

- Experience creative spiritual practices that nurture embodied spirituality.
- Cultivate deeper awareness of self, God, and others.
- Contribute to research that may provide tools for faith communities seeking to integrate art and spiritual direction.

Incentives for participation

There is no financial compensation for participation. However, all art materials will be provided free of charge, and participants will keep any artwork or creative pieces they produce during the sessions.

Audio/Video Recording

Some sessions may be recorded for accuracy of data collection. Recordings will be stored securely on the researcher's password-protected computer and will be destroyed after the dissertation is defended (anticipated Spring 2026).

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

Your participation will remain confidential. Each participant will be assigned a unique ID, and identifying information will not appear in the written dissertation. Data will be stored on a password-protected device and destroyed six years after the completion of the project.

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community to advance knowledge of spiritual practices. Any identifying information will be removed before files are shared.

Participation is voluntary

Participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, or skip any activity that makes you uncomfortable. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the researcher, your congregation, or the Link Centre.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Rev. Amber Lea Gray. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Amber Lea at hello@amberleagray.com

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

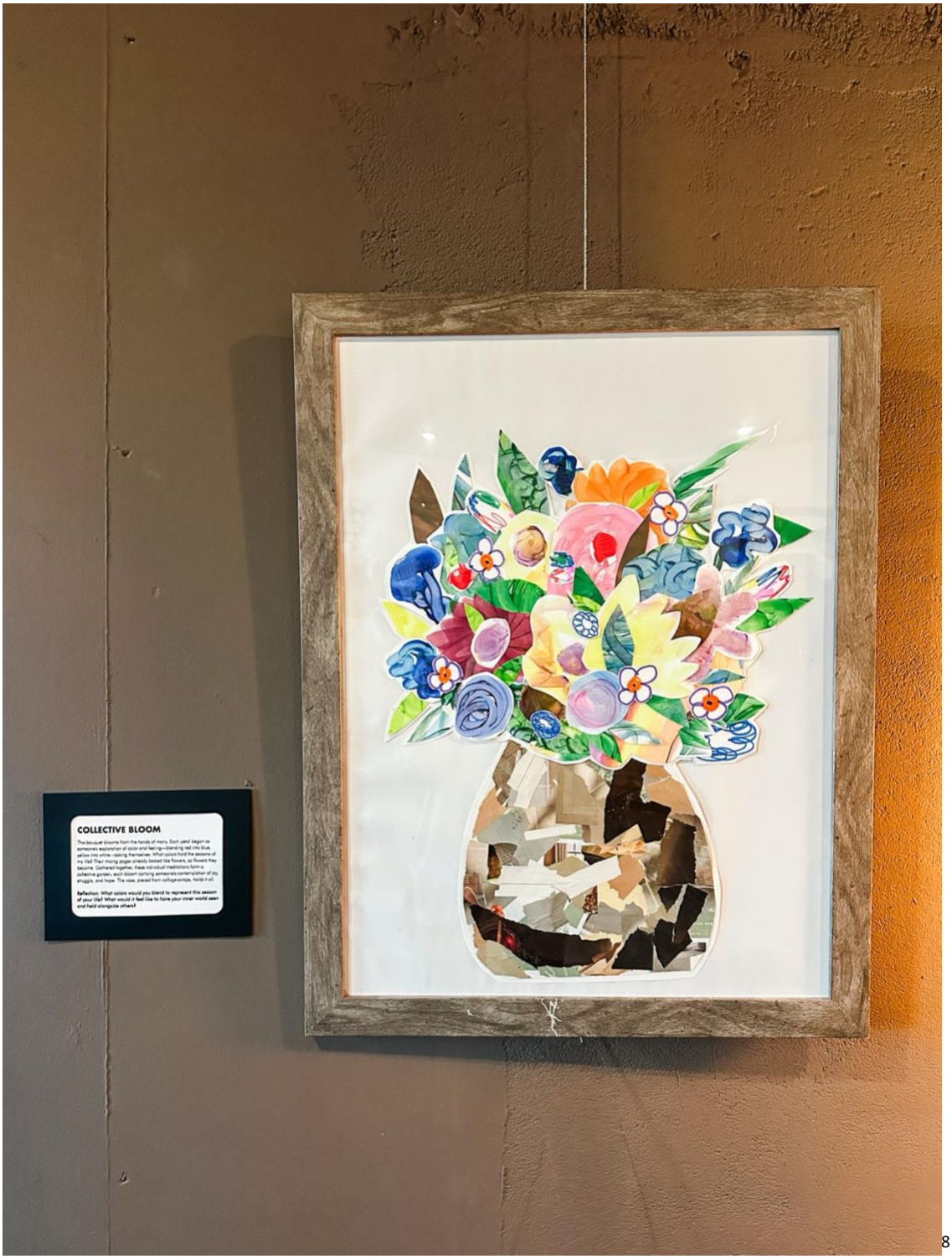
Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Participant Name (printed) _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____

Appendix G: Photo Documentation of Exhibition



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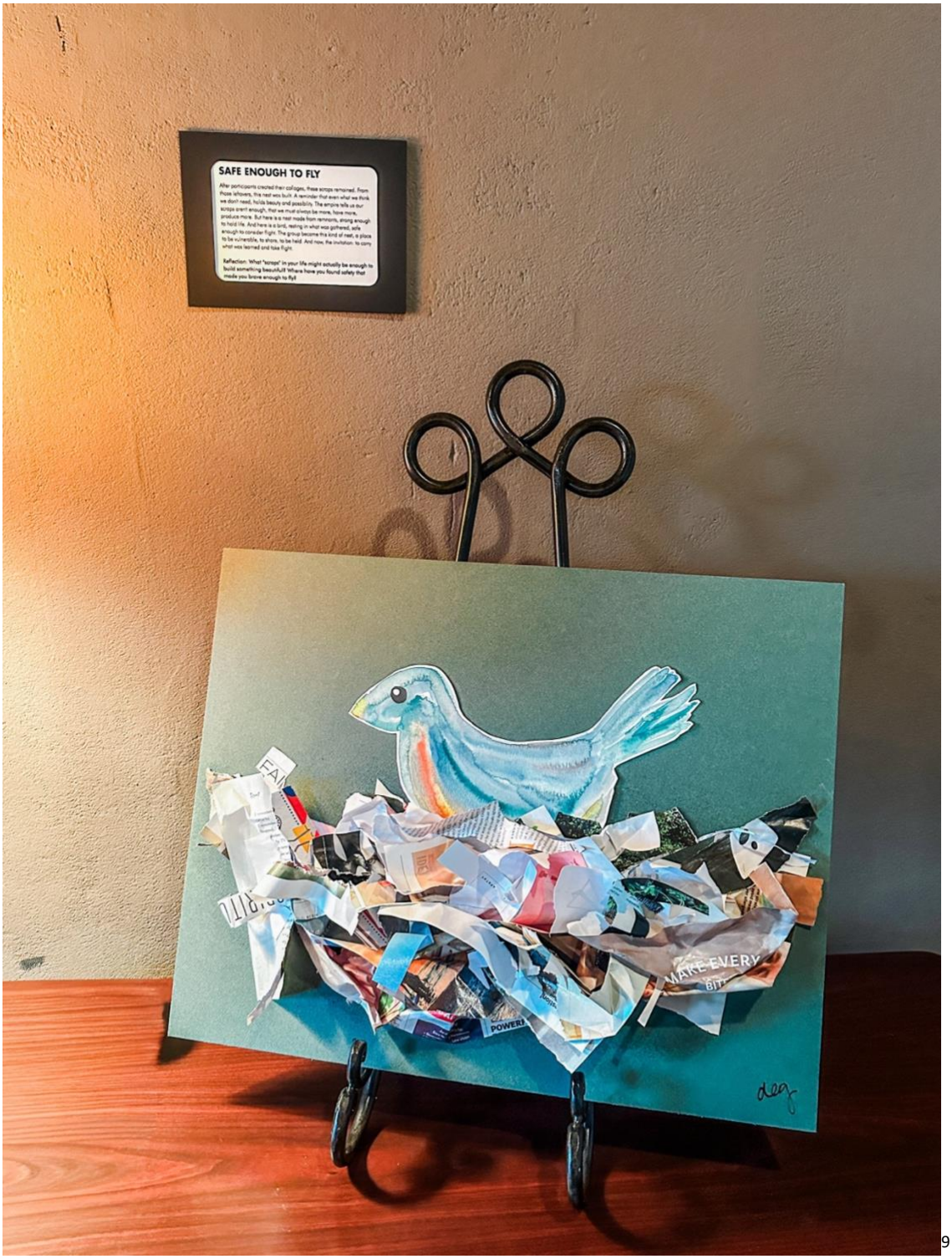
[8] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of Collective Bloom Art*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.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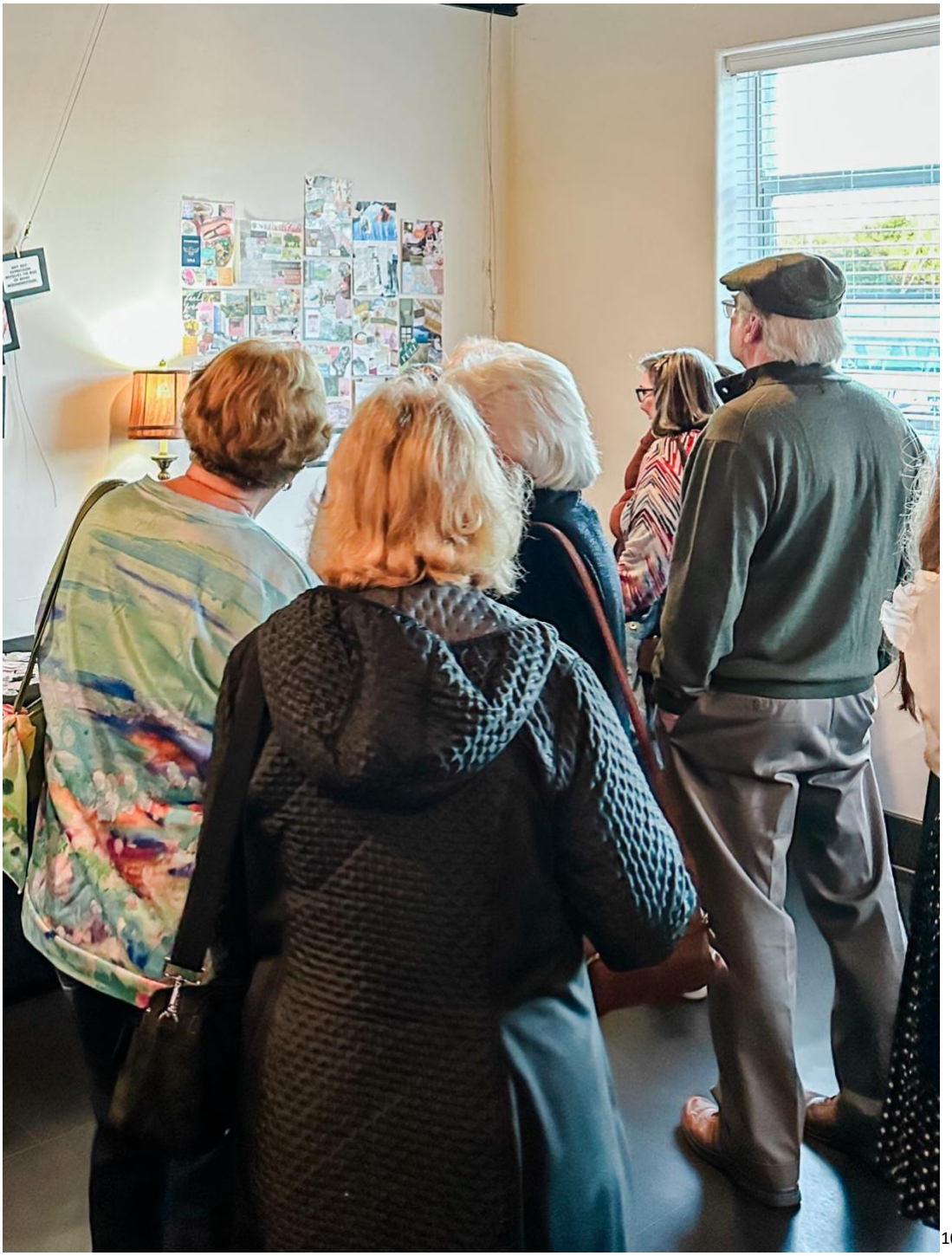
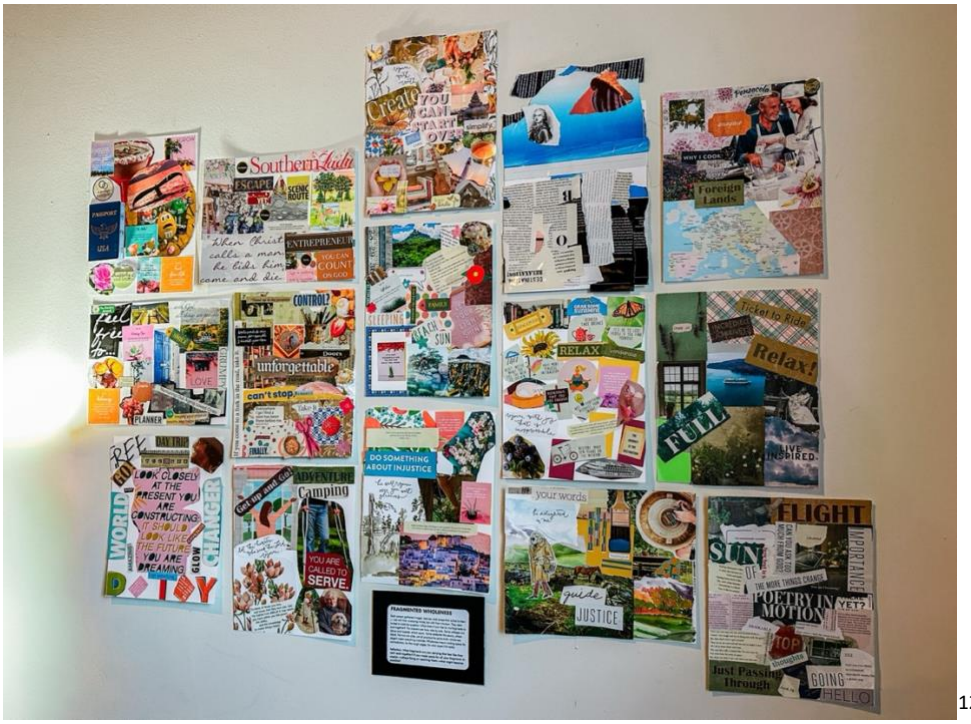
[9] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of Bird in Collage Nest*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.

 [1011]

[10] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of People Look at Art Exhibition*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.



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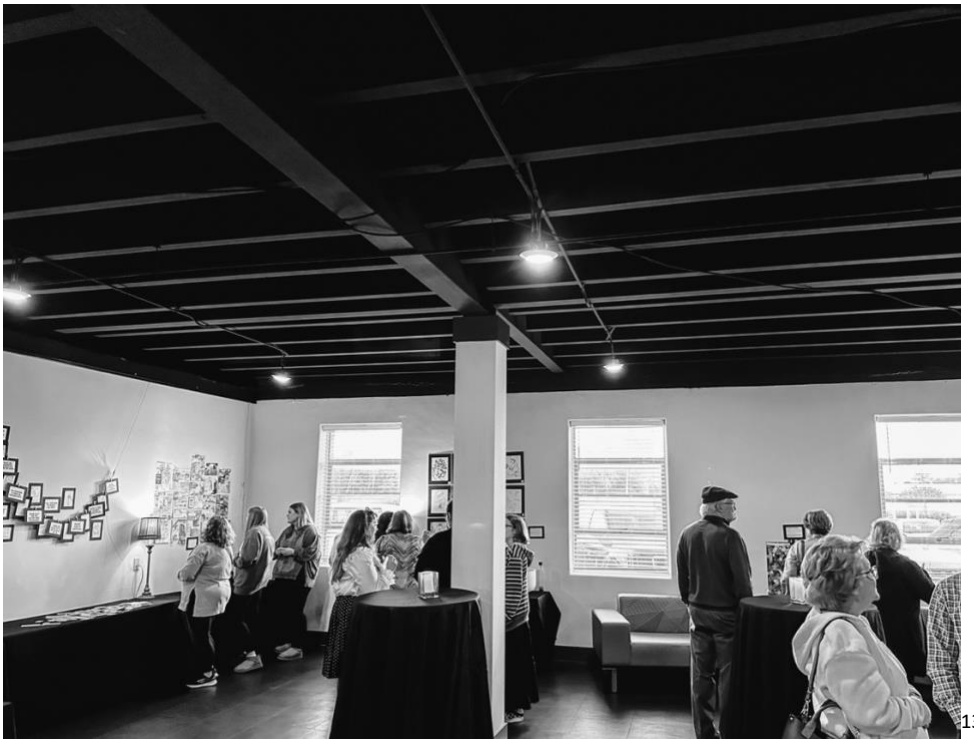
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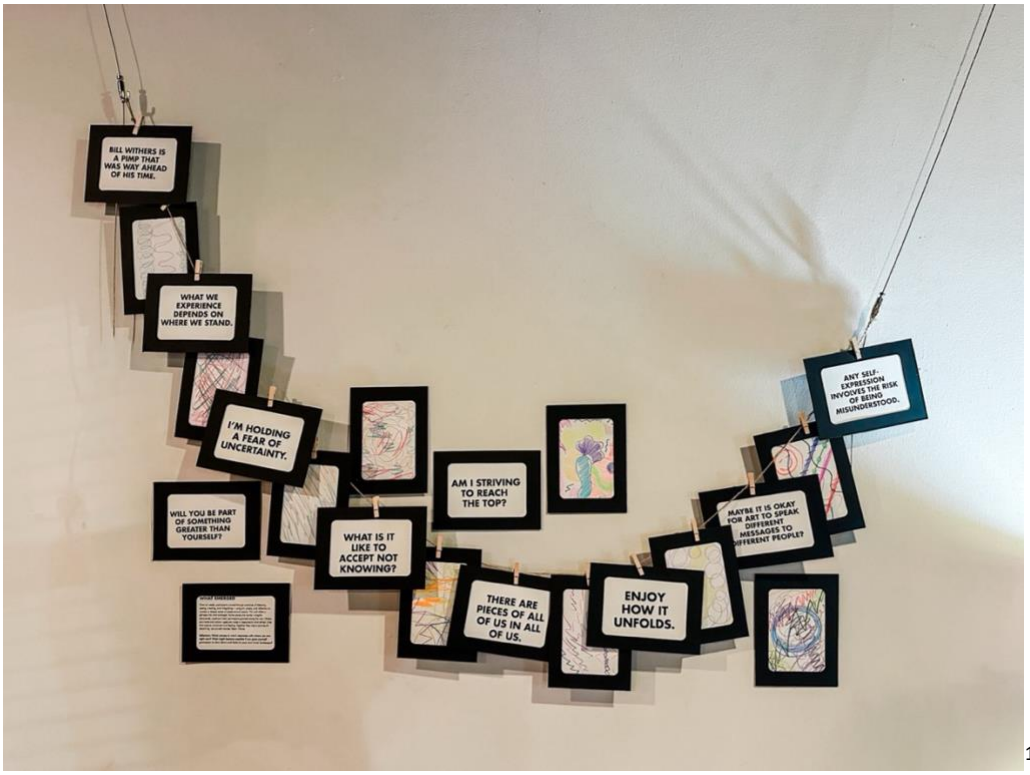
[12] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of Collage Art Hanging on Wall*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.

[13] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of People at Art Exhibition*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.



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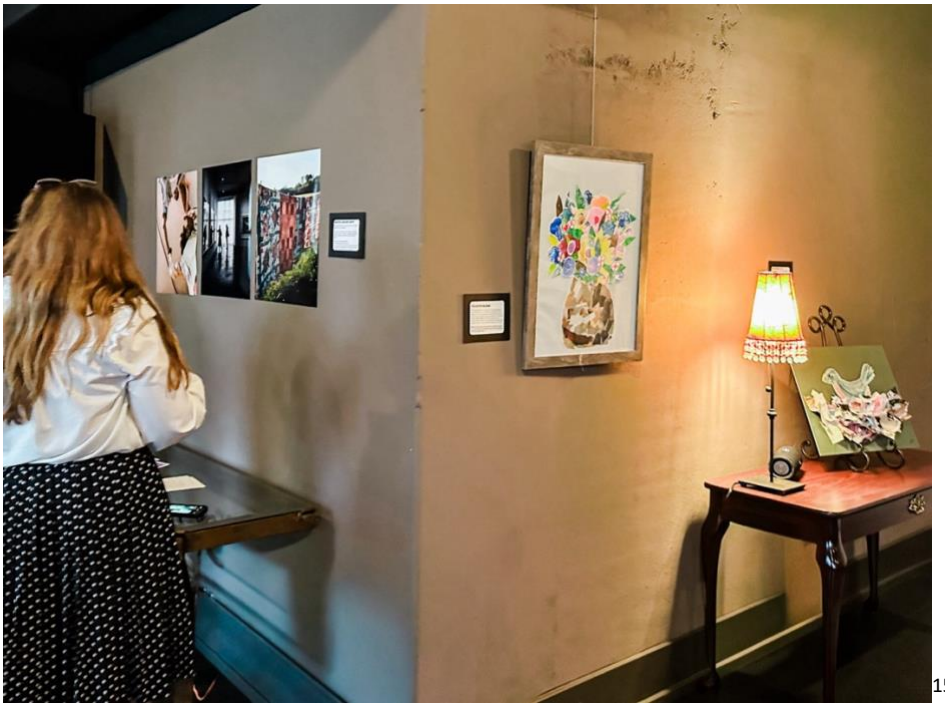
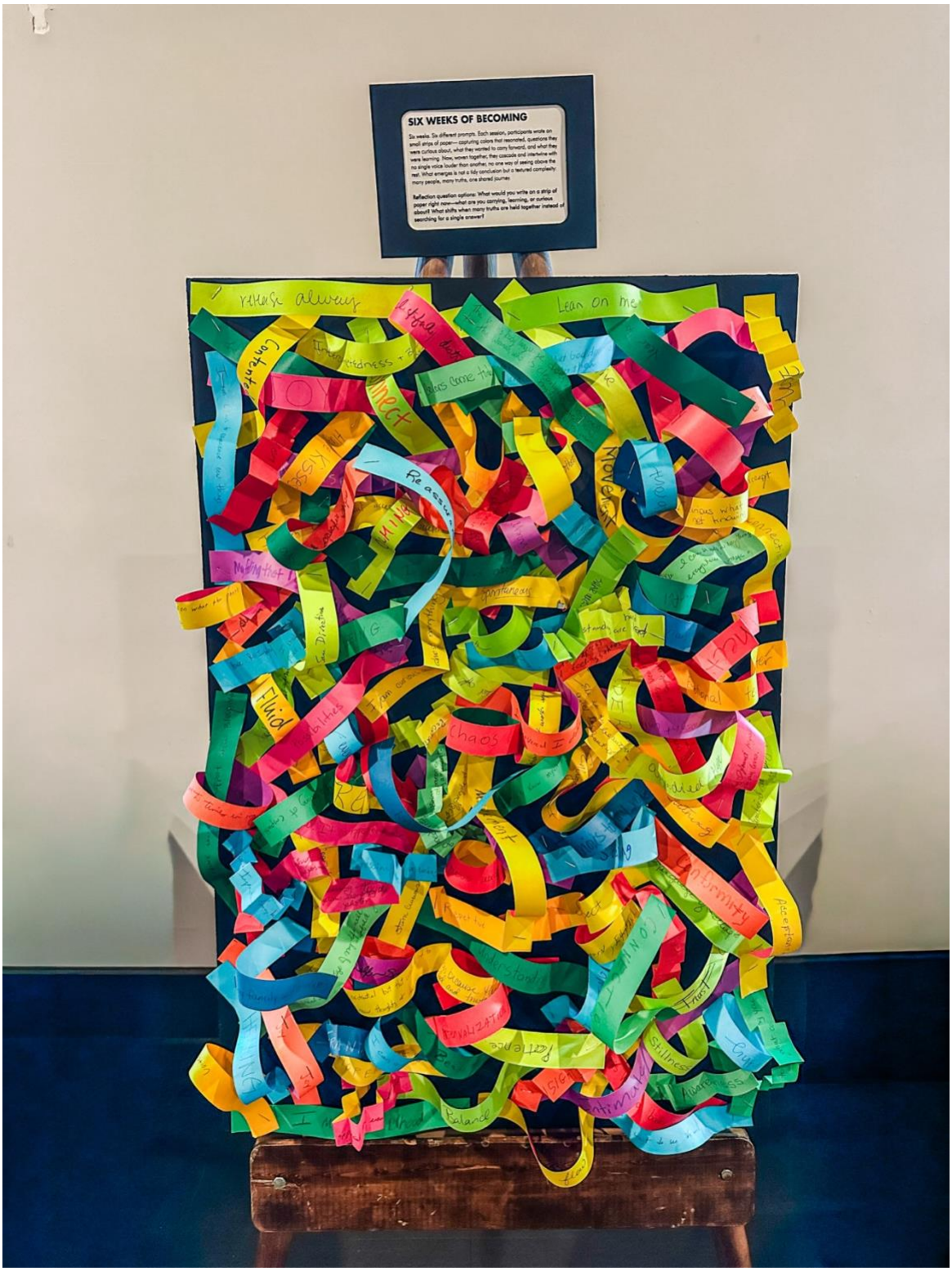

[15]

[14] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of People Looking at Art at Exhibition*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.

[15] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of People Look at Art Exhibition*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.



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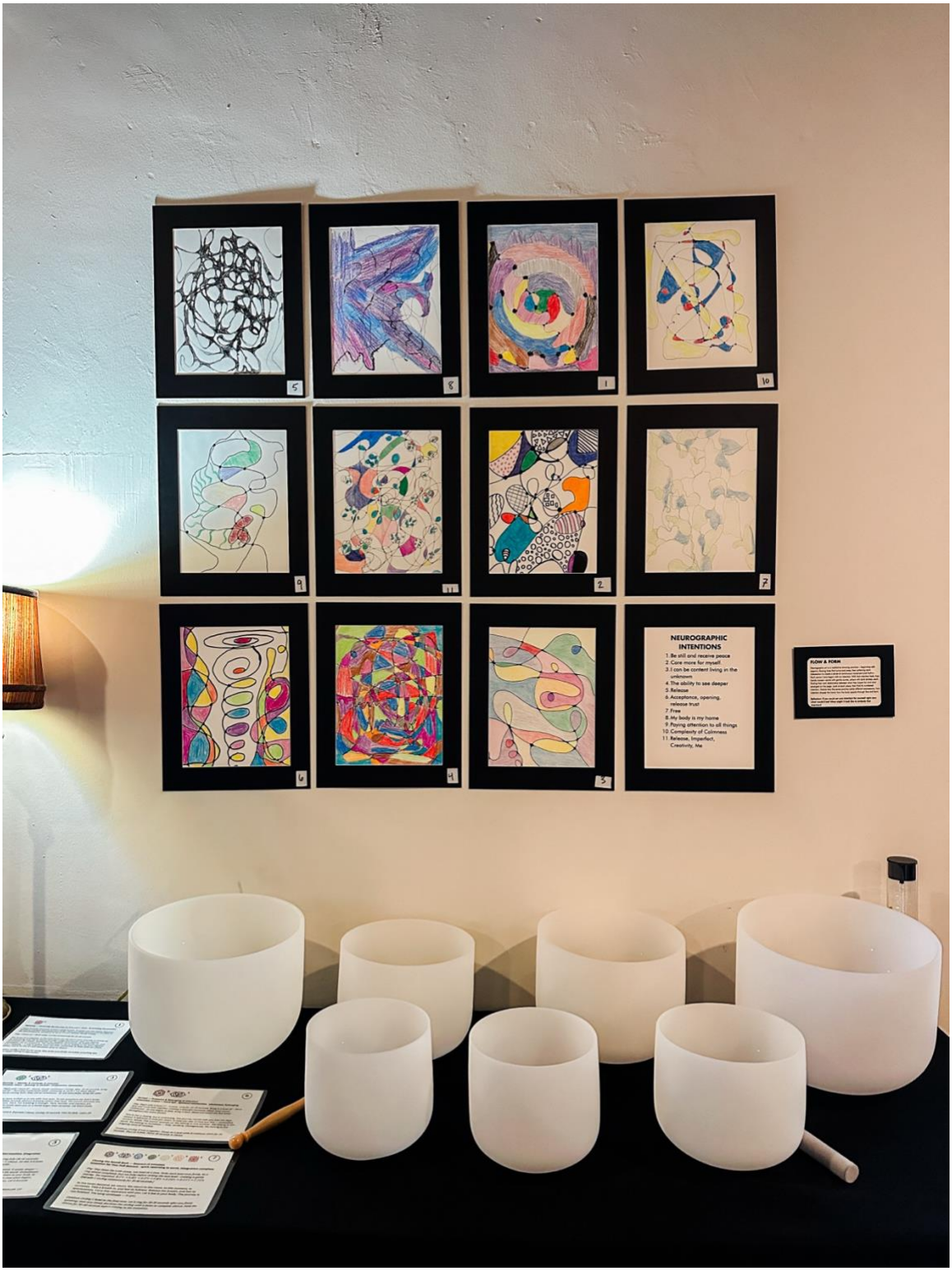
[16] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo Collective Art Piece*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.



17

[17] Amber Lea Gray, *Photo of Art and Sound Bowls at Art Exhibition*, October 30, 2025, Phone Photograph, Private Collection of Amber Lea Gray, Link Center, Tupelo, MS.

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