

A personal journal of caring through esthetic knowing

In this article the author, through a process of contemplation, sought to put into words the inner feelings and experiences of caring depicted in six works of art. The questions the author explored were, Is the language of caring present in all environments? Are there similarities or dissimilarities? Evidence of caring was found in all the paintings, some of which were painted during the Holocaust. The paintings and the journaling process are described. Key words: *art, caring, esthetic knowing, journals*

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To me the ideal of a work of art is that each man should be able, in contemplating it, to see himself as he really is.

—John Hersey¹(p82)

Hersey's¹ statement identifies for me the essence of what can be felt and experienced when viewing works of art. For the present study, during a process of contemplation, I sought to put into words the inner feelings and experiences of caring that are depicted in the artists' creations.

During the months of preparation for the formal phase of my research, I began to feel that there are times that your past comes to haunt you, or perhaps rather to seek you out, to see if who you were then is part of yourself today. I am reminded of the saying, "What has been will be, and what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9); the year may have changed, but we are who we are.

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How to best verbalize those feelings and experiences was the purpose of this study. In my searchings and reflections on the process and substance of the study, I found myself on the floor, going through papers written in another day and another year during my time as a doctoral student at Teacher's College, Columbia University. I had the fortunate experience of being enrolled in a class taught by Dr Maxine Greene, a scholar known and respected in her field. The title of the course was "Aesthetics and Education." In my final paper for the course, I found, I had written the following:

My understanding of aesthetic education (is that it?) allows the learner to become engaged with his own feelings as they pertain to his interpretation or awareness of an art form. It allows the individual thus engaged, in what one could call free space, to interpret his interactions with art through his own identity. He thereby becomes unity with the art and himself . . . allowing oneself to form an encounter between himself and the painting—to experience—to feel—to become involved . . . to raise our consciousness, so that one can do more than just perceive an object, but one can become involved in an experience, to have a sense of identity with the painting, with the artist, letting oneself be moved, be carried past oneself, to become one with the object (the creation).

Paintings allow us to experience a closeness, a oneness, tempered only by our own consciousness, to step in, one can say, to the painting itself. The painter creates, expresses feelings and actions on canvas. . . . What happens in the space between the object and ourselves is ours—our aesthetic experience—our awakening.

As I reflected on my prior writings, the questions that became apparent for me to seek an answer to, as I began my journey into the world of the artist, were, Is the lan-

guage of caring present in all environments? Are there similarities or dissimilarities? If I believed, as I expressed in that earlier paper, that nursing is both an art and a science, "that to be human is to be caring, that hope, courage, trust, honesty are caring behaviors, that there are many ways of knowing," then I also believed that there was a way to explore and enter the world of artists creating in environments of opposites—imprisonment and freedom—to search out the caring, both visual and felt.

PROCESS OF INQUIRY AS JOURNALING

Using the technique of journaling, I explored and established my personal horizon of the meaning of caring in selected works of art, reflecting on each of the paintings and documenting how, for me, caring was depicted. The tool for my experience into the world of the painting and its creator was a concept, a structure conceived by Progoff.^{2,3} It is a tool that enables one to work psychologically with oneself, to reposition one's mind and psyche out in front of oneself, so that one could have a relationship and work with it.

The structure of the tool was the journal, where I recorded my thoughts, feelings, and ideas as I went down into myself, going down (as he described it) into one's own well (into one's own life, and then working in this awareness). Progoff⁴ stated that "when we go down deep enough, we will then come to a kind of underground stream, a deep stream which has no walls, the source of all the wells . . . so that the unity we achieve is down at that depth level. We get to this depth by working in our own individuality."

I used the technique of imaging to get into the depth of myself, to record my dreams as they unfolded, and to have an inner dialogue with persons or works that had meaning for me.

The process of journaling can only be generally described, as it is a process unique to each individual; the uniqueness of each person using the technique guides the experience. The person interested in this process can fully verify it only by experiencing it.

In my active work with the journal, of which there were many parts, I worked from both the conscious and the unconscious, where I was imaging and having an inner dialogue to get an inner perception into my deeper thoughts. In my unconscious thoughts, I wanted to sensitize myself to my perceptions of events, people, and situations. From the part of myself that was deeper than my consciousness I sought an understanding of the relationship of people to other people and the warmth, depth, friendship, and love of that relationship.

In this depth of my being, I experienced a oneness with all; I had a sense of the movement; I was within the process. I reached a sense of harmony, of unity with the movement of my life. I was unfolding from the inside, being at one with my thoughts and self.

There are many parts to the journaling tool; the period logs, the daily logs, and the recapitulation logs being some examples. I used the technique of imaging to get into the depth of myself, to record my dreams as they unfolded, and to have an inner dialogue with persons or works that had meaning for

me, where I could feel that there was something to be said to me.

This last process, dialoguing, is what I attempted to do in my search and exploration of the world and creations of artists in two very distinctly different environments. I was looking for the universality of caring. If to be human is to be caring, and caring is part of being human, then the expectation of my journey into the world of the painting, allowing myself to reach my well and encounter the streams of commonality of all, was that common behaviors of caring would be seen and felt, regardless of happenstance of environment, happenings, or experiences of the artist.

In my dialoguing with the art, I needed to be quiet enough to hear the work and allow it to speak, so that it could become what it wanted to be, to let it speak to me. I had to go down into the well to reach a depth where I could go beyond the superficial, where I could reflect on more than myself, to allow the art and the world of the artist to be reflected through me. At this level, I became a mirror of the universe, and larger meanings reflected themselves through me.

I thus set out to understand in a particular way, to bring forth the meaning of caring as felt and seen in the artistic creations.⁵ What is shared with you now is a selected sample of my dialogues of the full research study.

ART OF THE HOLOCAUST

The first paintings selected for my study were created by artists who wanted to leave behind a body of material that documented their hope, humanity, and creative spirit, as well as their suffering. Their overall impression was powerful and one of strange beauty. The works I selected were created

by victims of the Holocaust from 1939 to 1945. That the artists created at all in circumstances that barely supported life, much less creativity, was remarkable. That the artists often rendered these circumstances in a manner that evoked esthetic appreciation rather than repulsion seemed an irreconcilable contradiction. Some artists presented the victim's struggle to adapt to inhumane conditions while still attempting to preserve their identity with humans. The works that emphasized the human and the humane were imbued with an overriding sense of compassion. Blatter and Milton spoke of this when they observed, "We are human beings and we remain human beings . . . despite everything! And if we must perish, the sacrifice must not have been made in vain. We want to give it some meaning."^{6(p72)}

And since I believed that as humans we care, then it was my assumption that through the process of reaching down into myself, I would be able to see that caring, that meaning, come through in their paintings, in works created within the shadow of death. In commenting on, responding to, or getting into the world of the artist as depicted in the art of the Holocaust, it is important to remember the time and its environment when this art was created.

The first painting in my dialogue was "Grain for Sowing Shall Not Be Milled" by Kathe Kollwitz (Fig 1). Depicted in the picture is the protectiveness of the mother, taking her children into herself, into her bosom; that you shall not separate what is mine, what I created, because when you mill something, you take off the roughness, the outside, to get to the inside. The concept of sowing is conveyed by the artist by saying that children are the future generation, they are the seeds we plant, and you will not take



Fig 1. "Grain for Sowing Shall Not Be Milled," by Kathe Kollwitz. Courtesy of Kathe Kollwitz Museum, Cologne. © 1994 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

them from me. The artist's depiction in this painting of what I saw as caring is the hands enveloping the children. Enveloping is something that we do when we care, providing a closeness and feeling of protection. When we care, we protect others; we allow ourselves to feel, to let ourselves be touched, physically and emotionally, like the little girl touching the mother, holding on. That is what we do in caring, this holding on and allowing someone to come close. The eyes of the mother show a deep awareness of her children, and awareness I believe is also in the happening of getting into oneself, a personal knowing.⁷ My feeling of what was happening in this picture that conveyed caring was that awareness, that something that is very human and needed if one is to care. As I looked at the children's faces and their eyes, they seem to be unafraid, and in this feeling of being unafraid, they were

feeling very protected and able to show it in their comfort in their mother's bosom. There is also a feeling of connectedness that is seen in the way the hands are wrapped around the children and in the connectedness we feel with others we are caring for. The darkness of the picture conveyed a certain sadness; even within our caring, sometimes there is sadness for happenings we are not able to do anything about, but one can still care even within one's sadness.

A picture I found very meaningful and very human was created by Charlotte Buresova, entitled "Mother and Child" (Fig 2). It was created in Theresienstadt, a place with gardens and flowers, set up by the Germans as their model concentration camp. Within the artist's creation, I saw in the eyes of the mother a faraway look and thoughts, perhaps of some hope in her ability to care for her child. There is a quietness, a closeness, a certain amount of fear, fear perhaps for the humanity of humans. In the child's face, I sensed a feeling of comfort, of not being afraid, of trust. The eyes of the mother were what sought me out, the eyes of a person that were revealed in myself; one's eyes affect how one interacts with another through one's different senses and the messages one sends and receives.

With this artist, it is important to have some personal background to understand the painting's creation. Buresova, born in Prague in 1904, started drawing at the age of six and studied at the Prague Academy. Interned in Theresienstadt, she wanted to paint scenes that were a contrast to the horror, hunger, and suffering she saw around her. She painted flowers and dancers from memory. When she did paint to tell the story, she felt a need to sketch all the incredible things she saw to oppose the destruction

of beauty. She called her paintings the most sincere things she did in her life. She escaped from the camp three days before liberation and returned to Prague, where she created paintings of children and her memories of Theresienstadt.

ART IN MOTHERHOOD

The book *Art in Motherhood*⁸ took me into a totally different time of life, where I was witness to the days and years of the beginnings and development of a person through other persons. I first witnessed depictions of pregnancy, the beginning of life.



Fig 2. "Mother and Child," by Charlotte Buresova. From the collection of Beit Lohamei Haghettaot-Ghetto Fighters' House, Israel.

The next painting, entitled "Pregnant Woman," by Kathe Kollwitz (Fig 3), was created in 1908. As I tried to get into the painting and dialogue with it and myself, I could not help but remember the other painting, of the mother holding her children close, protecting them from harm. Here, too, the new mother to be, with obvious concern for another, is clutching her belly, almost seeming to hold it up. This conveyed to me her inner sense of caring for another, her concern. Her eyes look down and carry a



Fig 3. "Pregnant Woman," by Kathe Kollwitz. Courtesy of the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Israel.

In nursing, I (and you) have the responsibility for self and others, and humility and hope are part of becoming a person able to take that responsibility honestly when caring for another.

sadness, a heaviness, perhaps worry. In asking myself what she was thinking, what the artist felt for her as she created this painting, I sensed a feeling of humility, of hope for herself and the new life within her, of perhaps worry for now having the responsibility for the life of another. In nursing, I (and you) have the responsibility for self and others, and humility and hope are part of becoming a person able to take that responsibility honestly when caring for another.

Berthe Morisot painted "By the Cradle" in 1872 (Fig 4). There is a sense of intense devotion, quietness of thought, and closeness of position to her sleeping baby. There is also a constancy of look, perhaps with thoughts of concern for this new life. Will she be able to care, be able to do what is right? The mother also seemed to me bonded to the baby as she holds onto the material enveloping her baby, sort of wanting to take her up in her arms, but yet not wanting to disturb her sleep. How often, I think, this happens in my caring, wanting to take one into oneself, but somehow hesitating, unsure if it is right or the right moment. This painting told me that in caring, I have many deep thoughts, sometimes doubts, of myself, of the other, trying to be honest with both, moving between (alternating), each within their own space and time.

Where all the previous paintings focused on the mother and child, the painting by



FIG 4. "By the Cradle," by Berthe Morisot. Courtesy of the Musee d'Orsay, Paris. © R.M.N.

Pablo Picasso, entitled "Family at the Seashore" (Fig 5), created in 1922, includes the father, making the circle of family complete. In trying to reach the depths of this creation, I sensed a mood of tranquility, of deep thoughts of the mother, of playfulness of the child, and peacefulness of the father. There is a touching of all, from the mother touching the child's back, to the child touching the father, and the father being close with all, even if sleeping; conveying a connectedness and yet a detachment. The people are relaxed in their postures, conveying to me trust in each other. In caring, I am in both interconnectedness and detachment, alternating between entering and leaving, contemplating and interacting, always

alert to self and other, responding to the person as each grows and develops.

The last work of art is a creation executed in wood, charcoal, and plaster by Marisol in 1987 and entitled "Working Woman" (Fig 6). There was some difficulty in reaching down into myself and engaging in a dialogue with this creation and its artist, to find the caring attributes and behaviors depicted within. There is a stiffness of the mother, from the emotions expressed on her face, to her exact, particular dress, to her hold on her baby. Even the baby, in her face, shows some distress, perhaps in the tightness of the mother's hold, or in the sense of what is to come (being left in day care). In caring, I suppose, there can be at times a stiffness, a hardness, when I must do what I know is not what the other wants, but I do it with patience, honesty, and competence and with a sense of connectedness to the other. I try to instill courage in the other so that the necessary task can be done. This courage, to me, is shown here in the determination seen in



Fig 5. "Family at the Seashore," by Pablo Picasso. Courtesy of the Musee Picasso, Paris. © R.M.N.



Fig 6. "Working Woman," by Marisol. © Marisol/VAGA, New York, 1993, courtesy of Sidney Janis Gallery.

the mother's eyes and in the emotions seen in her lips and firm grip on her baby.

REVISITING THOUGHTS AND WRITINGS

As I continued in the process of engaging myself, working in the journal to gain a better understanding of self, others, and the focus of my dialogue, I revisited my thoughts and writings to search out the answer to the questions I posed at the beginning—Is the language of caring present in all environments? Are there similarities or dissimilarities?

ties?—and to come close to a deeper, richer meaning of what it means to care. When I care, or am being cared for, I am not afraid of being myself, of giving of my competence with humility of being. I am intertwined physically and emotionally in an interconnectedness, in an I-thou relationship; "I experience something."^{9(p56)} This speaks to the concept of intersubjectivity, that thinking exists in the mind of the person rather than of the thing being thought about. I allow myself to be in a spiritual harmony, a oneness with others, creating and living tranquility and comfort within quietness of thought. I strive for authenticity of presence and person, allowing for that freedom to be and not be afraid.

As I reached the conclusion of my journey, I felt comfortable in stating that if we are human, we care, and we care because we are human. One could delve further for intent of the artists of the Holocaust as to the why and how of their inclusion into their creations of what I observed and felt to be caring attributes. Perhaps I could say that to survive, they needed to portray to others that there can be caring in a world in such utter disarray. There were paintings, though, that depicted the ugliness of the happening, but my intent was to find, even if only in a small way, elements of the existence of caring in that ugly environment.

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When I first contemplated working in the process of journaling to observe and live in the world of artists in two very dissimilar environments, looking for that universality of caring, I looked at this involvement as a first step in my seeking to do research in the realm of caring. This experience brought to me a new reflective awareness of self as car-

ing person, of those things, behaviors, and feelings I express and live by when I am in a nursing situation, interacting with another, each helping the other to be and become through caring.

As a result of my experience, I feel a need to now explore, using the tool of journaling, to reach into the world of nursing and its esthetic component. What esthetic experiences are nurses engaged in when they are

within a nursing situation? What is an esthetic experience—is it creative ways of nursing, or is it something deeper and perhaps only reached by a deep personal knowing of self and the other? What is the meaning of this process of exploring caring to nursing education? If nursing as an art is to achieve a deeper meaning to all of those it touches, these are questions that deserve an answer.

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