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Clay as a Spiritual Practice

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Work with clay as a spiritual practice is illustrated by an experience with work on two ceramic pieces. While listening to music during work with these pieces, a mystical encounter took place, and both the creation of the pieces and ongoing contemplation of the finished works after the event were essential parts of assimilating and drawing insight from the experience.

Keywords: *art, expressive arts, spiritual practice, clay, clay as a spiritual practice, art therapy, Mary Magdalene, interior light, surrender, Divine Presence*

Art for me is a spiritual practice. I put my hands in the clay and then just allow. There is a subtle level of awareness in my body that takes in all that is happening for me non-cognitively. When I start to work on a piece, an energy takes over and pulses through my body, directing my hands, if I allow my mind to step aside. Then, when I am finished, I can see what is "working me" spiritually.



Figure 1. Immortal Memory (Wall Piece) 27 x 7 x 6 in.

For example, I started two pieces recently (Figures 1 and 2), not really knowing where they were going or what they would become. Usually, my psyche becomes immersed in something outside of the studio and simultaneously what emerges in the art corresponds to what is happening in my psyche. In this case, I was reading the book "Mary Magdalene, Shaman," by Sara Taft (2013). I have resonated with Mary Madgalene for a long time, admiring her ability to hold both suffering and light at the same time. She is for me the image of a completely embodied human being, who is at the same time, spiritually enlightened.

Then one day, after being at the studio, I came home for lunch. I turned on my usual radio station. I listen to it often and know most of the songs the station plays, but this time, something new was playing. I was suddenly completely transported. It was as if a curtain opened and I stepped into another world. I was in a huge cathedral, walking towards the altar, when I, without warning, prostrated myself on the floor right at the transept, the point of the architectural cross in front of the altar. I could see, feel, and smell the beautiful polished gray stones of the cathedral floor. There was a sudden sharp and excruciating sensation in my chest. It seemed my heart was ripped open and flooded with a profound sense of love and light. I was, at that moment, a nun in complete and total surrender to God.

Then, the music stopped and I was back in my kitchen staring at my lunch! I was stunned. My experience was that a veil had parted and I had stepped into a past life. I wondered, "What was that music?" I learned then, the piece was called "Abwoon," sung magnificently by Lisa Gerrard (2004). It was the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic from her album "Immortal Memory." I was amazed. It was a moment of pure



Figure 2. Surrender (front and back views) 20 x 10 x 10 in.

Grace. I had known the lord's prayer since childhood, but never knew it in Aramaic. I was in awe with, and shaken by, the experience. I then went back to the studio and saw what I had just completed, which I later titled "Immortal Memory" (Figure 1) in honor of the experience.

I decided to sit and contemplated this piece. I felt as if the experience had ignited a light inside me, just as I saw the light radiating from my sculpture. I wanted to bow down on my knees in gratitude. I yearned to feel the huge amount of love that had flowed through me. It was as if this piece had prefigured my dream-like experience I had at lunch. Then I looked at the other piece I had just finished, which at that point had no title.

As I sat with this other new piece (Figure 2), I could feel in my body how the experience of light in my heart actually began in a place further down in my body, rising up until it reached my heart. While the first piece focused on the feeling in my heart, this piece opened me up to my "whole body" experience. Just like the snakes on the back of this piece were rising from

the lowest chakra I could sense that the light came from deep within. Then I looked at the front of the piece (Figure 2). Wrapped in the wings of an angel, the piece made me feel held in a way that I could completely relax. That helped me understand, it is actually only in surrender, that the light can rise and radiate. I must let go of all holding in order to experience this profound love and light. I recognized / remembered / felt the complete surrender that had happened as I lay prostrate in the church.

And so, each time I come back to the pieces, and sit with them, I learn more. Even writing this article has helped me embody the pieces and the experience to a greater degree. There is likely more to learn, or as one of my teachers, Brugh Joy (1939-2009), used to say to me, "to be revealed"; and so I must continue to surrender to the pieces and to the experience, in order to embody them more wholeheartedly and to know my own psyche's calling for surrender to God, and to the light within. I am continually amazed, blessed, and gifted by the expressive arts process.

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About the Artist

Kat McIver, PhD, REAT, is a working and exhibiting ceramic artist at Odyssey Ceramic Center for the Arts, Asheville NC, as well as a registered Expressive Arts Therapist. She has received a Masters in Spirituality from the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality, at Holy Names College, in Oakland CA, and a PhD in Transpersonal Psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto CA, with an emphasis on creativity and spiritual guidance. For the last 15 years, she has taught Masters level courses at several Universities in the Bay area, facilitated expressive arts workshops, and offered individual sessions in expressive arts therapy and supervision for the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA). You may view additional work and contact Kat on her website <http://www.katmciver.com>

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