

## **Reflection Paper 2**

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Throughout the first half of *Hermeneutics of Self*, I have evoked the spirit of my childhood heroine Samus Aran and have been spelunking into the cavernous depths of my psyche. Over the past few weeks, I have developed my *personal process* and *inner awareness* by treading the various *experiential* and *academic* pathways of chakra meditation, active imagination, somatic group work, mandala painting, and counseling micro-skills.

As our class has continued the *experiential chakra meditations* from Robert Waterman's *Mandala of the Soul*, I have been uncovering some key mental imagery and insights. During the Mystery School meditation, rainbow speech bubbles emanated from the stepped entrance of an archetypal pueblo-like temple. The language spoken by the temple was non-verbal chakra energy, yet I somehow understood that it was asking me to trust my bottom-up emotional processing and regulation. Relaxing my perceptual and cognitive processual habits has allowed me to find a better balance between my rationality and emotions. While I have fully rationalized the circumstances surrounding my recent betrayal and loneliness, it has been a bigger challenge for me to integrate those negative emotions into my larger sense of self. Because the "heart-brain" connection is the seat of emotional regulation, it has been critical for me to track my anahata chakra to do this integrative work (McCraty, 2015, pp. 5, 8). Therefore, my *personal process* has focused on integration through bottom-up emotional processing and regulation, because I have gained *inner awareness* of the risk of burying those emotions resulting in further trust issues and isolation.

As I *experientially* engage in *active imagination* through my routine outdoor walks with my headphones, I find myself moving from my apartment parking lot into vast internal

landscapes. Cars, curbs, and pavement morph into ancient ruins, where indecipherable brickwork rises like lost blueprints from endless reflecting pools. Architecturally brutalist drainage structures irrigate the water down to raw cave walls, where crevice light illuminates cryptic tile work. At this point, I can even hear the taps of droplets gently echoing from various levels of this subterranean labyrinth.

Occasionally, these taps are joined by the low growling of a lone beast prowling in the shadows between the crevice light. I am not frightened by glimpses of its night vision eyes, because I know this beastly black dog is my archetypal protector in disguise. If I am in the mood, I may even call on the massive dog to maul mental images of my enemies. I watch as the dog displays grizzly bear force to thrash and toss bodies like rag dolls down the steps of a molten sacrificial altar (this is the same archetypal altar that showed up in my week 2 drawing). As the bodies sizzle and disintegrate on the blood- and fire-stained steps, I feel relief and release from the unhealthy attachments they offered.

Further, I am somatically integrating this relief and release through the bilateral movement of walking, as well as increasing my heart rate and sweating (K. Latimer, personal communication, April 27, 2023). Even the particular energy and lyrics of my music can complement this somatic integration and provide added catharsis. Altogether, this violent sublimation and consequent cutting of cords are allowing me to set healthy boundaries and find closure on my own terms without further enmeshing myself in harmful relationships that are beyond repair. By developing greater *inner awareness* of my underlying anger and sadness, as well as the mental imagery and physical activity that supports its integration, I am slowly healing my broken heart. As Chodorow (1999) so thoughtfully writes:

Those whose movements follow and reflect an ongoing stream of inner imagery often move through journeys of mythic proportion ... [f]ollowing the image alone may lead to some sense of its meaning but without attention to the instinctive body (through felt body sensations), a movement experience lacks emotional spontaneity. (p. 260)

During the week 4 *in-class somatic dance experiential*, I observed these themes synchronize with my body movements and materialize in my subsequent artwork. As the whole class got up to dance and began occupying space within the classroom, I found myself bobbing uncomfortably in the periphery of the dance circle by the front doors (I may have unconsciously engineered an escape plan). While I was genuinely trying to avoid inflaming my lumbar disc herniation, I was also feeling trust issues with our group and making social comparisons with some of my classmates who danced more freely with one another. Their faces seemed blissful and happy, and I developed a felt sense of longing and isolation within my marginal space.

At the same time, I also noticed four other students like me who appeared to be either exhibiting negative emotions or deeply engaged with their own slower processes in the margins. After feeling low blood sugar and grabbing a handful of cashews, my professor validated my need to take care of my body and follow its lead throughout the group process. Having my internal resourcing validated by our group facilitator and identifying with other students helped me to feel less alone, ride the dark waves of my insecurities, and engage my body's movements within the classroom on my own terms. As Foster (2017) explains in *The Deepest Acceptance*, "only when your attention turns 180 degrees to look at the not-okay [emotional] waves that you are running away from is there the possibility of discovering total freedom and peace within your own [present] experience" (p. 59).

After the dance portion of the experiential, we were directed to grab our big sketchpads and create blind oil pastel drawings. As I closed my eyes and grabbed a pastel of an unknown color, my hand instinctively went to the center of the page and began moving in a continuous angular line, occasionally overlapping into closed shapes. Once the class had moved through three layers of different colors, we opened our eyes and looked at our drawings. From back to front, my colors were pink, dark green, and bright green, which oddly synchronized with my transition from my more recent warm compositions back to my first green anahata chakra drawing. It appeared that my *personal process* had taken me full circle from initially engaging my heart, down to integrating my lower-chakra negative emotions, and then back up to my heart.

I also observed how the drawing occupied the center of the page rather than the margins and concluded that I feel much safer occupying illusionistic space by myself than I do in architectural space with other bodies. Additionally, I identified how the line work represented my willingness to move while maintaining tight boundaries, which is an improvement from my past experiences with feeling stuck and immobilized by somatic group work. Utilizing drawing to visualize and integrate my somatic dance experience helped me to gain *inner awareness* of how my body and heart have grown more resilient in tolerating the lack of safety that I feel while occupying architectural space with others. Instead of only looking at the aspects of the dance circle I could not engage with, I have chosen to acknowledge the abundance of my inner resourcing, as well as the energetic solidarity I felt with the four other students. Ultimately, this has helped me to build some trust between myself and others. McCraty (2015) explains how this trust may have been reinforced through the process of group coherence:

Group coherence ... refers to the synchronized and harmonious order in the relationships between and among the individuals. ... A growing body of evidence suggests that an energetic field is formed between individuals in groups through which communication among all the group members occurs simultaneously. (p. 28)

In my *academic and experiential mandala project*, I am learning new watercolor techniques through my watercolor workshop that are complementing my increased balance between rationality and emotions. As a completely water-based painting medium, watercolor is extremely uncontrollable and never loses its workability (M. McGuire, personal communication, April 18, 2023). Highly unforgiving, transparent watercolor paint may expose all the flaws in one's composition and cannot be layered without destabilizing a painting's initial washes (M. McGuire, personal communication, April 18, 2023). As an acrylic painter who enjoys working with opaque and unmovable layers, this drives me *batshit* crazy!

That said, I have embraced new modes of working with the chaos and looseness of watercolor while maintaining some harder edges. By *academically* studying techniques such as wet-on-wet painting with flat and angle brushes, watercolor pencil application, sponge application, and utilizing masking fluid, I have discovered new ways to *experience* my paint flowing more affectively within rational boundaries. This has resulted in comprehensible, yet moody geometric abstractions. For example, one small painting I created with watercolor pencils illustrated a little triangular shape with weepy watercolor streaks streaming down from one side. Initially, I oriented the composition to look like a sad raincloud in a dark field, but after doing more healing, I turned the paper vertically so that the shape appeared to be jetting forward at light speed. I believe this piece is symbolic of my mental shift from being stuck in past grief

to moving on into a more present-focused headspace. Through this process, I am continuing to discover more synergy with van Meer's (2022) process of imaginal knowing, in which "[approaching] an experience with images bridges [one's] outer and inner worlds" (p. 11).

Lastly, this rational-emotional balance has further manifested through the improved self-efficacy that I feel roleplaying as a therapist with my classmates. By *academically* studying and roleplaying new *counseling micro-skills*, I am becoming increasingly more confident utilizing the unnatural social process of rationally reflecting and questioning while attuning to my classmates' emotions through empathetic gestures, body posture, and mirroring (K. Latimer, personal communication, April 27, 2023). In essence, I feel that I am learning to successfully apply insights from my own *personal process* and increased *inner awareness* to the therapeutic alliance, where I must refrain from personally relating and focus all of my psychic energy on helping the client bridge their artwork's meaning with their needs. After all, the more I know myself, the more capable I am of knowing and helping others.

## References

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