

CIRCLE PLAY: A SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE OF
PERSONAL INTEGRATION, LIFE REVIEW, & SPIRITUAL EXPLORATION

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Preface

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.
Albert Schweitzer

I am in gratitude to many people who have encouraged and supported me in ministry through the years. I want to say “Thank you” to a few here:

~ to my classmates in the 2005-2007 Hebrew Union College/Postgraduate Center for Mental Health D. Min. program. Those Mondays were a God-send.

~ to our teachers in the program who offered insights and inspiration on those Mondays.

~ to my Project Advisors, Rev. Ann Akers and Rabbi Richard Address, who have been so encouraging and helpful during the writing of this Project.

~ to the beautiful women who participated in this Project and made it seem important.

~ to my mother, Jane Holland Looney, who inspired this Project in the first place.

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Chapter 1

A statement of problem or issue addressed by this project

“A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species...The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning.”
(Carl Jung)

“We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a HOME. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.”
(Hildegard von Bingen, 12th century Christian mystic)

“Which one of the many people who I am, the many inner voices inside of me, will dominate? Who, or how, will I be? Which part of me decides?”
(Dr. Douglas Hofstadter, Professor of Cognitive Science)

In the liberal mainline Protestant church located in the NYC metropolitan area where I serve as interim pastor, one of my parishioners, a seventy-eight year old woman who has been active in the church for decades as a leader, including moderator, choir member, and participant in numerous committees, remarked to me that she found herself in “a difficult place spiritually at this stage of life.” She said that she finds herself “not believing what [she] used to believe, and wondering about things [she] never wondered about before, such as the place of God in church.” She said that she was surprised to be the age she was and not to have more certainty about her faith, more peace of mind about her spiritual path and what lies before her, and more self-awareness of who she truly is and what her life has been. Recently she declined the invitation to serve the church as moderator (church officer who presides over meetings) for yet another year because she felt it necessary, “at this stage of [her] life,” to focus on “more helpful spiritual pursuits”

that she has not explored to any great extent in spite of her many years of activity in the life of the church. Having said that, she looked at me in perplexity and declared, “But I don’t know how.” She appeared to be deeply troubled by this state of affairs. I invited her to consider the possibility of gathering with other older women to reflect together and to explore this stage of their lives. I suggested that we might make space for an experience of God that has been elusive to her up to this time. My project invites a small group to covenant together to, for a brief time, devote themselves to practices dedicated to the presumption that God’s healing presence can be experienced more palpably through paying attention, by sharing with others in trust, and through play. This conversation with my parishioner is the second part of what inspired me to consider this project. The first part is intensely personal and painful.

My own 89 year-old mother died this past July. I observed her final year prior to and then her final months in hospice care when she was clearly unable to entertain an exploration of her life or anecdotal sharing of her life experiences even in the most minimal fashion. She was resistant to engage in life review of any sort. She was closed rather than open and willfully silent (defended, defensive) rather than willing to share what her past joys, sorrows, surprises, and insights might have been and what her future hope might be. In the final days before death, she was unconscious far longer than anyone would have believed possible and yet her body continued to live. She did not want to die and it appeared that she was not happy with how she had lived. Having been a devoutly religious person in a fundamentalist Christian tradition that often espoused preference for “the sweet by and by” to “this old world,” her resistance to accept the

inevitable that would presumably bring her face to face with the God she had worshiped was even more painful to me than observing her angry reticence about her life review. It is a sad state of affairs to observe an elderly person die in despair. And especially this is true in light of one who has claimed deep religious conviction. Isn't religion supposed to help us live as well as die? I began to consider what the community of faith might offer such as these, my parishioner and my mother, very different women, yet each one struggling at the latter stage of life.

Perhaps because my mother was a staunch Southern Baptist all her life, she had internalized the God she often verbalized, a God of harsh judgment and retribution who preferred the spirit to the body. At the time of her disturbing dying, I wondered if this internalized God, along with whoever else peopled her inner community with their strident, accusatory, or unhappy voices, contributed to her despairing final months. I was curious to wonder what sort of spiritual/psychological/emotional work might have been available to her, even in her later years at the end of her life, that might have helped her die with self- acceptance, peace, and hope rather than despair. I was curious if there could be some initiative that might have enhanced her ability to love herself and her life with grace rather than the all-consuming disappointment that seemed to engulf her and was of unknown origin to me. Because her life was, largely, a mystery to me, I do not know what life events contributed to her state of mind. She refused to share her early life with anyone, claiming that it was "private and personal."

While the population of elderly women with whom I work in my church are not

fundamentalist Christians and do not appear to be burdened by such an abusive God as my mother's, they tend to hold their lives close and personal. They consider their faith a private matter, largely unexamined by them and undisclosed to others. Their religious learning has emphasized doing good in the world rather than exploring the soul within. Their focus has been on others rather than on the internal ones that live within their own personalities and hearts. Both movements are essential in the Christian faith. Working for justice and doing mercy in the world is a sign that the heart is right with God. However, it appears to me that the internal, personal work of spiritual formation, when it is absent or unhelpful, diminishes the capacity of living the later years with integrity and hope. Even those who have done great good all their lives may flounder in the dimming light of later years without intentional support, and by this I mean the intentional support not only of a community of faith, but of the inner community within.

My Project poses the opportunity to create a spiritual formation community for elderly women who, while they may have been engaged in church activities for years as volunteers, have not experienced a transformative faith that equips them for the final chapter of their lives, those who have reached a stage of their lives when their religious life does not serve them as an integrating dynamic at this crucial stage. The Project aims to create a safe and sacred circle of women, engaging them in playful ways that prompts them to explore personal stories and their inner life, accompanied by one another as well as figures from sacred text. Their regular encounters over a five-week period will include active listening, story telling, and prayer as well as activities of play and reflection. I am interested in exploring whether a small group experience can enhance the internal

community of each participant through artful experience of the sacred that will allow the participant to give voice to memories, reflections, fears, or other thoughts that might otherwise remain unexpressed. I am curious to see if this particular small group work can cultivate a dynamic internalization of sacred figures as companions for the end-of-life journey.

In Mathew's gospel, Jesus offers a promise to those who gather in his name: "For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst." This assurance embodies the hope that even (and perhaps especially) very small groups of seekers/believers who come together in a certain way can embody the possibility that Jesus offered those he met in life, that is, the possibility of healing and wholeness. In her book, Cultivating Wholeness, Margaret Kornfeld notes, "Authentic community is the 'medicine' our society needs." (p. 16) My Project seeks to stimulate authentic community in the spirit of this sacred text because it invites its participants to an experience of integration in their elder years, perhaps filling the gap where something is missing, so that they are better equipped to embrace their final time with grace, hope, meaning, acceptance, and integrity.

The ethos for the suburban progressive Protestant UCC church where the pilot project will occur has been an emphasis on justice issues in preference to and often in complete ignorance of what I term personal spiritual formation that includes disciplines or practices associated with the Christian faith such as prayer, meditation, and devotional scripture study. In this mainline church there has been a bias away from the personal spiritual

journey in preference for, and largely replaced, by engagement with issues, often causing conflict, most especially civil rights back in the 60's and the issues of human sexuality and inclusive language more recently. The church became Open and Affirming (UCC designation of a church that affirms persons from the LGBTQ community) in 1993. This movement created a major rift in the church community, even among families, some who no longer speak to one another even until this day. While the church has championed liberal causes and has had a vigorous participation in feeding the hungry through their soup kitchen, there has been little preaching, education, group work, or nurture for what I term personal spirituality and the practices that support it: various types of prayer, contemplation, personal sharing or testimony, and any of the other ancient spiritual disciplines that lie within our Christian tradition.

This particular mainline church is not unique in its lack of attention to the culture of faith that includes spiritual formation. Presbyterian minister N. Grahm Standish, in his book Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence and Power, writes, "If I were to pinpoint the biggest problem in the mainline church today, it would be that the modern church has succumbed to treating God as a theological ideal, as an abstract concept, rather than as an experience, an encounter, an embrace of One with whom we can have a deep and transforming relationship."(p.49) Churches like the one I serve become fixated on their own functioning so that its members are relegated to duties, tasks, and meetings that become spiritually, emotionally, and physically draining rather than life-giving and inspiring. It is my belief that my parishioner's melancholy, alluded to earlier, is a result of the dynamic of a church that has become simply functional

without the vitality of spiritual practice. This simply functional church is not, as a result, a life-giving community where intimacy is cultivated and deep relationship is nurtured.

My parishioner finds herself in her elder years, after decades spent active in her church, impoverished in her soul, diminished in her spirit, emotionally out-of-touch to herself, and thirsty for something more. My assertion is that she is not alone in her feeling.

The purpose of my Project is to examine how it might be possible to create what James W. Fowler (Stages of Faith) calls a “climate of developmental expectation”(p. 296) that will offer support to these women as they grow in understanding and clarification of their lives in light of the faith they have professed for years and even in light of the doubt, questions, and agnosticism they may hold at this point in their lives. My Project aims to create an ethos in which intimacy, playful yet authentic self-examination (personal history as well as internalized community), and prayer can become, for the elderly participants, an experience that supports integration of their past, enhanced self-awareness, and loving self-acceptance. The Christian story gives us an image of the table at which Jesus sits, surrounded by the motley crew of unrighteous and misfits he has collected in his journeys on the highways and byways of Galilee. As he gathered those around him who were neglected, ostracized, put out, cast out, and unloved, he drew them into one community of wholeness who shared one loaf of bread and one cup. So it is in our internal world of selves and voices, figures real, imagined, sacred and profane, those within us who inform who we are and measure our days with gentle or berating speech that encourages or defeats us. My Project offers a small group the invitation to begin to identify, name, and integrate these figures, personal and sacred, as valuable and cherished

companions into the final era of their earthy lives so that, again, they find integration and peace. The Purpose of this Project is to create authentic community among a small group of elderly women that is healing for its offer of intimacy, empathy, and shared reflections and that provides safe and sacred space to explore the inner community of the participants, including the integration of sacred figures, in service to their ongoing self-reflection for the aim of integrity at the end of life.

Chapter 2

Principles that guide and inform this Project

Religious Principles

“The Bible is more concerned with time than with space.” (Heschel, p. 6)

The God of the Bible is a God encountered in history who works in time, through circumstances, in the midst of muddles, by way of curmudgeonly personalities, via human flaws and foibles, and all this revealed in narrative. God meets us in story that unfolds over time. The Hebrew faith, Christianity’s mother faith, is not a religion *beyond* time but *of* time. Theology of the Sabbath illuminates this Jewish religious aim: the sanctification of time. The Creator God of our tradition used words born on breath to speak the world into being. (“In the beginning, God...” Genesis 1) God is first a poet. God’s poem is creation. God’s breath bears words that create reality that result in form and shape, texture and substance, water and sky, moons, suns, stars, and planets that bear growing things, grasses, rose bushes, elm trees, and insects, birds and whales, mosquitoes and panthers, ducks and badgers, rocks and humus, the rich soil from which a new narrative twist will emerge, shaped by God in God’s own image. However, prior to that transformative crafting of human life comes the word that created a vast array of life forms and tantalizing, colorful, complex and simple, aromatic mysteries of energy bursting forth. Story was born at that time, though there was no one to narrate it except God, and no one to hear. The forming of humanity from the rich humus provided a narrative detail that has, ever since, supplied never-ending story. We each hold a portion of that plot as our own. In this story of ours we meet God. Therefore, our stories are sacred for they are holy vessels of time where we meet the divine through our humanity.

It is helpful that individuals acknowledge this by the time of their later years.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”
John 1:1*

For the church, Jesus is the Word incarnate, the Word of the same God who spoke the world into being. For the church, Jesus is the definitive revelation of this Creator God, a human life animated by the Holy Spirit, the manifestation of God’s compassion and God’s loving nature. While we cannot know the mind of God who is ineffable mystery, we have seen the heart of God inasmuch as we know of Jesus, his life, his healing, his teachings and his radical table fellowship. When we contemplate the nature of the Divine, it is Jesus’ image we consider and Jesus’ story of self-emptying we tell. Jesus, who traveled the countryside to invite vagabonds, tax collectors, whores, orphans, widows, the hurting no-accounts and unrighteous, unclean folk of every ilk to the table is the God who welcomes us, too. When the Gospel writer narrates the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God, the disciples mouths agape staring up at an empty blue sky, we imbue our imagining of the Divine Mystery with the paradox that was Jesus, fully human and yet only begotten son of God, one whose most defining behavior as an itinerant healer/wisdom teacher/rabbi may have been his radical table fellowship. When he broke bread with unlikely and unlovely characters, Jesus proclaimed the realm of God was present in the exquisite hospitality of his table. Radical hospitality, as a religious discipline, stretches us to love the unlovable, touch the untouchable, and stand with those whom the world has abandoned. Such radical hospitality offered to all, including the intolerable, has spiritual implications for individual human wholeness when we imagine that our own personalities include the broken, misbegotten, cranky, sullen, grieving,

orphaned, whining, disagreeable and unlovely splintered parts of us who we are to welcome and offer a place at the table.

The foundational religious image underlying my Project is the radical table fellowship of Jesus who dined with strangers and the unrighteous as well as his friends and disciples, creating community among the disparate and sharing bread with the hungry. The ritual eating of the Christian sacrament of Eucharist embodies the acts that my project seeks to model. During Communion, bread is blessed, broken, shared and consumed as we remember the love of God revealed in Jesus. Remembering and sharing are re-creational acts of healing, bringing the parts together, finding wholeness in this meal that is considered a holy act, a sacrament that is reparative, restorative, and celebratory. The movements of blessing, breaking, sharing and consuming replicate the essential movements into which my Project invites its participants.

The Communion words of institution recall the events of Jesus' last supper, a Passover meal shared with his disciples in an upper room. "We remember that on the night of betrayal and before death, even so, Jesus took the bread and he blessed and broke it and shared it with his disciples saying, 'This is my body broken for you.' Take. Eat. Whenever you do so, do so in remembrance of me. Ministering to you in Jesus' name, I offer you the broken body of Christ." These words precede the distribution of the bread that is for the Protestant church, symbols for Jesus and the wholeness that is ours when we participate in sharing the bread. The communion of souls is invited to this Table of Jesus by words that, as an ordained United Church of Christ clergy, I repeat every time:

“Come to this table not because you must, but because you may. Come not as a testimony to your righteousness but as testimony to your love of God, your desire to follow Jesus, and your openness to the Holy Spirit. Come not because you lay any claim on heaven’s rewards, but because in your human frailty you stand in constant need of heaven’s tender mercies. Come not to express an opinion, but to seek a Presence and to pray for a Spirit. Come just as you are because it is Christ who invites you and Christ who meets you here.” In the liberal Protestant tradition in which I serve, there are no barriers to Jesus’ Table. Everyone is welcome to gather there.

“We make a home for each other, my grandfather and I...I don’t mean a regular home, a house of wood, brick, stones. I think of a home as being a thing that people have between each other in which they can nest--rest, emotionally speaking, in the heart of other.”
(Tennessee Williams’ play ‘The Night of the Iguana’)

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him ...” Luke 24: 30

What made Jesus so compelling was the availability of his life. My project aims to replicate the experience of sitting around Jesus’ table as it creates a safe space for intimacy. What is blessed and broken is not bread but the lives of the participants. The lives of the women are shared in the circle, those who are willing to share what is broken in them. Sharing is the true communion. Personal narrative, difficult transitions, painful passages, unfinished business, lost opportunities, missed connections, and lonely hearts are the bread and wine of this communion. What is broken and blessed becomes acknowledged as sacred. Scripture says, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20) This is a divine promise for a small

group who gather in the hope of God-with-us.

“We live in story as fish live in the sea.” (Dominic Crossan)

Mark's Gospel, chapter 5, contains narrative that conjoins two intriguing stories about two distinct healing events. One describes the healing of a woman who has suffered uncontrolled bleeding for twelve years, resulting in marginalization from her community due to her uncleanness. The other depicts a twelve-year-old girl whose father tracks down Jesus to ask for healing for his very ill daughter. We hear the father's plea to Jesus, to which Jesus immediately responds by accompanying the father heading to the home where the little girl is gravely ill. Their journey is interrupted by the crush of the crowd and, most peculiarly, by Jesus' sudden realization that he has been touched by someone, an odd remark given the crush of the crowd surrounding him. In the woman's case of healing, she is desperate, having spent all her money on physicians who did nothing for her, leaving her destitute to grow more ill. As Jesus moves through the crowded street toward the little girl's home, the bleeding woman stealthily approaches him from behind, determining that if only she can touch his garment, she will be healed. She is hiding, hoping to draw no attention to herself or her plight, but desiring to be relieved of her burdensome condition. As the story goes, she accomplishes her goal, cloaked as she is in the crowd that surrounds Jesus. She is instantly healed and so turns away to disappear before she is noticed. While many people press against him, this woman's touch has an electric effect on him that causes Jesus to ask, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples consider this an odd remark, given the teeming crowd who surround and press into him. Jesus looks all about to find who has touched him. The gospel writer notes that upon the woman's touch, Jesus was "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him."

This frightened woman, who wanted only to touch the hem of this healer's cloak and believed that the mere touch would help her, was forced to reveal herself in front of the crowd as Jesus scrutinized every person. Already healed from her uncontrolled bleeding, she "came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth." To which Jesus replied, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

The truth that resonates is this: the woman could not be healed in secret. Her desire to touch Jesus was enough to end her physical torment. Her power to be healed was within her (Jesus said, "Your faith has healed you"). Her healing, however, was made complete when she was brought back from the margins into the community. Jesus would not allow her to hide. There is no healing in hiding. When Jesus brings this marginalized woman from the fringe to the center and blesses her there, he effectively reunites her with her community. She becomes whole in community, not in hiding. While her healing was generated by her faith (her SELF that holds the divine image and everything we need to heal), it was in the community where her healing was made complete.

My project invokes the power of community and the spiritual discipline of hospitality. My project summons the circle of women to trust that when they gather in the hope of God and when they call upon God as they reveal themselves to themselves and to one another, healing results. There is healing because there is imminent wholeness. Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen links hospitality with healing: "Healers are hosts who patiently and carefully listen to the story of the suffering stranger."

My Project seeks to discover small religious community through the creation of a circle of trust whose participants covenant to bless, share, and explore what has been broken in their lives. “Community is not only the place where healing occurs, it is a means through which it happens. Authentic community is the ‘medicine’ our society needs.” (Kornfeld, p. 17),

“Birth is a beginning and death is a destination. And life is a journey: From childhood to maturity and youth to age; From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing; From foolishness to discretion and then, perhaps, to wisdom; From weakness to strength or strength to weakness. And, often, back again; From loneliness to love, from joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion, From grief to understanding, from fear to faith; From defeat to defeat to defeat. Until looking backward or ahead, We see that victory lies not at some high place along the way, But in having made the journey, stage by stage a sacred pilgrimage. Birth is a beginning and death is a destination. And life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage - to life everlasting.” (Rabbi Alvin Fine)

Our call as community of faith is to be companions for the journey. My Project will create a space for participants to reflect on their lives as sacred pilgrimage.

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Mark 10:14-15)

When Jesus proclaimed that to experience God’s realm one must be as a child, we are urged to consider what does it mean to “be as a child?” Children are curious, vulnerable, trusting, open and playful. My Project will invite the women to revisit themselves as children. My Project discerns playfulness as a sacred discipline. In the circle of women, I believe their trust will grow as they share their lives and risk enough vulnerability to

build new and deeper relationships with one another. That, in turn, will generate compassion and empathy. As they play, I surmise they will become more curious about their own responses and one another's. The play itself will create moments that are highly conscious and not pre-supposed, because play happens in the moment and cannot be controlled. To play is to let go, if briefly, and to free one's responses. Just as a belly laugh frees the body, a moment of play frees the soul. To play a simple game is to let go of control. I surmise that the simple activities that these women will engage will delight them enough that they will relax and experience themselves in a novel way. Delight invites curiosity that cultivates a culture of play, and so it is like a circle: from play to delight to curiosity to play. Playfulness means eagerness to explore and to discover. It means being spontaneous and creative. Playfulness will be the ethos I hope to stimulate in this Project.

“Find a place in our heart and speak there with the Lord. It is the Lord’s reception room.” (Theophan the Recluse)

The space for my Project is the Vestry at my church but equally and also the inner chamber of each participant. We will incorporate exploration of the inner community of each participant, beginning with the children that these women were decades prior to this time (the participants are aged 70, 72, 76, 77, 78, 83, 85, and 89.) Considering this inner child, we return to the story of Jesus healing the little girl in the story mentioned earlier. After he had left the woman, free at last from her hemorrhaging illness and enabled to be included in her community, Jesus proceeded to the house where the little girl lay ill. As they arrived, the father, Jesus, and some of his disciples were met with wails and sobs. A great commotion erupted as news spread that the little girl had died. Jesus rebukes the

crowd, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” He enters the room, careful to include only his most trusted disciples and the child’s parents. Taking the little girl’s hand, he says to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” Scripture notes that she gets up and begins to walk about.

This story will provide linkage for the women in my project to their own inner girl. As she was not dead but only sleeping, so I mean for the women to imagine that the little girl within them is not dead, but sleeping. Finding her, taking her hand, and “walking about” will be our first of several excursions into the heart of each participant, and the seminal experience.

Clinical Principles

Moving beyond Freudian thought that saw ego as fixed from childhood, Erik Erikson conceived human development as more flexible over time. In his theory, even the elderly adult has a malleable ego capable of continuing development. This is a gracious concept with which to understand people of all ages and a hopeful approach when working with the elderly in particular. To consider the idea that one’s ego and sense of identity has potential to continue to be shaped over the entire lifespan right up until death and that experiences later in life might potentially heal the hurts of early childhood is consistent with the Christian faith tradition, central tenants of which are redemption and salvation. (“With God, all things are possible.” Matthew 19:26b)

Erickson theorized that from infancy on, each stage of life is associated with a specific psychological struggle that contributes to a major aspect of personality. The sense of identity is shaped over the entire life span. Adulthood's choice between generativity and stagnation precedes the elderly years when, if one's various life experiences are not integrated and experienced with integrity, despair is the joyless outcome at the end of life. Ideally, one's life culminates in the wisdom of old age. The final phase of life that is imbued with wisdom has integrated the lessons of each stage of development along the way, beginning from earliest infancy when the issue, according to Erikson, is trust versus fearfulness. Wisdom that comes with elder years appreciates interdependence and translates the successful sense of will and mastery of one's own body to an acceptance of one's body's inevitable, natural deterioration with aging. Those who reach mature age and do not work through their lives with satisfaction will end up in despair at their experiences and perceived failures. Fear of death is one result of this failure to thrive at this stage as they struggle to identify meaning and purpose in their lives. My Project is concerned with this stage of life and its struggle to identify and integrate parts of oneself and one's life in a satisfactory, comforting way that equips one to meet death with grace. Erikson's assertion that late life experiences can alter the human personality positively inspired me to create opportunities for elderly persons to engage their lives in ways that will make a hopeful difference for them at this stage of their development. My Project was interested in this exploration and the possibility of change for the participants.

Object relations theory is based on the belief that all people have within them an "internal, often unconscious world of relationships that is different and in many ways

more powerful and compelling than what is going on in their external world of interactions with real and present people.” (Berzoff, p. 127-128) The internalized community, composed over a lifetime, includes images, voices, and memories of significant others, family members, teachers, friends, and figures from literature or culture. It is a mysterious world that, presumably, has potential to offer a dimension of comfort as well as struggle in a person’s life. The internal world is the realm in which others have become part of self. Object relations theory, among other things, is interested in exploring how needs have or have not been met in relationships, in exploring the harm that comes when the need for attachment has not been met, and in learning how a person’s internalized objects from the past can interfere with one’s present life to the extent that it becomes distorted and painful. For my Project, Object Relations is a necessary presumption. Some part of each participant’s internalized community, for my Project’s purposes, will be sought out and listened to. How that internal, mysterious world is organized, or why, is beyond the scope of this Project’s concern. The inner representations formed by experiences, past relationships, memories, ideas, and cultural input from the figures of religious story, history, and fiction offer the promise of a rich variety of inner resources for companionship, guidance, and support. The work of many theorists, including Melanie Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, and D.W. Winnicott, suggest something beyond Freud’s view that believed that “no fantasy will take place if real gratification is available.” (Berzoff, p. 141) Object relations theory understands that fantasy is a “basic characteristic of human beings” (Berzoff, p. 141) and believes the inner life of a person to be rich with characters, voices, and energies from the past. My Project is interested in this richness, in the imaginative

voices within, in the memories of past moments and eras. The main significance of this theory in terms of my Project is this: my Project assumes that the inner life of each of my participants is rich and multi-faceted, whether or not she realizes it. My project assumes that the inner community within each participant includes comforting voices as well as dissonant ones. Another theory that frames the individual personality as inclusive of numerous parts or personalities is Internal Family Systems theory.

*“Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself.
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (Walt Whitman)*

*“Which one of the many people who I am, the many inner voices inside of me, will dominate? Who, or how, will I be? Which part of me decides?”
(Dr. Douglas Hofstadter)*

IFS views the inner life as multiple rather than unitary. It, like Object Relations theory, assumes an inner life peopled by many parts. This, again, supports the work of my Project, for one reason, because it invites playfulness with one’s self. The multiplicity paradigm for personalities that IFS proposes is gracious because it avoids simple descriptions and categories for individuals, seeing in each person a complex assortment of personalities that are full of variety. The numerous parts of a person are best conceived as “inner people” (Schwartz, p. 35) with many feelings and abilities. These parts or inner persons have developed over time to take certain roles in the protection of the core Self “at all costs.” (Schwartz, p.38) The parts are often angry or scared, controlling or protective. These parts of a person, when they are emotionally charged and polarized, cause one to feel fractured and stressed. The number of inner people is not the issue, but their relationship, and, most essentially, the relationship of the core Self to

the parts. Ideally, the core Self is accessible because the Self holds healing and compassion for the individual, however, easy accessibility is often not the case. Sometimes, the parts are so extreme that a person is unaware of the Self at the center of their core. IFS describes the Self as centered, calm, clear, creative, compassionate, connected, courageous, and confident. The inner people, on the other hand, include figures of stridency, fearfulness, rage, over-protectiveness, and control. These parts are not bad in themselves; they are good in their intent to protect. However, their roles in relationship can become aggressively over-protective in various ways that thwart wholeness. We are internally organized to protect the hurt we have experienced in our lives. This is the genesis of IFS theory of the inner multitude. The goal of IFS therapy is to identify and know the various inner persons and to allow the core Self to lead. What is malleable is the relationship between the core Self and the multiple parts. Healing comes with building part to self and self to part relationships and, again, inviting the Self to lead this inner world with the attributes named earlier (calmness, clarity, courage, creativity, curiosity, confidence, compassion, and connectedness).

IFS provides a conceit for my Project that imagines a person including numerous inner distinct personalities within one individual. Its theory offers a gentle, helpful dynamic for self-reflection of even the most painful life episodes or behaviors as it examines the inner personalities that strive to protect the sensitive, vulnerable parts of one's self, most notably the inner child, the child one was. In the realm of the personal work of the soul and the personality, this theory provides a framework for identifying both "good" (acceptable) parts of oneself and "bad" (unacceptable) parts, without pathologizing them

or even necessarily judging them harshly, but finding compassion for each part (and its positive intention) and the whole person. It allows for understanding the parts and their relationship, and it points in the direction of, finally, compassion for oneself through the years. When coupled with the dynamism of the sacred text and sacred figures of the text that invoke response, spiritual formation goes hand in glove with personal psychological work that may be healing work. This, too, is the work of religious faith, to facilitate healing. While the inner community may be always present within one, it is not always acknowledged. The companions of a lifetime, those parts of oneself who have emerged through experience, the parts of others who have been internalized, the remnants of cultural or fictitious figures who have been remembered or worshiped or to whom one has prayed, these companions can become available for the elderly person. The inner community, those companions that accompany us throughout our lives, need attention in the final years. They need recognizing and naming. They need a celebration, a reunion, and Communion. IFS serves this Project as a tool for this work.

The theory is generous. It does not pathologize the multitude within, but seeks to understand what each has suffered and what each longs to protect. All the parts have a positive intention. The goal is to have the whole inner family learn to love one another, accept one another, be in right relationship to one another, and listen and, again, bring the core Self to the center of leading. IFS, according to Schwartz, is a conceptual framework and practice for developing love for self and other. In its therapeutic technique, according to Schwartz, most people very quickly and easily are able to identify their parts when they are made aware of this concept. My Project is interested in exploring this idea

of multiplicity of persons within with the women, in as much depth as is possible given the time restraints, the ability to trust the group, and the degree to which each woman is willing to be vulnerable. My Project is not interested in doing therapy or in delving so deeply that the participants are at risk of going deeper than for which they have support.

Considering hidden parts of the personality within, this work resonates with the Jungian concept of the shadow, the unlived life, those parts that are not freely available to us due to their unacceptable nature to our conscious selves. However, for purposes of my Project, Jung's work has relevance in another light.

My Project's aim to explore the inner community is to begin with the child that each woman had been. While there are numerous possible theoretical bases to use for conceptualizing the inner child, Carl Jung's work with his own inner child and his exploration that led him to play with blocks and sand in order to connect with his inner child inspired me to ponder the activity of play and its role in freeing persons to be receptive to themselves and one another. Jung's remark, "the child motif is a picture of certain forgotten things in our childhood," echoes the intention of my Project to the extent that I hoped to help the participants remember and reconcile. Theories of the inner child suggest that the wounding of the child can be healed at any age. It is hopeful to believe that childhood traumas are no longer haunting and hurtful to the adult. My Project is not about the inner child, but it calls on the inner child to be awake and counted among the inner community, or at least it will invite remembrance of the child that each participant was to facilitate whatever enhanced remembering, reconciling, and healing may be possible in such a short order. My hope would be that the Project work and the Circle of

women would be a beginning for continued deepening, remembering, reconciling, and healing.

Play will be a key function in initiating this process. My aim is to stimulate a group ethos among the participants that will inspire a willingness to play with the stories and with one another. “Play” and “playfulness” have been noted by a wide variety of thinkers as keenly important to human development at any age. Plato advised, “Life must be lived as play.” Author of Deep Play, Diane Ackerman suggested, “Play is our brains’ favorite way of learning.” Psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote, “Almost all creativity involves purposeful play.” Carl Jung noted, “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct.” Geottfried Benn, German physician, declared, “Whoever wants to understand much must play much.”

Because play is an essential part of the human experience, I choose to use play (and to cultivate a playful attitude), inspired by my theater games and creative play background, to inaugurate a whimsical relationship among the group with one another, with the figures of story that we engage, and with some of their own inner community.

Playfulness, as described by Maslow, is the value that is desired for my Project’s participants. Playfulness is an attitude that is fun, joyful and relishes amusement, gaiety, humor, exuberance and effortlessness. (Brennan, p. 118). The playful attitude itself, if it can be cultivated through this group experience, will create a receptive spirit to explore what might otherwise be too painful to explore at this late date. Playfulness becomes, for the purposes of this Project, the most essential orientation.

My Project wants to deal seriously and gently with the inner life in a playful way, creating an environment and events that intentionally introduce sacred figures into the inner community and invite the participant to play out relationships imaginatively, not necessarily in the group time together, but in private time, during the time between our meetings. My Project will try to create, in a relatively brief period, a paradigm for imaginative inner play as well as offering the group a playful ethos in which to gather in a comfortable experience of self-revelation and listening.

I chose to use art techniques as part of the playful orientation. I looked to art therapy for some guidance. Art therapy uses the creative process of art as a healing tool. Art therapists believe there is an inherent healing power in the process of making art. Art provides an opportunity to express oneself with color, texture, and design, beyond words. Art making is spontaneous and personal, playful and invitational, creative and inventive. Art images are symbolic communication and enhance verbal communication. My Project will engage art therapy techniques to augment the group culture of play, creative expression and personal emotional exploration.

Chapter 3

Method of carrying out this project

Approach and Procedures

The Invitation

The method of carrying out this Project begins with an invitation to eight identified women of the congregation in their 8th and 9th decades. This initial invitation is in the form of a personal letter explaining my request (Appendix 1) to each one, mailed to their homes and in which I ask them to call me with their response. At the time of our phone conversations, I will explain that the project is a small group gathering to meet for five sessions (with an additional sixth session dinner celebration planned at a later date). The participants will have assignments to complete between meetings. I will tell them my expectations: that they attend all sessions (unless an emergency) and faithfully do the homework assignments. I emphasize that confidentiality will be honored and that whatever is shared within the group will remain there. I contemplated making the group open to anyone who would choose to come, however, I decided to limit membership and select a group of women who had at various times participated in other groups I had conducted and, therefore, had demonstrated some interest and facility in sharing their lives, were reasonably comfortable with one another, and were not prone to monopolizing a group so that I would be taxed to keep the group operating on an equitable level. This decision to pre-select the group for the purposes of my Project insured that there would be, very quickly, a level of trust among the women who were already, for the most part, familiar with one another though not necessarily intimately acquainted. Following the group's formation and before our first meeting, I will send a second letter (Appendix 2)

including a questionnaire (Appendix 3) to be filled out before the Project experience. At the end of the project I will provide an additional questionnaire (Appendix 4).

The Schedule & The Environment

I will execute this Project on five Wednesday mornings in October/November with an additional celebratory closure dinner at a later date in early 2010. The sessions will be held in the church Vestry and the final dinner in the parsonage where I live. All Wednesday group meetings are from 10 AM – 12 Noon. The Vestry will be set up with slight variations from time to time, depending on the response activities planned; however, the circle of chairs surrounding the lighted Christ candle will remain the same session to session. Music playing will be consistent for the activity time and as the participants enter the room. For our Circle discussions, there will be no music. The music is taken from a CD featuring music composed by Hildegard of Bingen, 12th century German mystic. The fluorescent lights will be turned off in favor of incandescent lamps and the natural light through the windows. My intention is to create a sacred space in the Vestry where many meetings occur and coffee hour after church each week. The space is familiar, however, I will strive to re-create it in a mode that is different from the norm. I will remove extraneous objects in favor of an uncluttered environment, softened by light and the otherworldly sounds of Hildegard's music.

Letters

In the course of the experience, I will use letters between sessions offering quotes, information, or an additional assignment beyond the homework already assigned. At

times I will affix ‘fun’ stickers to the letters, as one might do to delight a child. Each letter is written to the individual participant by name rather than using a form format (Dear Group).

Homework

I will print a homework sheet for every session. It is not necessary in each case that the homework be shared among the group, though it is advantageous when the participants will feel comfortable doing so. Journals will be given to each participant at the beginning. Daily journaling is asked of them.

Letter prior to Session 1 (Appendix 5)

In the letter sent days before our first gathering, I will invite the women to bring “a photograph, drawing, or portrait of yourself as a young girl: the girl you used to be.” The heading of the letter will include this quote from T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from our explorations

And at the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Group Session 1

Room set up: chairs around small table with candle and room for pictures, meditation sheets on chairs, CD & CD player, work tables set up with chunks of clay (4 pieces of

red, 4 of gray, 4 of green) covered with a cloth so content is invisible to participants.

Candles will be on the worktables to be lighted when participants take their seats there.

Journals and homework sheets will be given to them at the end of session.

The individuals will enter the room to find a circle of 8 chairs surrounding the lighted Christ candle. On each chair will be the opening meditation to be repeated together prior to every session. The music will be playing. I will already be seated, modeling silence as each enters. Should anyone enter talking, I will gently let them know that we begin in silence. We will sit in silence until everyone is present and then for several minutes beyond that.

I will greet them and thank them for being part of the circle. We will begin with this question: "What did you leave behind to come here today?" I will model an answer that is simple and non-threatening: "I left behind a sink full of dishes and 4 loving cats." I will explain that the answer might be that concrete or it might be otherwise: "I left behind my anxiety for what is coming in the next week" or "I left behind a troubled relationship with my daughter who is visiting." I will explain the purpose of my project as partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Ministry degree at Hebrew Union College. I will give a minimal idea of what we will be doing because an element of surprise is important. I will emphasize that each person is asked to delve into herself and may or may not want to share what she finds. I will welcome sharing but no one is pressed to share beyond their comfort level and confidentiality is necessary. I will emphasize that it is preferable that no one discuss the group's experience beyond the group for the duration of our meetings.

My purpose is to preserve the group-ness and intimacy by claiming the circle as sanctuary. What happens in the circle, stays in the circle (until the sessions are over). I will invite clarifying questions.

I will lead the group in an exercise, asking them to close their eyes at this point or to focus softly on the floor. I will lead them through a breathing awareness relaxation meditation for five minutes. (Appendix 6)

I will invite them to read silently to themselves the Opening Prayer Meditation. (Appendix 7) We will include this Meditation at every session, reading it aloud together, silently alone, or by my lining it to them so that they repeat it after me.

After a time of silence, I will invite them to share the pictures of themselves as young girls. They will share whatever they choose to about themselves as they pass the pictures around the circle. Should anyone need encouragement about what to say, these are among the questions I might ask: “Who was her best friend? What was her favorite toy or game? Where did she like to play? What made her afraid? What made her feel safe? What made her feel glad? What made her feel embarrassed?” After they share their picture and tell their stories, they will be invited to place the pictures on the table at the center of the circle around the Christ Candle where they will remain for the duration of the session.

I will invite them to close their eyes and listen. I will tell them part of the story from

Mark 5: 21 – 43, about the little girl who was thought to be dead but was only sleeping.

While their eyes are still closed, I will offer a question for their silent private reflection, no conversation: “Is the little girl within you sleeping?” Silence will follow this question for several moments.

With no discussion, I will invite them to respond to this question by taking a seat at the work table, selecting a color of hard clay (not soft like play dough) and creating a figure or shape that symbolizes that little girl within. I may need to prompt them with other words such as, “What are your feelings about her now? The clay is hard, not easily manipulated, and somewhat messy so that it may leave residue on your hands, but what is harder still is the soul work of delving into one’s inner life. Be patient and allow your hands to warm the clay. No need to rush.”

The music played during arrival and then turned off during our circle will be turned on again as the group will be encouraged to work silently to form their clay pieces. After 20 minutes, I will invite them back into the circle where they will hold their figures, close their eyes, and remember how Jesus spoke to the little sleeping girl, the one that everyone thought was dead, and even so, he invited her: “Little girl, I say to you, get up!” I will pose the question: “Imagine what it would mean to have that little girl you were so many years ago, alive and vital within you, healed and whole and holy right now.”

I will invite them to open their eyes and if they have anything to say or clarifying

questions to ask, this would be the time. I will allow silence in the event that there are no questions or observations.

We will close with intercessory prayer for others in their lives and in the community. I will open the prayer and allow silence for them to pray aloud as well. We will end the prayer with the Lord's Prayer.

Before they depart, I will give them a homework sheet (Appendix 8) and a journal.

Letter prior to Session 2 (Appendix 9)

This letter begins with a quote from Hildegard von Bingen: "*We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a word that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a HOME. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.*" I offer them gratitude for agreeing to be part of the circle and other encouraging words. I invite them to return the following week with their clay figures. I ask them to be in touch with their feelings and, if they are so inclined, to be prepared to share those feelings when we make space for that.

Group Session 2

Room set-up: Vestry is divided into 2 spaces, the entering space is set with a table on which are Tinker Toys with a sign that says: "Enter in silence and build something

together.” Hildegard of Bingen music is playing. Circle/Christ candle area is set up in the second part of the room. Also in this second area are two worktables that are set with activity explanation sheets (Appendix 10), colored markers, multi-colored paper and pencils. Meditation sheets with opening prayer are on circle chairs.

As women enter, they will begin working with Tinker Toys in silence. I will not be present, but in the other part of the room. There will perhaps be some confusion as they enter, some seeing the instruction to build in silence before others are aware. This activity will continue for 15 minutes, at which point I will enter the area and ask them: “What did you build together?”

They will gather in the circle. We will center down with a breathing exercise followed by saying the opening meditation together.

I will allow time for expressions of feelings from the week before and any clarifying questions they may have. Following that, I will invite them to place their clay figures around the Christ candle, one by one, with whatever sharing or explanation about their figure they care to offer. While the figures were created the previous week, this will be their first exposure to the group. I will have given them permission the previous week, to recreate this figure during the week, should they feel inspired to do so. At this time, they will have opportunity to talk about that as well. Did they change it? Why? Where did they keep it? How did they feel when they looked at it? Did they pay attention to it during the week or ignore it? Should anyone choose not to share, that will be acceptable,

however, I would ask about their experience of their object or their feelings about not sharing it in that event.

After this time, when all the figures are at the center in the light of the candle, I will invite them to close their eyes, center down, and listen. I will read a portion of Psalm 139 in Eugene Peterson's translation (The Message) that includes these words: "Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit? To be out of your sight? You'd find me in a minute—you're already there waiting! Then I said to myself, 'Oh, God even sees me in the dark! At night I'm immersed in the light!' It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you; night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you."

I will continue, saying something to this effect, "Placing our trust in this tradition of ours, we can imagine that while this little girl within you may have been lost to you for years, sleeping, and may still feel lost or in the dark or locked away, she is not alone there, but only separated from your knowing. Bringing the parts together is wholeness that is holiness." I will lead them in a guided meditation: "Rest inside, centering on your breath for a moment...In your mind, say to yourself, 'I love this little girl unconditionally.' Picture her. Was she skinny? Or fat? Tidy or messy? Happy or sad? Lonely? Scared? Confident?" I will remain silent for 10 seconds and then repeat: "In your mind, say to yourself, 'I love this little girl unconditionally.'" This will continue for 20 repetitions. I will ask them, while their eyes are still closed, to notice between repetitions what happens in their bodies and their minds. What thoughts spontaneously arise? What body sensations occur? I will ask them to notice without judging. After

they open their eyes, I will invite them to share their experience, paying special attention to their physical sensations. I will encourage them to practice this activity daily during this Project, encouraging them to realize that learning about what blocks them from loving themselves fully may come if they pay attention to this exercise over time. I advised them to use their journals to keep track of these experiences.

After their expressions, I will say, “By sharing stories, we understand our own lives better and grow in compassion for ourselves and others. ‘We live in story as fish live in the sea.’” (D. Crossan) I will invite them to close their eyes and listen to two stories about two very different women, both tenacious, bodacious and strong and both sisters from our sacred story: Hannah: the relentless sister who insisted that God allow the good to be born in her (in the narrative, we see this ‘good’ as baby Samuel whom she devoted to God after he was weaned) and the Canaanite Woman from Matthew 15: 22- 29, a fierce protector and persistent seeker of the ‘good’ for her daughter who needed healing and wholeness.

My purpose in telling these stories is to link these two women to the participants with this idea: “Both these sisters can live in our own hearts and as sacred figures, that’s where they belong...offering us their strength, and their encouragement as we seek the ‘good’ for ourselves and as we search to engage the divine. Remember their stories as pertinent to your own. Listen now with eyes closed. The first story is about our sister Hannah.”

I will tell the story from 1 Samuel 1 in my own words, emphasizing Hannah’s clarity

about her own hopes and her resistance to apparent divine will that denies her the good she seeks. She models tenacious, daring persistence in prayer. From Hannah, we may learn insistence and tenacity to claim the good for ourselves even in the face of divine silence. Hannah models for us an unflinching approach to God and a fearless quest for the good.

The second sister doesn't have a name, though her story is often told in church. She is not of the Hebrew people, but a Canaanite. I will tell Matthew 15:22-29 in my own words, emphasizing the mother as a fierce protector who defied Jesus' attempts and his disciples' attempts to send her away without the good she sought for her daughter. She stood her ground in active protection of her daughter. I hear in this story a narrative that resonates with our own fierce protectors, those within us whose only purpose is to protect our most vulnerable parts. I will encourage the women to identify with her in some way. I will note that some forms of her energy can be very helpful and some forms not so helpful, but again, as a figure who comes to us in sacred text, she can be with us to teach us, guide us, comfort us.

I will say: "Imagine that this fierce mother is within you and the child she is audaciously protecting is yourself. Imagine that Sister Hannah is your mother, and the child she dearly longs to bear is you. Invite them to live in your heart for each bears gifts as a good companion for your inner child. And we know that Hannah, once given her baby Samuel, at his weaning, turned him over to God. So Mother Hannah dearly longs for your new birth so that your life, too, is completely devoted to the Divine. Invite Hannah

and the fierce loving mother into your heart to commune with you. See what each has to say to you. Offer these figures the hospitality of your heart, if either speaks especially to you in your need.”

After the story telling, I will invite the women to open their eyes and I will explain IFS in a simple way, introducing the concept of one’s person as a multiplicity of parts within. I explain that these figures can cause us lots of trouble because the protectors are often fighters, reactors, and managers---but we can learn to love them when we recall that everything they do is to protect the ones within us who they believe cannot survive without being hidden, safely locked away and defended. What these trouble making fierce protectors need most from us is our assurance that all is well and there is nothing to fear.

At this point, I will be self-revealing about my own personal exploration of the inner personalities. I will describe my Diva and Child, two figures that I have identified and visualized over time. The Diva, her name gives evidence to her character, empowers me to stand up and speak in front of a crowd, for instance, and the Child informs what I say. An ongoing transformation of these two sees my Diva as an ancient woman with too much make-up sitting at a kitchen table sobbing, mascara running down her face, and the child standing beside her chair comforting her by rubbing her arm. This image came to me this summer and caused me to gasp. By sharing my own inner life, I will hope to give permission for the participants to do the same more freely than they might.

I will emphasize that the work of paying attention is the beginning. I will introduce the idea of the SELF (calm, clear, centered, courageous, creative, compassionate, curious, competent) and suggest the idea that SELF is the divine eternal part of us, what we in the church may call, with religious language, the Christ within us. I will invite them to ask clarifying questions and to express whatever they would like to about their experience thus far.

After discussion, they will go to the worktables with their exercise sheet (Appendix 10) to write a Cinquain poem, the first line of which will be an image, figure, or feeling to explore more fully through the poem. I will encourage them to know that this exercise is about exploring their own experience and, as I quoted Hildegard von Bingen in a letter to them: “We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a HOME. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.” I will tell them that this is one excellent definition of what we are trying to do here and I will entreat them to have fun! Music will play as they work silently for 20 or 30 minutes.

They will return to the circle to share their verses if they are willing to do so. I will allow time for further questions or expressions about their experience. We will close with intercessory prayers for the church and others for whom they care to pray. I will pass out their Homework Assignment Sheet (Appendix 11)

Group Session 3

Set up: CD player and CD's, magazines, colored paper, glue, tape, markers, scissors, etc., paper for masks, Christ candle. One long worktable set up, homework sheets.

We will begin with a Centering on the Breath exercise that focuses on self-acceptance in the present, paying attention, non-judgmental being with oneself. For three minutes I will ask them to pay attention to what thoughts, feelings, sensations pop into their consciousness as they sit in silence, eyes closed. After this time, I will ask for their responses, noting that it is tempting to try to generate thoughts and feelings but the goal is letting go and allowing thoughts and feelings to emerge into consciousness as if bubbling up from a deeper place. I will ask: "How did you experience this?" I will emphasize that the important thing is to accept whatever emerges, because at that moment, whatever comes to mind is the real "you." Learning to receive each moment with acceptance--no criticism, blame, guilt, or judgment is transformative and it is the desired practice here. I will invite them to close their eyes again and repeat the "I love myself unconditionally" exercise for several minutes. When they open their eyes, I will invite them to go around the circle and name something(s) they love about themselves. We will discuss the difference between loving the self and loving the attributes of the self.

I will line the opening meditation to them that is a new experience of the words, causing them to listen more intently and to say them in more intentional phrases that promotes a deeper hearing.

I will invite discussion about their experiences with the homework that asked them to name some of their various parts. If anyone were willing to read her scene, this would be the time for that to occur. I will ask if, in their learning, they discerned any “dark feminine” figures within. I will introduce the story of Lilith, traditionally Adam’s first wife, including numerous color images of her downloaded from online that I will pass around. I will share some of the traditions about Lilith, including the notion that she possessed women by entering them through mirrors when the women looked at themselves. I will also pass around pictures of owls because owls have been associated with the dark feminine through time. After a brief exploration of this story and all of the images, the women will go to the worktable where their task will be to create masks that give expression to their own inner Lilith. I will emphasize that this is playful, not to express ‘the truth’ as they know it, but more to explore what their truth *may* be. This is play and thus the process of play is the journey’s exploration with fun. Music will be in the background as they work in silence. Collage is the venue for creating the masks. They will work for 20 – 30 minutes.

They will be invited to reconvene the circle with their masks and, if they choose to, to share their masks with whatever commentary they are happy to offer.

I will allow time for them to express their experience of today so far. We will end the circle with intercessory prayer. I will give out their homework sheets. (Appendix 12)

Group Session 4

Set-up: CD & player, activity sheets, homework sheets, large roll of paper for map making, scissors, markers, crayons, tape.

We will open the session with a guided meditation: they are to imagine they are on a road, walking for a long time. Some silence is allowed for them to discover their road. Sometimes they stop to rest. Where are they? What does the road look like? Are they walking with companions or alone? Who is there? What is the weather? Is it raining or snowing? What does the air smell like? Flowers? Freshly mown grass? Salt water and the sea? What time is it? Are they hungry on their journey? Are they tired? What are they looking forward to as they walk? The guided meditation will prompt their visceral experience of their road and themselves on it. Following the meditation, they will sit in silence for 5 minutes. I will invite them to share how they experienced the guided meditation. Where were they? What did their path look like? Was it a familiar path or new? We will spend as much time as necessary on this exploration.

I will line to them the opening prayer meditation.

I will invite them to share which of the several quotes from their homework had resonated with them and why. We will spend 20 – 30 minutes in conversation about this. I will provide the Activity Sheet (Appendix 13) and invite them to gather at the worktable to do this activity that is to create a map of their life. The music will be in background as they work for 30 minutes.

They will reconvene the circle with their maps and I will allow time for them to share and discuss the experience as well as the content of their maps. We will close with intercessory prayer. I will give them homework sheets. (Appendix 14)

Prior to the final session in the Vestry I will send a letter that asks them to “bring an object that, for whatever reason, represents something essential about” them or for them. The letter will also include thoughts on play and playfulness. (Appendix 15)

Group Session 5

Set-up: Chairs in circle with Christ candle, a Bible at each chair, end-of-project questionnaire and self-addressed stamped envelopes to return the questionnaires to me, CD & music.

We begin with this question as we began the first session: “What did you leave to come here today?” They will respond with either simple concrete answers or more in depth answers. We note this is our last session prior to the celebratory meal that will be an evening at the parsonage in several months.

We will begin with a moment of silence, eyes closed after which I will line to them the opening prayer meditation. I will invite them to share how they experienced writing the letters of gratitude to themselves and also what those letters said. I will invite them to express anything they care to at this point, in light of the end of the Wednesday morning sessions.

I will tell the story from Genesis 12 that describes how Abram and Sari are invited to leave their clan, land, kin and country behind and to embark on a journey into unknown territory by God's invitation. I will invite reflection on this story as a trigger to consider God's invitation as personal and to each one of us. What would such a journey mean to the participants or what has it meant if they consider their lives this journey? I will use this story as a link to exploration of these questions: "What is your experience of leaving, leave taking, letting go, moving on, uncertainty about the future? What has it been like to leave behind things, persons, circumstances? What is your experience of letting go? Can you relate to the idea of letting go in order to receive a blessing? What is the ultimate 'letting go' we are asked by God to do? Can you trust God to provide in the uncertainty of the future?" We will develop the ideas of this biblical narrative into conversation about what it means to have the faith to risk and to grow. What might that look like in specific circumstances of their lives? Time will be allowed for this conversation to develop.

For this last session we will remain in the circle the entire time. Our activity will be to create an extemporaneous worship experience, improvised in the moment. First, I will invite them to silently reflect on all we have done together as a group and what has been touched in their own lives through this experience. I will ask them "what does 'letting go' mean in the context of this moment?" I will ask them to consider the symbolic object they brought and to think about what it would mean to relinquish it (and what it symbolizes) to God.

I will prompt them to consider what a worship service includes. They will, eventually say such things as: prayers, hymns, call to worship, readings from the Bible, passing the peace, benediction, offering, sermon, and so on. I will suggest to them that the symbolic objects they brought from home will be both the sermon and the offering for this service. As they have named components of worship, I will assign them to take those parts of this spontaneous playful worship we are going to create together. With no additional time to prepare, they will spontaneously experience the worship as they offer up the various components, with their objects creating the center that will be both proclamation and offering. At their time of sharing, each will provide what they brought with whatever commentary they choose and then place it at the center around the Christ candle. This is what I call “playful worship.”

We will end the worship experience in silence before picking up the housekeeping details that will complete our time together as the Project, handing out the end questionnaires and setting a time for our gathering Communion Meal at the parsonage months later.

We will close with intercessory prayers and blessings. I will ask each person to offer up a blessing, affirmation, or words of appreciation for the person to her right. We will proceed around the circle. This will end our Wednesday morning sessions.

Group Closure Celebratory Meal

This will occur months beyond the time we finish the sessions. It will be a feast at the

parsonage, including Communion, and it will offer an opportunity to see what perspective time has put on this whole experience and whether or not any of the disciplines such as journaling or doing the guided meditations have been included in the personal life of the participants.

Methods used to assess outcomes

I devised two questionnaires, one to be completed prior to our meetings and one to be completed after the 5th morning session. I will use this and anecdotal material, primarily, for assessing the outcomes of these session. Anecdotal evidence will include the promptness and enthusiasm with which the sessions are attended, attitudes toward doing the homework, willingness or reluctance to share both the results of the planned activities and personal stories. A very important factor for assessment will be my observation about how the group bonds and if relationships are deepened in intimacy and friendship. At the final celebratory meal, I will listen to the women reflect on the experience after some weeks have passed.

Chapter 4

Results

Description of Outcomes

All eight invited women agreed to be part of the Project. Their responses to the invitation were marked from the beginning by grateful enthusiasm as each person seemed pleased to be included in this small group. Each was curious about what the weeks would hold. The women were aged 70, 72, 76, 77, 83, 84, 85 and 89, all vital and active. Two were a lesbian couple, each divorced years before from men with whom they had children so that they were also grandmothers. One was an ex-nun who is a single lesbian. One was a never-married heterosexual woman. One has a seriously ailing husband (60 plus years of marriage) and is matriarch of a huge wealthy family, well known on Long Island for their name. Two were widows with children and grandchildren. One, the oldest among the group, was a widow who had lost her only child to AIDS and has no remaining close family. Seven of them have family connections that are active and ongoing.

The woman whose husband was ill dropped out of the project after one session, with apologies, though it was clear from the beginning that, by her own admission during the beginning exercises, she had “never been self-reflective and found this experience uncomfortable” and challenging. She is a well-known and well-liked person in the community who has been described to me as someone who “keeps her head in the sand” and is a “Pollyanna who cannot deal with sadness.” In a phone call to me on the day of the 2nd session, she said she was “the most depressed” she “had ever been in [her] life” and her therapist “suggested” that it might be better for her not to go through with my

Project at this time because of the self-reflection involved and that she believed would plunge her deeper into depression at this vulnerable time while her husband was ill. So, we began with eight and ended up with seven. Only two had to miss a session each due to travel plans made well in advance of this Project. Everyone was prompt and took the covenant to meet as a sacred task.

Once the Project started, the sessions flowed one to another with a gentle rhythm and variety that seemed pleasing to the participants and hopeful to me. The combination of surprise, challenge, stress and comfort created an environment that encouraged them to push against their usual boundaries just enough to suggest growth. The deepening bonds of this group were apparent as I observed them listen to one another attentively and with care. By making space for them to share their personal thoughts/stories among caring, sympathetic, encouraging friends, they grew bolder to be more authentic as the session progressed, sometimes sharing information that presented themselves in less than perfect light. This experience was palpable at times, for instance, as I was careful to end the sessions at the designated ending time, noon, often the women would continue to sit in the circle, clearly choosing to remain in one another's company. Even as I clearly ended the session and allowed silence to reign, they continued to sit in the circle, unwilling to break "the spell" (as one of them described it). They articulated their sense of newfound freedom of expression, deepened relationship among themselves, and heightened sense of 'the holy' in their midst on more than one occasion. Each participant, in an assessment document or in the group, said some version of this statement, "I have thought about my life more during these assignments than I ever have before." Each person offered

gratitude for this experience as well as acknowledging that the self-examination had been “painful” or “stressful” at times. There is a sense, among some of the participants, that while we did not specifically discuss the end of life, their personal awareness and comfort level with thoughts of their own death were enhanced by the work we did as a group. One wrote in the end evaluation, “In reviewing myself through life—watching myself aging, literally, as we worked through memories together and as I wrote in my journal on my own—it’s [the thought of dying] beginning to feel okay.” Another noted, “This journey of self-evaluation has been helpful. Hearing about your ‘Diva’ gave me strength to visit and acknowledge that part of myself that I don’t like and that gave me some peace about my life, and the episodes that have troubled me.”

Over all, the Project was deeply gratifying to me because I observed the women’s pleasure in gathering, their productive discomfort at moving beyond their own safety boundaries, and I experienced the fun of it all, the laughter and the tears that drew the group together in a powerful and meaningful way. To quote at length from one woman’s evaluation: “What have I learned? I think I’ve gotten more acquainted with myself, accepting who I am without critiquing what I look like, what I can do/not do and realizing my past has left an indelible mark—like a sculpture being created by a master—the master being my Creator. I enjoyed the circle, prayers, art projects, and the sharing that each woman offered to us, the acceptance with love, whatever anyone offered to share. Yes, I was both surprised and delighted especially the tinker toy activity with no spoken words. The map was troublesome for me, but I persevered. Lilith was a problem for me and I got in a funk. I’m still trying to figure that out—am close though—thinking

along the lines of “competitive” which I know was not necessary. However, it cropped up in my mind. If there were a Part 2 to this [Project], I would jump at the chance. Thank you, Pastor Jane Ann.” From the end reviews, I note that everything we did had some impact on someone. Nothing we did seemed to draw a neutral response.

Session One

The women were eager to begin. They brought attentive curiosity to the first session. During the sharing of personal photographs of “the girl you used to be,” they appeared to be in various stages of anxiety, some more than others. Some held their pictures close in a clinched hand or concealed in envelopes until the last moment when they revealed them. Some needed encouragement to pass them around the circle, hanging on to them as they spoke. Each did, if with some prompting, share stories of younger years that most often included a clear expression of sadness, pain, and loss. Some, but not all, spoke of happy times. One “didn’t know where that child is” and “doesn’t know herself.” She “looks at the photo and says ‘she was happy.’” This person later told me that she spent all night one night sorting through boxes of family pictures that her therapist had encouraged her to go through 20 years ago and that she had not been able to until this time. This Project was the impetus for her to do this after all these years. She did become physically ill with a bad cold during this process and she grew slightly depressed, yet she came out of both with a sense of having completed something important for herself. She ended up sorting through those boxes and sending off many batches of family photographs to extended members of her family, choosing to keep what was

pertinent to her own life and discarding the rest. She said that she considered this a “major positive development” in her life.

One participant, the daughter of alcoholic parents whose mother had committed suicide when the participant was twelve years old, presented a photograph of herself, a beautiful patrician looking child and recounted how the photographer came to the house to take the picture. At the end of her stories about that day, she remarked, “I think this child has many secrets, but she is smart, able to play the piano and learn many things, and I hope to learn her secrets some day.” This participant was part of the lesbian couple in the group. Her partner and she, even though they were at different tables during the exercise in which they created clay figures to represent how they experienced “the girl they used to be” both created the same image. They each made shells, one red and one green, to evoke these inner feelings. At the end of the session, they were delighted to find that they were simpatico in this way and spoke of how this confirmed what was true about them, “that they were made for one another even though it took years to find each other.”

One of the most quiet, demure octogenarians in the entire church expressed how she always “brooded over my faults” as a child and as an adult. She “tried hard to be nice” as a child and as an adult, and had grown up feeling that “the world was a safe place but boy was I wrong.” This participant is the sole remaining member of her family, having no living relatives, and having buried her 28-year-old son who died of AIDS over two decade ago. She often revisited the theme of “being nice” in all the sessions. She expressed “guilt” for thinking, talking and writing about herself through this whole

process and yet she was the most prolific of journal writers, in fact, and one of the most poignant writers. Sometimes she was willing to share her writing. At one point she noted that “because [she] valued being nice above all things, [she] did exactly what she was told.” This was in response to doing the exercise that asked them to write a poem. She wrote only one, while most others wrote several. She took literally the instruction to write “a poem” and, as she noted, did exactly what she was told. (She wished she had written more than one, but she “did what she was told.”)

The woman who ended up leaving the group after one session at her therapist’s suggestion, appeared uncomfortable and ill prepared to share about herself personally. I noticed that during the time of sharing pictures, rather than bringing an individual photo of herself, she brought a group shot of two dozen family members posed on the front porch at their affluent summer home. Her image was very tiny on the back row as everyone stood on a magnificent front porch, all dressed in tennis whites and beautiful summer dresses. She was able to point herself out, but she was not able to talk about herself individually and seemed uncomfortable to recall anything about herself except in platitudes such as, “we were very happy as children, my siblings and I” and “we had lovely summers.” Later she would admit that personal reflection was something she had never done in her life and she found it very difficult. I think she preferred to remain in denial than risk discovering unhappiness, anxiety, fear, and regret. In addition, her husband was ill (he has since died) and even her happy memories must have felt intolerable in light of the loss she was about to experience.

At this first session, as I listened, I longed to share my own “girl I used to be” but felt the need to maintain a boundary at this point. I felt compassion for these women, many of whom grew teary in the process of sharing themselves and listening to the others. They listened well to one another, with obvious sensitivity and desire to be present. I was intentional about allowing for silence, not jumping in too quickly with any sort of commentary or encouragement, but allowing the silence to create its own invitational presence. Without fail, the silence resulted in rich moments of gentle shared sympathy or soft words of encouragement or recognition. I continue to learn, as a group facilitator, the value of silence. It is well worth cultivating a willingness to sit in silence and to curtail the impulse to speak too quickly or too often.

Second Session

When the individuals entered the room for the second session, the room was divided into two parts. They were met with a table set up with Tinker Toys and a sign that instructed them to remain silent as they built something together. I remained on the other side of the room divider, observing them through the entranceway, with music playing. What was most noteworthy were the giggles and laughter that began quietly and erupted into uproarious good humor by the time I invited them to finish by asking, “What did you build?” I found myself, while watching and listening, becoming very emotional. I was struck by their vulnerability as “adult children” who are invited to play in an unexpected way. Their response was pure delight, preceded by a bit of confusion about what was expected of them. They built a structure of whimsical detail and entered into the circle for centering with a light-hearted quality that grew directly out of the unexpected play.

What they built was a whimsical structure that, I noted, everyone had contributed to. It is interesting to observe how shared leadership can result when no one is in charge. While someone or two will often automatically step into a leadership roll, the role can become fluid with a give and take that brings one and then another person into the character of leader for the moment. This was the case with this exercise. Had I thought, I might have asked them “Who was in charge?” and allowed that question to lead to discussion about leadership and how they have led or followed in their own lives.

After the centering exercise followed by the prayer/meditation, I invited them to share their clay figures from the previous week. Each had returned with the clay object carefully wrapped in cloth or paper. Each woman chose to share her creation. Besides the two shells already mentioned, a butterfly (“that begins homely but emerges into beautiful flight”), a kite (“that flies high but is tethered to the earth”), boots (“because boots make it possible to walk long distances, to kick things out of the way, and to dance”), a tulip (“because the bulb holds the promise of something beautiful and fleeting”) and a mask (“that shows the world only some things and keeps personal the rest”). What emerged from each exposition of object was poignant metaphor that in every case revealed a sense of personal strength and hopefulness yet disclosed vulnerability as well. After the guided meditation that invoked the darkness within that is “not dark to God,” the reflections of some in the group revealed how out of touch they felt with themselves and, especially, the girl they used to be.

Some had real difficulty writing the letter to their little girl (or vice versa). Several found

this to be extremely moving and helpful to them. A couple noted how out of touch they felt from this girl. Everyone remarked that they wished to be back in touch, though some were fearful of what they might discover. One person's imagination linked her own inner child to a figure from the Jesus narrative. She said that she had a "waking dream" about her inner girl, carrying forward the story told last week of the "dead" girl that Jesus said was not dead but sleeping. This woman said that she imagined that little girl awakened by Jesus was the girl who questioned Peter in the garden, prompting Peter to deny Jesus (Mark 14:66-72) three times. This particular woman is the daughter of a Baptist pastor who grew up in parsonages in New England and remains very religious. She was excited as she described this "waking dream," and said that she "needed to think about what it meant" to her.

My brief explanation of Internal Family Systems theory provided opportunity to introduce the concept of the multi-self. The participants were intrigued by this theory and recognized it as something they could relate to. One interjected, "I'm often torn between parts of myself, but I had never really thought of it before." Another one said, "Mostly I'm just me, but now that you mention this, sometimes I have thoughts that surprise me. This is normal?" After animated conversation about this theory and their personal experience of multi-selves, I invited them to recede back into a quiet place within themselves and listen to the stories I told.

The recounting of the stories of Hannah and the Syro-Phoenician woman was followed by my invitation to them to let these sisters be among their inner world. I asked this

question. “What would it mean to include these women among your inner community?” This question generated a conversation about what it means to listen to the voices within and it raised the question among them, “Is it possible to choose our inner world to some extent, the inner voices, so that our lives are more at peace and less torn by hyper-critical, judging inner companions?” Each related to this latter characteristic among their inner voices, each in touch with the nagging inner critic. Some recounted a mother or an older sister who figured prominently in the inner chorus and whose voice resonated through the decades. From this conversation they went directly into the Cinquain writing exercise that they eagerly engaged with quiet determination. Observing them as they worked for 30 minutes, I was aware that of all the times I have seen these women in church, at meetings and events where they participate, I had never seen them so fully engaged without self-consciousness. This perception of them grew throughout the Project’s duration. Just as young children in the sandbox work without self-consciousness to create castles and moats, these women engaged this and every activity with an intensity that I had never observed in them previously. I felt good about the Project and what it was offering them.

At closing circle, each was willing and eager to share her poem(s) that sounded the consistent theme of childhood’s freedom juxtaposed with childhood fears. From this we reflected on fear and freedom. Continuing the description of IFS theory, I introduced the concept of the capital S Self who is at the center of our various parts and who has attributes that Schwartz describes as calm, clear, curious, courageous, connected, compassionate, confident and creative. I prompted this idea as resonant with the

Christian notion of Christ living in one's heart and to the idea of the Sacred Center as our unifying principle that creates us all as ONE, a mystical concept that many spiritual traditions espouse. We discussed this idea.

We closed at a point of reflecting on SELF-trust, and whether or not trust has been part of these participants' experience of themselves throughout their lives and also currently.

From their self-revelations at this point, with the exception of one participant who expressed a sense of trust in herself now after years of struggling, the others spoke with more hesitation about a Self they could trust.

As always, we ended this session with prayer for one another and for those not present.

As I have noted, intercessory prayer was included at the end of each session.

Session 3

The guided meditation ("I love myself unconditionally") brought some surprising responses. When asked what feelings were evoked, one noted, "My shoulders dropped and I relaxed." Another said, "I felt vulnerable." Most had a positive experience. One said, "I felt guilty." When invited to explain, she said that she had been "raised with the idea that one shouldn't focus on oneself but on others." She did not feel comfortable offering unconditional love to herself. It seemed "wrong." This theme was consistent in everything she did. She ended up being one of the more prolific and beautifully evocative writers, for instance, however, she shared her work with exclamations of "I feel guilty" and "This really isn't important" and so on. I urged them to continue this

exercise at home, to pay attention to what they felt and to cultivate the experience further by writing about it in their journals.

In response to my query about their experience of the week's homework, naming some of their parts and journaling a dialogue, each participant had a strong experience, either positive or negative. One said she had been "afraid of going deep, afraid of what she might find." Another remarked that she "had a ball" listing numerous parts of herself easily. One said that she had "thought I had only two and I was surprised to find so many of me!" One said this introspection caused her to consider her mortality. Some had fun. Some found it more challenging than fun. Everyone did the work and reported something about it. They seemed to appreciate the concept of IFS and, as one noted, found it "fun to play with it as a helpful tool for figuring myself out." No one chose to share the scene they had written in their journals though each had finished this exercise.

When I passed out numerous color images (downloaded from online) of the mythic Lilith character, I introduced some of the narrative detail of legends surrounding her.

Conversation about the "Lilith within" generated considerable resistance from one person in particular, the 88 year old participant who had identified "being nice" as her primary MO in life from childhood on (the one who felt "guilty" for the self-love exercise).

Using a good deal of humor, I shared with them the story of my own "inner Lilith" who I call the Diva. I described her in detail as one who is ambitious, relentless, sometimes unkind, piercingly direct except when she needs to be wily, opinionated, egocentric, high-maintenance, overly -dramatic, intractable, audacious, bodacious and clever. I described

to them ways I had come to know her and why I had grown to appreciate her input into my life. While I would not choose to identify with her exclusively, her energy had been invaluable to me and, had I known her sooner, she would have inspired success in certain instances when my own shyness kept me from being bold. I related to them how, recently, an image had come to me of this difficult, daring, capable woman, very old and overly made up with huge hair, not in command as she was typically to be, but seated in a chair, slumped over a kitchen dinette set table sobbing, her make-up running down her face, her hair disheveled. As her shoulders tremble with anguish, a little child, a gawky adolescent girl actually, stands at her side, patting her shoulder comfortingly. I told the women how this image had come to me at about the time of my mother's death and how I pondered it. Not feeling it essential to explain it, I simply observe it and identify it as some kind of growth.

With this self-revelation, I hoped to encourage the women to be bold in their own exploration. This seemed to give permission for everyone to relax into the idea of the inner Lilith for herself or the dark feminine as I also expressed it. I provided, along with the images of Lilith, images of owls because the owl is also considered to be a representation of the dark feminine or the witch. These images generated conversation. At the point when we moved beyond seriousness into playful imagining, I invited the women to retire to the worktable that was set up with materials to make collages including colorful paper, different textured materials, ribbons, stickers, various types and all colors of crayons and markers, magazines to cut up, and all sizes of paper from which to choose. Their task was to create a mask of their personal Lilith using collage.

Again, as they gathered at the worktable, I noticed that their concentration was intense and the participants' enjoyment was palpable though in this case they seem to struggle more than usual with determining their choices of expression. I saw that each person made unique choices about size and style of mask, without paying attention to what the others were doing. Reconvening the circle after 25 minutes, each person, with the exception of one (the woman who wanted to always be "nice") shared her mask. Each mask was unique and revealing. Each person shared with enjoyment, not hesitation, but newfound freedom that was revealed by their willingness to play with these faces they created. One woman's mask contained only images of natural growth, beautifully arranged. It included greenery, fall foliage, winter stark bare scenes. She remarked that nature is "harsh but beautiful" and that her inner Lilith is "brutal but natural like the seasons and not to be feared anymore than summer foliage should fear winter." Another made a beautifully artistic depiction of a simple face using primary colors and simple geometric shapes, the mask depicting something attractive but cold and impersonal. Each mask was unique and the women enjoyed marveling at one another's creations in light of the material we had just covered. This session included serious contemplation of each woman's dark feminine, the Lilith, that brought a sense of discomfort. Because we played with the ideas, the material was accessible in a manageable way. The point was understood that we include parts of ourselves that are difficult, unappealing, even mean, but that isn't all of ourselves. That was a comforting thought to the women.

Session Four

The extended centering guided meditation led the group to “find a road and to walk its path, noticing what surrounded” them. When asked about their experience of this, each person was specific about the road they had traveled and was eager to share where they had been. Some roads were roads well traveled in childhood or a beloved vacation spot from years prior. Some found a new fiction, a road that imaginatively developed as they walked it in this meditation. Each was content to be on the path they had discovered or remembered, and each found comfort and joy in this exercise to a surprising extent. The ones who had traveled remembered paths, told anecdotes of their history there.

Lining the opening meditation gave a more prayerful substantive quality to the words than reading from text did. With each week’s repetition of these words came a deepening resonance of certain themes: “awareness,” “gratitude,” “grief,” “fear,” “faith,” and primarily “sacred pilgrimage.” The women loved this opening meditation.

We had the evocative quotes I had assigned them in homework before us to begin our discussion. Interestingly, every single quote had been considered by one or another of these women to be the one that struck a particular chord for her. Therefore, we discussed every quote, in turn, the woman who favored it beginning the discussion as she expressed why it resonated with her. Everyone, with the exception of one, shared some of their journal writing. That one said that she struggled with self-acceptance and could not share these thoughts except to say that she had written in her journal all week in light of this idea and her history. (Her favorite quote: “Change is possible, but it must start with self-

acceptance.....”)

The worktable was prepared for that week’s task, to create a “map” of their lives, sketching out the terrain in any manner they selected. I provided a roll of paper that allowed them to take as long a sheet as they chose to, cutting it from the roll. I limited their art supplies to colored markers, pencils and crayons. I gave them a list of questions to think about, relevant only if any question triggered their ideas for this task. The directions were clear, both spoken and printed on their worksheets, yet they remained stationary in their seats in the circle. Unlike every other session, no one made an effort to get up and move to the work area. We sat in silence for a few moments before I asked them, “Why the resistance?” Everyone looked at one another without speaking. Still, no one moved. After a moment of silence, everyone burst into spontaneous laughter. I encouraged them to do whatever it occurred to them to do in this exercise. As I often noted, this was a way to explore.

When they began to work, again the unself-conscious playful attitudes emerged, though their faces wore more serious countenances than I had noted previously. One woman chose to take her materials and sit on a nearby sofa and work alone at the coffee table. They worked for more than 30 minutes. They could have continued, but our time was running out. When I gave them a 2-minute notice, they continued to work right up until the last moment. At the end, I had to give them a warning to stop. Each brought her large map to the circle (and they were very large--each had cut a long piece of paper from the roll though some had filled in more of it than others had). None of them used the

whole paper they had cut. Every map had a lot of white space around the drawing. Some had tentative lines, intersections, and forks in the road. Others were bold in their colors and markings.

The variety of their maps was noteworthy. One person literally mapped her life geographically on Long Island, avoiding any emotional symbolism. She showed where she was born, had grown up, went to school, worked, and so on. One created a spiral of sorts, or a circle, that began at the center and ended in the same point, noting joyous events and painful ones along the way, but the prominent image was one of wholeness. It was shell-like. Another's map was notable for its valleys and mountains, each marked by relationships, turning points, gains and losses, and continuing beyond the present as though going toward the highest mountain of all. One created a simple line across the page that was marked like a ruler by events that were different colors, depending on their happiness or sadness. One included her inner companions, noting some events that evoked strong inner energies to emerge. As she noted, this was "a present recognition of what had been true in the past." Another created an image that was not so much a map as a picture of her life, the houses, the family members, and the sun shining on it all.

Several noted that this exercise was the "most difficult" of the sessions' activities. They didn't know how to approach the idea of expressing a linear representation of their lives (this is what "map" meant to them). It evoked deep thoughtfulness on their parts as they struggled to articulate for themselves and one another what were the "high points" and the "low points" that were "worthy" of description at this point in their lives. They

wondered aloud what had mattered the most and spoke of those “insignificant” choices that had changed everything, sometimes for the good and sometimes not. There was a note of sadness in them as they considered these so-called “insignificant” choices. They agreed that relationships, their beginnings and endings, were among the most essential “measurements” for their lives.

Session Five

The final Wednesday morning gathering began as usual, with the centering meditation and the opening prayer lined in a heartfelt, slow, meditative manner. Unpacking their week, I asked how they had experienced writing a letter of gratitude to themselves. One had overlooked this assignment entirely. She had “forgotten” or, actually, she claimed that she hadn’t known about it. Another had viewed it as similar to the original letter to the young inner girl and had omitted doing it. One (the woman who tried to be “nice” and felt guilty to self-reflect at all) found it a very vexing exercise, but because she strove to be “nice” and always to do what she was asked, she persevered to do it. When encouraged, she read her letter and it did, indeed, say positive things to her about her, however, it did end on a note of self-criticism that made everyone smile because we saw how difficult it was for her to pay attention to herself and especially to do so with a benevolent attitude toward herself. Others found this exercise “freeing” and “comforting” and “lovely but challenging.”

I told them the story from Genesis 12, about Abram and Sari leaving everything behind to move into unknown territory because God invited them to do so. The trigger questions I

asked: “What is your experience of leaving, leave taking, letting go, moving on, uncertainty about the future?” generated immediate visceral responses that included anecdotes of their various experiences and also feeling words: “gut-wrenching,” “terrifying,” “exhilarating,” “dreaded,” and “hopeful.” Most participants in the group found letting go to be among the most painful experiences of their lives. Anecdotes mentioned as particularly unhappy included letting go of parents in death. The one whose mother committed suicide when she was 12 grew withdrawn during this part of the discussion. Two who had nursed extremely elderly fathers until their deaths spoke at length about what it felt like to be older persons themselves and yet to nurse an even older parent in lingering illness. They spoke of the release of that final letting go, the initial relief and flood of feelings and the lingering sense of sadness of it. While at least two indicated that they focused on whatever “new thing was coming up” as something “to look forward to” and “a way to grow,” most felt that letting go of the familiar was the “shadow of dying a little bit.” Leave-taking was something that most of these women had not done in the sense that most of them were life-long residents of the area. When we talked of leave-taking, the conversation veered to what it felt like to be left behind. One, the widow whose only son had died as a young man and who had no family to speak of, spoke poignantly of being left behind. She found herself wondering, over the years, “Why? Why was I left and they were taken?” Likewise, this conversation touched upon what they would be leaving behind at the time of dying. Finally, we reflected on the biblical story that suggested that God’s invitation to leave everything was coupled with the promise of something more. We reflected on what that story might mean when we take it to heart for ourselves. This led the way to continue with the

session's planned exercise.

Each had brought an object from home that represented a symbol for themselves. One said that she spent a sleepless night trying to figure out what such a symbol might be for her. As she wrote later, "The most painful part was the last assignment to find a symbol that described who I am. It took me a week of pondering the question and it finally came to me as I was awakening on the day I had to report my answer. I have thought about my life more during these assignments than I ever have before."

Before they revealed their objects, I reminded them that the objects were to embody something essential about them, about who they are, what attributes they have, or where they have been. I suggested to them that the objects were symbolic of everything they have to hold, perhaps their history or perhaps a talent that they value, but something that, eventually, they will have to leave behind, to let go. In my letter to them, I had encouraged them to consider what it means to be playful. While we had actually *been* playful for these 5 weeks, now I was asking them to consider what being playful is. Our next and last task as a group was to create what I call "playful worship." I asked them, "What do we need for a worship service?" As each one noted something, I invited that person to provide it. Surrounding the Christ candle as usual, this was spontaneous, almost instantaneous, playful, and therefore deeply connected. Their objects would take the place of a homily and also the offering. One offered a Psalm as the Call to Worship, another lined to us a hymn that we sang in praise of God, another introduced the passing of the peace that got us up on our feet hugging one another with words of welcome,

another two read from the Bible (from Ecclesiastes --"For everything there is a season..." and from Proverbs -- "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring...."). Someone prayed and someone offered a benediction. After the reading and before the prayer came their sharing that was both sermon and offering. Each one, sometimes with trembling hands, brought out her symbol from a bag or tissue paper and they offered commentary before placing it at the center around the Christ candle. One brought a miniature chair (this was the person who had a sleepless night about what to bring) because the chair represented her most cherished way of life: to be centered in her home/work/life and to have a sense "of where to be and where she belonged." One (the "nice" one whose family had died before her) brought an image of her home because there she "had loved and been loved." Another brought needlepoint work that signified her love of crafts and making homey articles for those she loves. Someone brought a spade because she loves to garden, to grow things, and the spade "represents the potential of the earth that is planted and where things grow like I want my life to be fertile and green." Another presented clown glasses with a nose and mustache attached because she and her sisters get together once a year and they all wear these as they emerge from airplanes and greet one another. The glasses represented "joy" in relationship to others. Another brought a sign from her former workplace that indicated the value she had placed on being a practical nurse and caring for the concrete needs of many people. Another brought goofy fun gifts given to her by her daughters because they represent fun and family. Prominent themes emerged from these symbols: home, work, love, joy, relationships, and sharing. After the sharing of symbols, the "playful worship" finished with prayers and benediction and then silence as the women wept. We sat in silence for a

full 3 minutes and there was no discomfort.

In response to my question, “How did you experience this exercise?” the immediate reaction was, “It was wonderful!” “Beautiful.” “Powerful.” and “Wow!” Again, the freedom of play released the women to have an experience of joy and celebration. It was simply fun, too. And the fun, joy, and celebration held important information about this circle of women. Picking up on their mood, I led them to go around the circle and each person speaking an affirmation to the person on her right. This exercise was deeply moving to me, as I noted the tentativeness and shyness with which each woman turned to listen to her neighbor describe something good about her. Those who spoke, spoke boldly and confidently. When listening, they listened shyly and vulnerably. In the listening came the softening of each face as she heard loving, appreciative words spoken to her about her.

At some point in our conversations, I had asked the women to consider one thing they had wished to do that fear had kept them from doing. At this point, I asked again and each woman shared her desire. Interestingly, the woman who loved to sing “because it is when I feel closest to God,” and yet would never sing a solo, preferring “to stand naked before a congregation than to sing alone in front of anyone,” happened to have been the one who suggested that our worship needed a hymn. Therefore, I asked her to lead us in singing. I had observed her timid agreement when I asked her to do this. She lined the hymn to us, so she, in fact, sang alone before a congregation, albeit a very tiny congregation. Others offered up new adventures that they set for themselves.

I asked how each had experienced this last session. “I feel healed,” said one. And others nodded. “It was glorious.” They agreed that this playful, spontaneous “worship service” was one of the most meaningful they had ever attended. As had happened at previous sessions, the women continued to sit beyond the allotted time when the session was declared over. What emerged in conversation that followed were expressions of the struggle that some had in dealing with some of this material coupled with their gratitude that they had the opportunity and support to do so, appreciation for the group and their deepened relationship, and a desire to continue in some form, including others who wanted to join. As one person said, “We are the yeast!”

Chapter 5

Discussion

The implications or results, both anticipated and not anticipated, as reported in Chapter 4

Developments not anticipated

At one point I realized that I felt somewhat like a mother to these elderly women, I felt protective of them and somewhat anxious for them. I wondered if I was a “good enough” mother to them as we played with the idea of their inner child, for example. I had not imagined that the project would access so much pain as it seemed to. At the beginning, I was keenly aware that I did not want to provoke personal reflection so deep that participants might become depressed. The one woman who dropped out after one session was enduring a fraught time at the illness of her husband. Also, as I have noted, she admitted to being a person unaccustomed to personal reflection. It was clearly uncomfortable for her in the first place. Even though I had invited her to attend, I was surprised that she had agreed. When she dropped out, I was not surprised though I felt bad that I had brought her into a situation that created inner conflict for her. She appears to be a person who depends upon denial as her core defense mechanism. As others say of her, “she sticks her head in the sand” and “cannot deal with unhappiness.” At this terrible time of genuine loss in her life, naturally she was not in a state of being able to move beyond that orientation that has become normal for her 85 years.

At times I found myself becoming emotional as I observed the women. This happened a few times when I watched them working on their activities. When they entered the room to find tinker toys and instructions to build something with the tinker toys, I looked at

them from behind a curtain. Having seen them many times in church or at meetings, I had never noticed them laugh so freely or be with one another so simply and authentically. This caused me to feel sad. As they delighted in their “we-ness” (as one noted) over the weeks, my own sense of purpose as a pastor was inspired to believe that creating space for and structure for “we-ness” beyond the relatively superficial group-ness that passes for community may be among the most important tasks of the church. The difference between the former and the latter depends upon trust, of course. Creating a space of trust is the work of hospitality and that touches on the religious aspects of this project.

The Contributions of this project to clarifying and expanding the religious principles referenced in Chapter 2

In a recent Bible study group, we pondered the Joseph saga (Genesis 37 – 50). In response to my question, “What would it have meant for your life had you taken to heart for your own experiences Joseph’s statement to his brothers, “What [persons] meant for evil, God meant for good?” One of the participants from this project who was attending the Bible study responded, “It would have made all the difference in the world, had I considered my life’s events in that light!” This illustrates the breach that my Project aimed to address. Whatever good her church life had offered her, it had not engendered linkage to the sacred story for the good of her soul, spirit, mind, body, and emotions. It had not engendered self-connection with her inner life or intimate connection with others. My Project aimed to touch on all of the above.

Limited though it was in time, this Project was ambitious in its intention. Specific aims of this Project were to offer participants an experience of connection to and acceptance of self and the multi-selves within as well as recognition of their lives as sacred journey in communion with this inner multitude. Exploring the inner world, for this Project's purpose, was for the sake of participants finding a path toward self-forgiveness and love, no matter what their history. The theory of IFS, in particular, creates space for self-understanding that is kind, non-threatening, and even playful because it allows for "the bad" to be included with "the good" in one person's identify. This was my interest in IFS for this Project: to offer these elderly women a construct that made room for their whole lives in retrospect, and for the girls and women they had been throughout their histories in various circumstances and in relation to others.

As we engaged the sacred story, my hope was for participants to find relationship with the story that opened them up to themselves. My Project offered a framework to link up self and self, self and story, self and other. The time between sessions was as important as the sessions themselves, because I directed the participants to activities that were meant to support the goals of the Project. The Project aimed to invite this small circle of women to experience themselves as a community of Christ (God-with-us) that was grounding, centering, healing, and comforting. Based on their anecdotal evaluations of their process, this Project was successful in these areas. It is not possible to quantify the assessment. Their personal reflections, verbal and written, support my observation that the Project affected them. It deepened their sense of the sacred in their lives, created a shared experience of community that allowed for intimacy and vulnerability that, in turn,

invited them to explore and risk just enough to move them beyond their normal boundaries. Their personal work, between sessions, remained for the most part private, yet it remained the foundation of all that was shared among them. FST proved to be a theory that invited their imaginative play. The artful projects that they engaged also worked to free their imaginations and move them beyond their “normal” responses into more lively responses that sometimes surprised them, occasionally made them nervous, and often made them laugh or cry (or both).

This Project directly and indirectly fostered reflection on their personal histories as the place where they met God. Rabbi Fine’s meditation that began each session grounded them and reminded them that each stage, each action and reaction of their lives, held the sacred. At first, looking back seemed to be for them a frightening proposition. The ritual acts of Eucharist, blessing, breaking, sharing, consuming followed by gratitude marked their journey as they began to share themselves in a more intimate way than usual. The Christ candle at the center of the circle was a constant visual reminder that all that was contained in our circle time was sacred. One area of collective insight for participants was their sense of relaxing into themselves and one another through the exercises. Working side by side in silence on individual response activities created a sense of “we-ness” as one of them noted. She said, “This feels like holy ground from the moment we enter this room and even when we are doing silly things like cutting up magazines to make masks of our inner bad girl! It feels holy to me because I feel whole and as a group we have found our we-ness.”

The “we-ness” she described is the communion of souls invited to the table to share one bread and one cup. For the church, it is the body of Christ where healing is found. As St. Teresa of Avila wrote, “Christ has no body now on earth by yours, no hands but yours, no feet but your...and yours are the hands with which [Christ] is to bless us now.” The “we-ness” was the blessing and also the venue for the blessing and healing because it provided space for being, trust for sharing, and the listening of those who could understand. While I was often touched by the kind remarks of encouragement or sympathy that passed among the women after sharing something painful, I was even more impressed by the silence that sometimes surrounded what was said. It was not the awkward silence of those who can find no words. It was the embracing silence of those who knew that words were superfluous. I disciplined myself to allow for silence without rushing in to direct, correct, comment, or fix what was lost or broken in the speaker. Silence wove in and out of the Project, weaving it together prayerfully. The religious principles I outlined earlier included the idea of sacred story as God’s word revealed in time, including the times of our own lives. When we engaged a biblical story, this Project urged the participants to bring to the sacred text their own lives. What we found and what we brought, the interaction, was illuminating.

The clinical principles discussed in Chapter 2

My Project presupposes the Eriksonian theory that at each stage of human development, there is potential “virtue” to be achieved by mastering a developmental crisis.

Participants were living in the stage of “integrity versus despair and disgust.” Each one of the women had been in the position of caring for others for extended periods of their

lives, whether it was for their children or for elderly ill parents. Each one was now in a position to care for herself and each, in varying degrees, was willing to examine her life with care though there was also “guilt” on the part of one who found it “self-centered” to focus on herself. Also, the woman who dropped out of the project was not willing to focus on herself. The remaining seven each, at various times, bore testimony to painful episodes or relationships that troubled them through the years. I noted that in each case, as the participant revealed narrative and named the pain of it, there seemed to be a palpable experience of self-acceptance even from the woman who felt “guilty” to speak of herself. Sharing what in some cases had never before been expressed created optimum potential for integrating what had been difficult to accept. This dynamic was articulated in a couple of cases. In all cases I noticed the bodies of women as they spoke of difficult matters. I observed bodily tension release as shoulders and faces relaxed in the course of the circle times. This was a manifestation that some degree of integrity was supported by the work of the Project. “Integrity is a sense of acceptance that this is one’s only life. This is the time (and last time) for emotional integration.” (Berzoff, P. 119) The opposite of integrity, disgust and despair, manifests a sense of meaninglessness and futility of one’s life. Grounding the Project in “life as a sacred journey” is a religious conceit that in and of itself is powerful. What is sacred cannot be meaningless and futile.

“The past is alive in memory—and it runs our lives more than we know.” (Nichols, p. 79) My Project presupposes the currency of the past as a major contributor to the present. The profound attachments accrued over a lifetime, both positive and negative, were explored by the participants. In one case, an 85 year-old participant kept returning to her

relationship with her older sister. She remembered anecdotes to this very day when the sister is ill with Alzheimer's yet still holds "power over" the woman, "terrorizing" her and "filling [her] with the same feelings [she] remembers from childhood." As this woman spoke her wide variety of memories sounding this same theme over five sessions, she also recalled her sense of being "abandoned" by her mother to the "bullying" of this sister. What became apparent to the participant was that these two energies, her overbearing sister and her absent mother, were at work in her. As she explored these energies at home in her journal as well as in the group, it dawned on her that these experiences of the past had caused her continuing suffering because she had never acknowledged the loss she felt at the hands of the sister's constant criticism. This participant had responded to the ongoing onslaught by withdrawing as a child, trying to be "invisible," she said. The photograph of "the girl she was" had shown a beautiful little girl with a big bow in her Dutch Boy hair-cut, hands on askew hips, one foot thrust to the side, chin up, and eyes staring into the camera with an unflinching gaze. Her remarks about that young girl in the first session had included words like, "happy" and "eager." As the sessions revealed, the little girl suffered far more than the image and the early description suggested. The internalization of the sister and the mother became apparent to this participant. At the end of the fifth session she remarked with laughter, "I have everyone seated at the table [meaning her inner community] where I can *see* them! I still feel hurt and discomfort with some, but at least I *know where they are!*" Object relations theory, like Erikson's human development theory, was presupposed by this Project. Noting this particular woman's experience, it seems that she had been deeply affected by her sister more than by any other person in her life. That sister's constant

criticism and bullying, unmediated by parental intervention, had led her to what Melanie Klein refers to as the depressive position, the unhappy realization that love and hurt go together. She had struggled for a lifetime with feelings about her nuclear family constellation, seeking therapy at times, but it was only at this late stage of life in the safety of this circle of women and in response to the invitation to play, based on the notion of inner community alive and active within, that she came to a healing understanding and acceptance of painful issues.

The Project proposed the idea that it is possible to intentionally invite narrative figures into the inner world to join the mysterious figures of our past, whether it was Hannah, the Syro-Phoenician mother, Sara, Lilith, or another figure from sacred text or legend, the circle of women played with this idea, supported by the religious notion that God comes to us in story, meets us there, and stays with us. In the case of exploring the “dark feminine” in Lilith, the conceptualizing of her as a classical fictional figure encouraged a more playful embrace of inner “dark feminine” energies within the women. Choosing to create masks to express this potentially threatening energy invited the idea of artifice as a safe place. A mask can be fun. It can be a joke. It is associated with children’s games and Halloween. Collage is a form of visual arts created by gathering many different pieces, assembling them into one, and gluing them together. Each step, choosing the pieces, cutting them into shapes and sizes, arranging them into patterns of meaning, and finally affixing them to the mask, invites interplay between both sides of the brain, left and right, and therefore creates a synchronism of response that includes the conscious and also the unconscious. It is in the sharing of the objects, the commentary offered up by the

creators, and then the responses of those who listen and see, that can provoke a consciousness about what has been under the surface. This process followed by the week's assignment including continued journaling was meant to bring participants to new insights about themselves in some area of their lives.

The act of play is freeing, whether it is bodily play in games (which I avoided since the participants were elderly and at various stages of frailty) or with art, words, drama, music, play frees. "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self." (Winnicott, p. 54) Therefore, play creates wholeness, if even only for the time of the playing itself. It expedites an experience of wholeness that, for however long it lasts, contributes to wellbeing. In the case of this Project, it wasn't the created product that was emphasized (poem, mask, clay figure, or whatever was produced), but it was the process of creating/playing that was emphasized. There was one working artist among the group. Her creations were, in fact, more beautiful in an objective way than the others. Yet, I believe that for her, the exercises were more limited in their ability to heal because it was likely that she would become fixated on the object she was producing rather than on the exploration of playing out the object's creation.

Play depends upon free association, whether with words or images or shapes. The first exercise, the creation of clay figures that symbolized the "inner little girl not dead but sleeping," was accomplished on the first session. They took the figures home and were

given opportunity to reshape them before bringing them back, however, no one did. Everyone kept her originally discovered image, leave or shell or whatever it was, and with time and reflection, each woman developed a narrative about what this meant to her. Free association was developed first with modeling clay and then with words describing why the figures were as they were.

Winnicott notes that “creative apperception more than anything else...makes the individual feel that life is worth living.” My Project aimed to move each woman closer to “creative apperception” in her heart and mind, healthy assimilation of past experiences of self and other, integration of painful moments and celebration of joyful ones, acknowledgment of all the moments as sacred journey. The clinical theory that I believe was most helpful to de-toxify what might be otherwise extremely painful self-reflection (for those women who operated out of an abundance of guilt or regret—and I had no way of knowing if any of these women did --the woman I thought about in this regard was my own mother who did) was Internal Family Systems theory. IFS frames the individual, the inner life that fuels behavior, in ways accessible to those with little background in psychology. It is fun, for one thing. It offers an opportunity to explore one’s behavior from the perspective of, “Who *was* that behaving that way? Was that *me*?!”. The women enjoyed this exploration and had fun with it, even as it provoked serious personal examination. Each of them was mainly concerned with their little girl within. As conversation evolved about her, some feared what she had to say to them and wondered who it was (within them) that kept her silent. Some were sad that she was incognito within them and wondered who it was who kept her hidden. One claimed that in the last

5 of her 85 years, she had recently “been back in touch” with this girl and “had great fun with her every day.” As we explored other figures within, some participants made lists that included bossy parts, frightened parts, “angry as hell parts who aren’t going to take it anymore,” and “nice” parts “who just want everybody to get along.”

The presentation and exploration of this clinical principle, in particular, gave the women a needed framework to explore their lives to whatever extent they found possible. Each one chose to move into discomfort willingly, but not so much discomfort that they were depressed (for long) or paralyzed by too much painful self-awareness all at once. This theory allowed for playing with the idea of those within us, our own parts that have competing needs so that we get confused and conflicted. One woman was self-revealing in a discussion to express her relief at this clinical idea. She said, “I can like myself better from the time of my divorce when I think that it was only part of me who hated my ex-husband, and not all of me.” Another woman had a dream during the five weeks. She dreamed that she was a “good mother” but she had no children in her dream. In fact, in life she had two children. She said that she interpreted the dream to mean that the “good mother” part of herself was, sadly, childless while the “bad mother” produced her two children. She said that as a young mother, she had been stressed and endured many difficulties that impeded her ability to be, in her mind, a “good mother” and so she was, in her mind, a “bad mother.” Her dream told her that the good mother part of herself was still within her, and childless. This seemed to offer her comfort. She began to consciously relate the two inner parts, the two mothers. She said they were “growing to like one another” and she was finding the “bad mother” to be a good soul, just “put

upon.” My Project’s hope was just this kind of movement, from sadness at self to self-acceptance and appreciation. It was an invitational Project for each participant to begin to pay attention and to know herself in a kindly, playful manner. IFS was an extraordinary tool for this accomplishment.

The contributions of this project to ministry in a wider context

While I crafted this project with elderly women in mind, its basic tenets are accessible and meaningful for any adult age, though most poignantly appreciated by middle-aged and older people. Perhaps it comes with age that we realize, as Jung noted, “outward circumstances are no substitute for inner experience.” (Brennan, p. 27) It may be that consciously aging persons are more interested in knowing themselves deeply. At least, it is more imperative that they do so. Obviously, the aging have limited time to finish what is unfinished, reconcile what is undone, and so on. My Project creates an environment that opens the door to deeper knowing of self, connection and re-connection with parts of self, and it offers an environment that stimulates caring for others through play that cultivates playfulness that makes empathy more achievable, less threatening, and, frankly, more fun. This playful ethos would be beneficial for any meeting of the church, board meetings as well as small group gatherings designed for study or self-improvement. Fecundity is missing when playfulness is absent. The most valuable learning in this Project is how play cultivated playfulness that created safe space for being together in wholeness. Whatever content a group might need to engage, the ethos of play and the attitude of playfulness will bring advantage that would not be available in its absence. This is the most essential application of this Project to other contexts.

Implications for future ministry

Creating meaning is a work of faith. To believe that God acts in history is to believe that God acts in one's own life. Spiritual direction is the process of accompanying people in their lives that emphasizes discerning how God is acting in their lives and helping them learn to tell their stories as part of this sacred movement in their lives. It offers a context of wisdom, encouragement and discernment that invites participants to pay attention to God's presence. Not only does it serve to recognize the sacred mystery of the life journey but it offers companion(s) to reflect back in word and presence what is learned. This is holiness that contributes to wholeness. Other names for spiritual direction are "tending the holy," "spiritual journeying," "holy listening," and "spiritual companionship."

Spiritual direction was an ancient ministry of the church, continuing to be strong in Catholic and Orthodox traditions and finding renewal in the Anglican church and some Protestant churches over the past few decades. While originally practiced by ordained clergy only, in recent years the discipline has been regarded as a ministry open to lay persons as well. My Project created a circle of spiritual directors who helped one another to penetrate beneath the surface of their lives and cultivate freedom of expression for themselves.

As the diminishing mainline church struggles to find new ways of being church, one irony is that some of the most thriving mainline churches are those who have rediscovered elements of ancient Christian practice that are enlivening them today.

Spiritual direction has the potential to be such a practice with the possibility to not only

offer the congregants ways to discover and create meaning for their lives but also to create deepened community and cultivate a thriving church culture that, as participants in this Project are encouraged to do, examines it's congregational history in light of what God has done and is doing. My experience as facilitator encourages me to think more deeply of spiritual direction as a primary part of my job description as pastor.

An After Word

There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.

M. Scott Peck

Come out of the circle of time

And into the circle of love.

Rumi

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been – a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

Starhawk

Our final celebratory gathering was a potluck dinner at the parsonage on a cold winter evening several months after our last Wednesday session. As we gathered around a festive table with a fire in the fireplace, flowers and candlelight on the table, and the bounty of food before us, the women looked at home and happy. One remarked, “This is like a happy family reunion.” Another added, “I have missed us!” When I noted that they had all seen one another numerous times in different contexts since the Project ended, their responses accentuated the fact that “being together in that circle is different from being together in other ways.” I asked them “Who, among your inner community, came with you tonight?” This brought gales of laughter as each contributed humorous and serious descriptions of who they would choose to bring, who insisted on tagging along, and who would rather stay behind. (“I would bring my best self---she’s the one who used to iron the sheets, towels and my husband’s underwear. I named her Edna. She

needs to get out more and relax.” “My Lilith is here—Rosie I call her---she insisted that if wine was flowing, she was going!” “My little girl is just beginning to peek out at me from her favorite hiding place. She is here, but she’d rather be home alone!”) In the course of this conversation, the Communion bread and wine were revealed and I led us into the order of Communion when we literally invited, by name, some of these figures from the women’s inner worlds to be at home at Jesus’ table and with us. I allowed a bit of time and silence as the women offered up names of the figures they had come to know within and even some of the sacred figures we had pondered during the sessions. Everyone was included. There was laughter that turned tender and quiet with the words of institution about Jesus who, on the night of betrayal “took bread and blessed it and broke it and shared it with his disciples saying, ‘This is my body broken for you. Take. Eat. As often as you do so, do so in remembrance of me.’ Ministering to you in his name, I offer you the bread of life, the body of Christ.” Continuing with the words of institution, we remembered that Jesus ate with sinners, with unrighteous, the prostitutes and tax collectors, the Liliths and the people with unclean hands and unacceptable occupations, the rich and the poor, the elite and the nobodies, and that he welcomed them all to the table. Jesus practiced radical table fellowship that included everyone. We spent moments in silence reflecting on the radical hospitality that marks the table of Jesus and how each of us is welcome there and each part of us, too. This was, in the end, the whole point of the Project. Everyone and every part of us finds love at that table and has a place in the circle. “A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.”

Appendix 1

“Birth is a beginning...and Life is a journey. From childhood to maturity and youth to age...Until looking backward or ahead, we see that victory lies not at some high place along the way, but in having made the journey, stage by stage a sacred pilgrimage. Birth is a beginning and death is a destination. And life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage to life everlasting.”
(Rabbi Alvin Fine)

September 10, 2009

Dear _____,

I am writing to invite you to help me with my Doctor of Ministry Project as a part of a pilot group. I am asking a specific group of women to gather, including you, asking that you commit to five Wednesdays (Oct 7, 13, 21, 28 & Nov 4) plus a final date to be determined. We would gather on Wednesdays from 10 – noon in the Vestry. The purpose of my project is to create an environment to support one’s inner life at this stage of your lives. The reason for this project is the completion of my D.Min. Degree. I completed the class work in 2007. In order to be awarded the Doctorate of Ministry, I need to engage a specific idea, to create a pilot program, and to reflect upon what happens. This is why this will be a closed group for the purpose of my study.

So, I am writing to invite you to participate with me. If you are able, I will be delighted. We will share scripture together with time for discussion and response. You may be asked to do some personal journaling at home. You will not be asked to share anything that you are not comfortable sharing. I think we will have fun together so I hope you are able to join this small group for this limited time.

Please let me know if you are able to participate. I hope that you will! If you have any questions please feel free to ask me.

Blessings,

Pastor Jane Ann
phone #

Appendix 2

“The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves, they find their own order...the continuous thread of revelation.”

(Eudora Welty)

September 16, 2009

Dear _____,

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this project that will help me in my studies for the D.Min. degree. I hope you will benefit from being part of the small group. This is a closed group by invitation only. the group is selected because I felt that this gathering of individuals would find comfort and trust very quickly.

Enclosed please find an evaluation form that you are requested to fill out now and return to me in the stamped self-addressed envelope I have provided. I need this prior to our meetings.

See an example of the question below. I suggest that you go with your first inclination. circle which answer makes the most sense for you at this time.

My Christian faith has helped me deal with different stages of my life.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree or disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

If the statement is one that is true for you, you would circle “strongly agree.” If it is one that you do not agree with as true for you, you would circle “strongly disagree.” There are variations on these two responses in between. I appreciate your willingness to be self-reflective with me. I require your input here so that I can have some way of measuring how our time together may or may not result in a change in your feelings about these various questions. It may be that there is no change. That is all right. Part of my process is designed to guide my further development of this project. Your feedback will be helpful.

again, thank you so much I look forward to spending time together. Please feel free to call me with any questions or concerns you have.

Blessings,

Pastor Jane Ann
phone #

Appendix 3

Pre-Project Evaluation Questions. *Please respond to these questions thoughtfully without over-thinking. Your first impulse will serve. The final two questions invite your written response. Whether long or short answers, reply in a way that feels authentic to you.*

Thank you for your willingness to be self-reflective with me and to share your thoughts here. Your responses are completely confidential. Pastor Jane Ann

Your Name:

1. My Christian faith has helped me deal with different stages of my life.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

2. As I grow older, I find that Bible stories and what I learn from the Bible has more meaning for me than in previous years.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

3. As I grow older, I am more intentional about my spiritual life.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

4. I have found that gathering with others, reading the Bible, and sharing responses has

enhanced my sense of God's presence in my life.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. I have found it to be comfortable and comforting to share my spiritual pilgrimage with others in small groups even when it causes me to feel vulnerable.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. At this point in my life, I am satisfied with my experience of my faith in God.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. At this stage of my life, I feel comfortable sharing my questions and my faith with others.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. At this point in my life, I believe that my participation in church has enhanced my faith and also my experience of God.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

9. As I grow older, I fear death less.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

10. Whatever my fears, I find that I have inner consolation from a sense of comforting presence within.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

11. I have a strong sense and memory of myself at various ages and different stages of my development.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

12. Through the years as I have been exposed to the Bible narrative, I have identified with various figures from the stories.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

13. When I hear sacred stories from the Bible, I relate my own life to what I hear.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

14. I have a strong sense of community in my church where I feel safe and supported.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

15. I have peace about my past and believe that my life has had meaning.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

16. I have a sense of hope for the future.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

17. I know myself.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

18. I like myself.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

{ You may use the back of the paper for the following questions. }

19. How would you describe your comfort level with talking about your life, yourself, and your experience of God?

20. What has kept you silent when you might share your story with others?

[If you wish to add additional thoughts or commentary on any of the above multiple-choice questions, please do so.]

Appendix 4

Post-Project Evaluation Questions.

Thank you for your willingness to be self-reflective with me and to share your thoughts here. Your responses are completely confidential. Pastor Jane Ann

Your Name:

1. After participating in this Project, my self-awareness is enhanced. I understand myself more.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

2. After participating in this Project, my self-appreciation is enhanced.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

3. Participating in this project has been painful at times.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

If this has been painful, can you offer commentary of that?

4. Participating in this Project has been helpful to me and worth the effort or discomfort it has at times caused.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

Can you provide explanation?

5. Sharing this experience with the group has enhanced my sense of God's presence in my life (though we rarely spoke of God).

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

6. Sharing this experience with the group enhanced my peace of mind in general.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

7. I feel less lonely for having experienced this group work.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree or disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

8. I found it to be comfortable and comforting to share myself with others during this project, more so than I have usually experienced.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

9. My sense and memory of myself at various ages and different stages of my development has been stimulated by participation in this project.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

10. My sense of community where I feel safe and supported has improved because of my participation in this project.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

11. The following statement [*I have peace about my past and believe that my life has had meaning.*] is truer for having participated in this group.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

12. I like myself and accept myself more after having participated in this project.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

13. My comfort level with talking about myself has increased due to this project.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

14. While we did not discuss the end of life, what I experienced from my participation in this project has contributed to my peace of mind or enhanced comfort concerning my own end of life.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

If so, please explain how.

15. Please describe the learning you have achieved from this experience. What was particularly engaging for you? What was not helpful? were you surprised or delighted at times?

16. Has participation in this project introduced you to any practice that you plan to continue (such as journaling)?

If you wish to add additional thoughts or commentary on any of the above, please do so.

Appendix 5

*We shall not cease from our exploration
and at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
--T.S. Eliot*

October 1, 2009

Dear _____,

I look forward to seeing you on Wednesday at 10 AM in the Vestry.

Please bring a photograph, drawing or portrait of yourself as a young girl: the girl you used to be.

Thank you for your help.

Blessings,

Pastor Jane Ann

Appendix 6

Centering Activity

(adapted from Hendricks: THE LEARNING TO LOVE YOURSELF WORKBOOK)

Instructions: Sit comfortably upright. Uncross your arms and legs, and close your eyes if that feels comfortable. rest for a moment....If you wish to practice with your eyes open, keep them softly focused on the ground a few feet in front of you. Begin by tuning in to your breathing. Do not force it or change it. Simply be lightly aware of your breathing. ...There are 2 ways that are especially useful in focusing on your breath. One is to concentrate on the sensations of the breath as it comes in and out of your nostrils. Be aware of those sensations for a moment (20 seconds) Choose one of these areas of your body, nostrils or abdomen, and pay attention to your breath and it comes and goes. Let your awareness rest on this spot, feeling the sensations of the breath as it comes and goes. For the next few minutes, you will simply be noticing the sensations of your own breathing. When you find yourself lost in thoughts, simple return your awareness to the sensations of your own breathing. The mind will often wander and you will have ideas and memories and there is nothing wrong with that. Whenever you notice it has wandered, simply return to your awareness—paying attention to your breathing. (3 -5 minutes) Continue to practice as before, but now make a mental note of ‘thinking, thinking’ when you notice your mind has wandered off into thoughts. When you find yourself thinking instead of being with your breathing, say in your mind ‘thinning,’ thinking’ and go back to your breathing awareness. No judgment, no censure is implied; simply notice that you are thinking, label it ‘thinking’ and return to the breath awareness. Notice your breathing and your thoughts as you would watch the clouds going across the sky on a summer day, and keep returning your attention to your breathing. Practice now for several minutes. (up to 10) Now simply rest quietly until I invite you to return to this circle. Give yourselves a good stretch. And let’s begin.

Appendix 7

Opening Prayer Meditation

Birth is a beginning and death is a destination.

And life is a journey: From childhood to maturity and youth to age;

From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing;

From foolishness to discretion and then, perhaps, to wisdom;

From weakness to strength or strength to weakness. And, often, back again;

From loneliness to love, from joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion,

From grief to understanding, from fear to faith;

From defeat to defeat to defeat.

Until looking backward or ahead,

We see that victory lies not at some high place along the way,

But in having made the journey, stage by stage a sacred pilgrimage.

Birth is a beginning and death is a destination.

And life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage - to life everlasting.

(Rabbi Alvin Fine)

Appendix 8

Homework for First Week

I encourage you to practice the sort of breathing exercise we began this class with on a daily basis for at least 15 minutes prior to writing in your journal. Make a comfortable place for yourself to commune with yourself and know that you are safe.

Each day: Reflect on the clay figure you created to represent the little girl within. Spend time in this kind of prayer: remember the story of Jesus who went out of his way to raise up a little girl that everyone else thought was dead. But he knew she was merely asleep. Spend time imagining that it was you that Jesus reached for with his hand, taking yours, and saying, “Little girl! I say to you, get up!” Imagine opening you sleepy eyes and seeing the face of Christ. Imagine this story as a meditation for the week. What happens next as this story unfolds? Journal these imaginings.

In your journal (or on a computer if that feels better to you), write a letter to that little girl you used to be. Tell her how you are feeling and what you want. Tell her what it means to meet up with her again at this stage of life. Tell her whatever you want to tell her—about your life, how its twists and turns have surprised you, perhaps disappointed you, sometimes delighted you. Ask her how she is feeling, what she wants, and what advice she has for you at this stage of your life pilgrimage. Spend at least three days with this letter. No one will read this but you. This is only for you unless you choose to share it.

Spend at least 3 days to write another letter from that little girl to the woman you are. Allow your imagination to run free. This is only for you. It is private. Hold nothing back. Let that little girl tell you how she is feeling, what she wants, what she suffered, how she coped, and see what she has to say to you. Let her speak to you. Listen to her. Perhaps she wants to congratulate you on how far you have come, that you have survived and thrived. Perhaps she has a beef with you. Whatever it is, let that little girl speak via your imagination in this letter from her to you. Hold nothing back. Write the letter. You don’t have to read it again right now unless you want to, but write it all down. Keep it. Add to it over time perhaps. Scripture says, “a little child shall lead them,” and that little child is within you. Please allow yourself to spend time on these exercises. If you feel silly or sad or happy or whatever it is that the exercise makes you feel, pay attention to that feeling and remark about it to your pen pal. This is meant to be slow and reflective and, again, no one will read this but you so let your true feelings be expressed without holding anything back.

Appendix 9

We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a HOME. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) Christian mystic, German Benedictine Abbess,
author, counselor, poet, visionary, composer and so much more

October 8, 2009

Dear _____,

Wednesday's circle was a gift to me, and I hope to you. I hope you are enjoying the homework you have for the week! Think of it as play. Remember: no one need see it or know what you say unless you choose to speak it out loud with others present.

When you return on Wednesday, you do not need to bring your journal unless you want to. Do return with your clay figure. Perhaps you will have played with it this week, reshaping it. Perhaps it is as you created it on Wednesday.

Please be prepared to talk about it—why did you choose that color? When you look at the figure now, what does it say to you? How did you change it during the week, if you did? Perhaps it will be helpful for you to write it down.

While you are not asked to share what you wrote in your journals, the group might like to know how you experienced the week's exercises. What feelings did they generate? Your little girl, like one of you mentioned, may well have secrets. If you don't know what they are now, I hope that you will come to know them. That doesn't mean you have to share them with this group or with anyone. Sharing with *someone* is probably an essential part of healing if there are wounds to be healed. However, with whom you share and when I completely up to you.

See you on Wednesday. Your promptness is appreciated.

Blessings,

Pastor Jane Ann

Appendix 10

Worksheet for session two

Write a Cinquain (sin-kane) style poem.

Cinquain poems have 5 lines and do not rhyme.

Below is one formula followed by an example.

Line 1: One word (name something)

Line 2: Two words (description or example of the first line)

Line 3: Three words (action about the first line---3 words or a 3 syllable word)

Line 4: Four words (words or phrase describing feeling about the first line)

Line 5: One word (synonym for first lines)

<i>Panther</i>	Something is named with 1 word.
<i>Sleek, graceful</i>	2 words describe line 1.
<i>Running, hiding, emerging</i>	3 words describe the action of line 1.
<i>Happy to be free</i>	4 words or a 4 word phrase describe the feeling of line 1
<i>Cat</i>	another word or synonym for line 1.

Use one image to explore in your poem, or one color, or one feeling that overcomes you or a figure within or without. Perhaps a word or feeling keeps coming to you. That would be your first line of the poem and you would work from there. This isn't about making great art, but about exploring your own experience.

To quote our Mother from the Middle Ages, Hildegard von Bingen:

“We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a HOME. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.”

You are writing a poem to help you to interpret your own world, to facilitate your own listening, to use your own voice, and to see your own light.

Appendix 11

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself.
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)
--Walt Whitman*

*Which one of the many people who I am, the many inner voices inside of me, will
dominate? who, or how, will I be? Which part of me decides?
--Douglas Hofstadter (Professor of Cognitive Science)*

*Faust complained that he had two souls in his breast. I have a whole squabbling crowd.
It goes on as in a republic.
--Bismarck*

Homework After Session Two

Spend some time this week identifying for yourself some parts of your personality, like my Diva and my embarrassed little girl. List them in your journal. Remember: no one sees this but you, so don't hold back. List them, Name them. Describe them as though they are characters in a fiction you are writing. There's no right or wrong answer here. Explore.

Create a dialogue of at least a page length between the little girl you were and one of these figures. Or between the girl you were and a sacred figure like Hannah or Mary or Jesus or a character from a book you used to love.

Let your imagination play here. No one sees this but you!

Be aware of your dreams during this time. Write them down for pondering. Dreams are symbols offered up from your soul trying to communicate with your conscious self. Pay attention!

If you are inspired, you might write more Cinquain poems. It couldn't hurt!

Appendix 12

Homework After 3rd Session

Following are quotes from a variety of sources. Please select one, at least, that you find particularly provocative, insightful, or helpful. Write it in your journal and reflect on the message personally, allowing it to guide you in thinking about your life, your inner life, your inner community, or whatever occurs to you. Include how the passage makes you feel. Use this as a trigger for writing about yourself. If you are willing, please bring back to the next session your written response or a portion of it to share for discussion, or questions that are raised for you or a poem, or a picture—whatever response is evoked.

“The tragedy of life is what dies inside a [person] while [s/he] lives.” Albert Schweitzer

“It is not I who create myself, rather I happen to myself.” C. G. Jung

“Change is possible, but it must start with self-acceptance. Change is part of the natural order. Life is not static; it is constantly growing or declining. One doesn’t have to do anything to grow. Growth happens naturally and spontaneously when energy is available.” Alexander Lowen

“If a person lost would conclude that after all he is not lost, he is not beside himself, but standing in his own old shoes on the very spot where he is, and that for the time being he will live there; but the places that have known him, they are lost....how much anxiety and danger would vanish.” Henry David Thoreau

“Go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows.”
Rainer Maria Rilke

“People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation...the real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love, the sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money or depressions or exaltation battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events; these come to my days and nights and go from me again, but they are not the ME of myself.”
Walt Whitman

Exercise for Session 4

A questionnaire to stimulate your thinking

How would you title your life story?

What have been some/the critical crossroads or turning points in your life?

When and where have you experienced major losses and disappointments?

What were some of the missed opportunities or paths not taken?

What has been the nature of your friendships? Are you a good friend?

Do you keep a balance of looking after yourself and others?

Which talents and abilities have you not applied?

When have you been happiest? The most afraid? The most courageous?

What talents or experiences have you lived out that make you proud?

When did death enter your life as a reality?

On a sheet of paper, create a map of your life, sketching out the terrain, perhaps many hills and valleys, a large mountain to climb, a long winding road, perhaps bridges to cross or rivers to wade through....be whimsical, name the points of interest. If you care to, place images or symbols along the way that have meaning. Are there forks in the road that are noteworthy? Have you backtracked at times? If you choose, create a SELF or several of your SELVES, placing them at pivotal points where you know they were prominent players in your choices at that point. If you choose, place others along the way as well, family or friends who were companions for you. Place them or place symbols that represent what they were to you. Play with this.

Appendix 14

Homework After Session Four

“I sometimes need to write things which I cannot completely control but which therefore prove that what is in me is stronger than I am.” Albert Camus

In this exercise, please consider yourself as a person apart from you—as you stand apart from yourself, looking at yourself as an admiring friend might observe you.

Center yourself with the “unconditional love” exercise that we have done in group. Close your eyes, breath, and say in your mind to yourself “I love myself unconditionally.” repeat this every 15 seconds for several minutes.

Now, **write a letter of appreciation and gratitude to yourself.** This letter isn’t to the inner child or the inner Lilith or any of the other various parts of yourself you may have identified, but to you by name: Dear—(your name). Detail the things that you can think of that you appreciate about yourself, as though you were writing to a dear friend (you). You might think about these areas: your body, your abilities, your mind, your actions, your personality, your sense of humor, your relationships, your ability to bear suffering or to share with others. Be generous in praise for this friend of yours (you). Stand apart from yourself to write the letter. Hold nothing back in terms of appreciation, gratitude, and admiration. In a few days, go back and read the letter aloud as though you are hearing it for the first time. Or record the letter and listen to it. Or invite another trusted person to read it to you.

Appendix 15

“...what is really needed as we age is the inner resource of the Eternal youth. This energy is free refreshing, and always available. To access it only requires an attitude of tinkering, discovery, and play.”

Robert A. Johnson [Living Your Unlived Life]

October 30, 2009

Dear _____,

On our final Wednesday session please **bring an object that, for whatever reason, represents something essential about you or for you.** This may be a picture a well-used object from your home or work, a souvenir from a special trip, something you have made, a gift from a loved one, a book that you love, or a symbol that has meaning for you. An example of a symbol might be that you bring knitting needles to symbolize how you feel your life has been knit together by God.

The above quote from Dr. Johnson suggests the power of “play” in our lives and by this he does not mean playing games such as cards, the piano, or golf so much as he refers to the sort of play that comes with a playful attitude with which we may approach our lives. The “Eternal Youth” is that person within us who is still young, adventurous, curious, and open. To age well is to include the Eternal Youth among our inner voices and to access her energy at times, sometimes letting her guide us. While we may have become the Wise Elder in years, the Eternal Youth lends “levity and yeast” to our lives when we allow it.

“Being playful” ~ what does that suggest to you?

On Wednesday, please come with a playful attitude and your object of meaning. Also, **bring your calendar** so that we can finalize our final gathering time when we will share a meal and communion some evening in a few months.

Blessings,

Pastor Jane Ann

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