

LAURY RAPPAPORT
Five Branches University

Trusting the felt sense in art-based research

ABSTRACT

Artistic expression serves to explicate our felt sense – or embodied knowing. This article discusses and demonstrates how both direct experience and artistic expression are necessary to convey dimensions of experiential meaning, not accessible through words alone or others' authority. The application of Focusing, felt sense and the arts throughout different phases of art-based research is presented, along with the challenge of using self-enquiry, as a research tool.

KEYWORDS

Focusing
felt sense
art-based research
Eugene Gendlin
embodied knowing
inner wisdom

Philosopher and psychologist Eugene T. Gendlin invented a phrase for our inner wisdom that comes through the body in relation to all of our experiences in life. He termed it, *felt sense*:

A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one ... Physical. A bodily awareness of a situation, person, or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time – encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail. Think of it as a taste, if you like, or a great musical chord

(1981: 32)

Listening to our inner felt sense is a guide for conducting art-based research. This inner felt sense calls forth and crystalizes known and unknown

dimensions that integrate this holistic knowing. At first, this inner bodily knowing is unformed. It requires mindful awareness with an accepting attitude for it to ascend from its inner realm. Given that the felt sense is beyond words and our cognitive minds, it needs a medium that allows for capturing all of it at once. The arts are able to do so and provide a vehicle to help externalize this knowing, to carry it forward, and help it to be seen and known (Rappaport 2009: 94).

In addition to the arts being able to capture this felt meaning all at once, the art expression is specific. Only certain images, music or dance symbolize the meaning accurately (Gendlin [1962] 1997: 27-28, 97, 123,; Knill et al. 1995: 37,56.). This is essential to understand as it clarifies why the arts need to be affirmed for their unique contribution of expressing meaning in a way that nothing else can.

This article provides a glimpse into the meaning and insight that can only come through art-based research, along with the challenges of artistic enquiry. In keeping with the authenticity of art-based research, I share how my felt sense served as a guide to add an art-based component to my dissertation, how the felt sense and Focusing are used as tools for enquiry, followed by a discussion of opportunities and challenges in guiding graduate students in art-based research.

ARTISTIC ENQUIRY AS A DOORWAY TO FELT MEANING

In the late 1980s, I decided to write my dissertation on 'Opening the heart: Psychological and spiritual perspectives' (Rappaport 1987). During that time, there were no books on art-based research. Although C. Moustakas' book, *Heuristic Research* (1990: 27-37) was available as a guide for a qualitative, phenomenological research method, and followed a creative process, it did not include anything about arts enquiry. In order to understand the profound experience of what is means to open the heart psychologically and spiritually, I needed to delve into the arena of meaning. How was I to find out? I made a list of teachers of the heart to interview – spiritual masters from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Sufism who could speak about opening the heart; psychotherapists who knew about the body in psychotherapy; and a physician who wrote about the language of the heart. I was fortunate to interview Ram Dass, Rabbi Schacter-Shalomi (Jewish Renewal), Joseph Goldstein (Insight Meditation), Alexander Lowen (bioenergetics) and other leading experts about the this psycho-spiritual interdisciplinary enquiry. I sent questionnaires to participants who participated in an Opening the Heart workshop asking them about their experience of what *opening the heart* meant to them. In addition, I researched writings from major religious traditions about the heart.

While all of those methods helped to discover the meaning of the experience of opening the heart, there was an essential element missing. William James (1999) describes what was absent. He states that a mystical experience as *ineffable* – 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words ... its quality must be directly experienced' (James 1999: 414). I discovered James' quote while doing the literature review. It confirmed my intuitive sense from the beginning, that to deeply understand and write about the experience of opening the heart, I needed to engage in a process of direct self-enquiry – and it needed to include a method beyond words.

I designed an art-based component to the research design in which I reflected on photographs throughout my life and also created new art from

emotional and spiritual experiences. By reflecting on the photographs, I was able to see when my heart was open and when it was closed (described in further detail in the next section). The photographs and art served as way to *see – to re-search* – and to find the living meaning of what it means to open the heart. As I engaged in the art process, greater meaning unfolded. This calling forth of felt meaning is what evolves and unfolds during the artistic process (Ikemi et al. 2007; Rappaport 2009).

I meditated to discover the spiritual aspect of opening the heart, followed by creating art about the experience. Two things occurred simultaneously – the artwork developed, and it carried forward unformulated inner knowing and meaning from the experience. Through the artistic process, I was able to make discoveries and have insights that could not be known otherwise. Art provided a language to capture, witness and unfold this somewhat mystical inner experience. Words alone could not provide this.

Mindful awareness in art-based research

While it was evident that an art-based research component was necessary to truly understand the meaning of the experience of opening the heart, this type of enquiry demands mindful awareness in order to discern personal issues expressed through the art and to discern implicit meaning that emerges through the artistic process. The following example from my research illustrates this challenge.



Figure 1: Drawing 1.

As previously mentioned, one part of my research included photographs and art from the past, seeking to understand what is a closed heart, what is an open heart and what helps to open the heart, psychologically and spiritually. As I reflected on some of my earlier art (Figure 1), I could see that the drawing of the little boy reflected a personal level of suffering that led my heart to close.

I needed to bear witness to that pain, to keep it company and to hear more. Through the reflection, I came to know that as I engaged in the creation of the drawing, it was as if I was throwing a life preserver to a part of myself that had been buried and not fully known. As I got to know this little boy through the art-making, I experienced in the present moment my own heart opening. I felt the waves of compassion move through me. Nothing could have taught me about this level of opening the heart except by reflecting on the art itself and the unfolding moment-to-moment direct experience of the process.

Something similar occurred when I created new art as part of the research. After meditating, I used Focusing to notice my bodily felt sense. As I waited, listening within, an image came of myself in prayer, surrounded by a warm radiant light (Figure 2).

After creating the art, I wrote a letter to this spiritual dimension of life: *Thank you for appearing so close to me. Thank you for revealing yourself to me ... Now that I feel you and see you, I wonder, 'How could I not have seen you clearly*

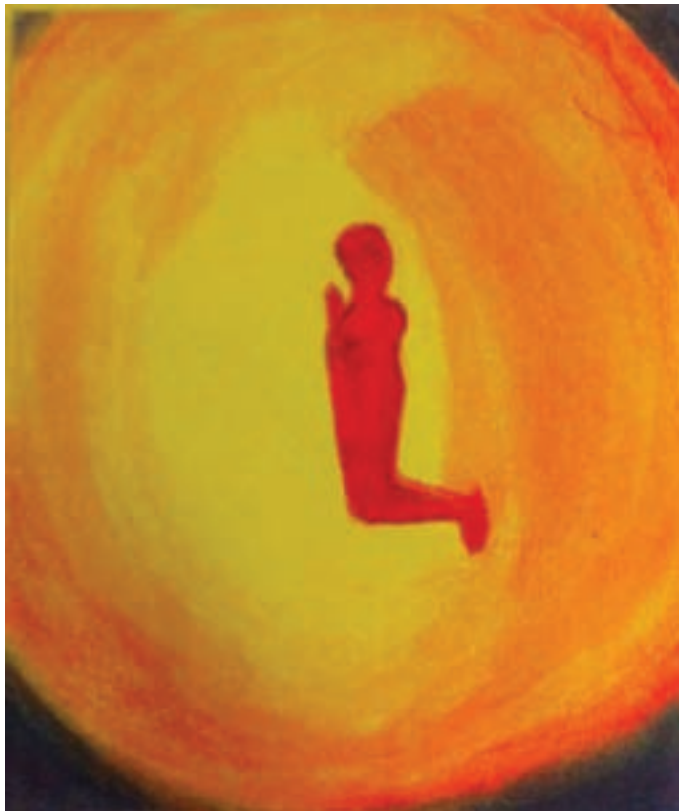


Figure 2: Drawing 2.

before? How could I have doubted your existence? It was like a door was closed and now it's open'.

Although I had been a meditator for many years, this artistic enquiry allowed me to physically observe, notice, witness and experience the spiritual dimension of what happens when the heart opens. This embodied knowing was only possible through this artistic enquiry.

Seeing beyond the personal

As you can see, this research was extremely personal. At the same time, the enquiry revealed answers to my research question that was more than I could have understood through the literature and interviews alone. However, the literature and interviews provided a necessary reflective relationship for the artistic enquiry. It provided a way for me not to just be absorbed in my own process but rather to test for a resonance. Did what I was finding within me, through my art, resonate with what the literature, interviews and questionnaires revealed? The answer for me was a clear 'yes'. There was a profound ring of truth.

There are other options for seeing beyond the personal. For example, others can be invited as co-researchers to participate in a similar artistic enquiry to investigate the same research question. Each can share their learnings and experiences, identifying similarities and differences. Another possibility is to show the art and to have others offer their responses through writing, sharing or arts expression.

TEACHING ART-BASED RESEARCH TO STUDENTS

While using my own art in research came intuitively to me, and I followed an inner knowing to do so (which was supported by the educational context of the times), this method of inner listening is less cultivated in today's graduate programmes, for various reasons. Programmes differ in regard to the place of self-enquiry – some advocate enquiry and self-disclosure within the classroom, others outside of the classroom and others in-between. My goal in teaching research is to help student listen to what has meaning within them and to find a topic that matches that felt desire.

The felt sense and the arts as a guide in research

As a first phase in helping students find a meaningful research topic, I incorporate Focusing and the arts (Rappaport 2009) as a way to help them listen to their mind and heart. I guide them in an art-based enquiry by first creating an atmosphere to slow down – *take a few deep breaths ... settle in with your body ... when you are ready, ask within: what is it that I really want to know?* I create a receptive space with time, allowing something not yet fully formed to come. I invite the students to see if there is an image, gesture, sound, word or phrase that matches the felt sense of what is there is the response to the question. Then, they create from that space. I give them time. This way of knowing requires time. The mind is quick; the heart and soul arrive from a more slowed-down dimension.

Once the art is expressed, I add writing. Writing after art does two things – it helps to access the authentic voice that the art is calling forth, and it gives the student a beginning place to write (a warm-up). I invite the students – *looking at your art, take a moment to listen to it. What is it saying? Begin writing*

speaking from its perspective. You can speak as an image, colour shape, the whole of the art or any part. Just write without judgement. When you reach a stopping place, see if you have a question you would like to ask the art. If so, ask it. Again listen to the art's response ... and write.

This exercise also teaches students a method for art-based enquiry. Additionally, it helps them to learn to discern their own personal issues from something larger that speaks through the art.

Once their topic is clarified, I use a similar enquiry of turning the topic into a question. Identifying the question that they really want to ask is critical as it informs the best method of enquiry. Using Focusing and their art, I invite them to reflect inwardly again: *Now ask, what is it I really want to know?* The repetition of the same core question at this stage, invites a deeper layer of what they truly want to find out to become clarified. There is no right or wrong answer. If they want to know *if* an art intervention leads to an increase or decrease in stress, and by how much, then it helps inform the student that a quantitative approach is needed. If they want to know the experience of using art for stress reduction, then they have various options available. They can use interview participants or ask open-ended qualitative questions. But, if they truly want to understand on a body-mind-spirit level what happens during the art process that impacts the experience of stress, then art-based research is a vital and necessary component.

Opportunities and challenges for students doing art-based research

I have found that when students access their topics through an art-based enquiry method, they feel excited, hopeful and connected to something larger than their cognitive minds. One student of mine had learned Clearing a Space with Art, a method that is useful for stress reduction (Rappaport 2009). It is beneficial as a tool for self-care, especially while in graduate school. She decided that she wanted to do research on this method since she had found it to be greatly effective for herself. In terms of art-based research, she did not really have too many challenges because it includes Focusing – inwardly listening to her felt sense to access her direct experience. On her own, she was able to engage in the art experience and also study the experience to become aware of what was occurring, within herself and in the art process and product.

One of the greatest challenges this student and others encounter is taking the next step in art-based research – *how do I understand what is my personal story expressed through the art and what from the experience may be reflective of something that has a wider application to others? How do I develop a process for reflection so that I can see what is me and what is more?* As previously mentioned, comparing the artistic enquiry to the literature or other collaborative research methods are some approaches to widen the view and test for resonance.

Often, students want to engage others in a similar art-based enquiry since they have their own knowing that something powerful happens through the art experience – where dimensions of understanding can be accessed beyond words. While engaging others as co-researchers through an artistic enquiry is often deeply meaningful to students and the co-researchers or participants, challenges occur with the art. Questions emerge – *what do I do with the art? If I have eight participants in a group and have all of them share or write about the art, how do I understand that meaning? Do I try to quantify the art or arrange it into themes?* Although counting colours, images or organizing the art into themes

may yield certain information, accessing and understanding the felt meaning for each person and their artistic process is typically overwhelming, and not just for students.

It is important to identify this challenge that integrating the arts in research with others can bring forth an overwhelming amount of information to grapple with, sit with and harness the meaning of, especially within one or two semesters of master's level research. Typically, the researcher organizes the art information by arranging it into a doable format, such as a chart that quantifies aspects of the art or finds the main themes. While this helps to do something with the art, and it manages the data, there is a level of the meaning within the co-researcher's experience that is swept under the rug (although carried with the artist). There is a dimension in answering the research question that still remains unknown. I have learned over the years that if students want to look deeply into felt meaning derived from an art-based enquiry with co-researchers or participants, then it is advisable to do so with a small sample. As my colleague Kevin Krycka shared with me, it is not about generalizability, it is about transferability (personal communication). Is there knowledge and wisdom that can be gained to transfer the learning to another situation, person or environment?

Going forward

When we stay with our direct experience with acceptance, the felt sense of a living process unfolds in a *life forward direction* (Gendlin 1981). I have trust that this is what is occurring in research with art-based enquiry as an integral component – something important, not fully known, is unfolding in a life forward direction. For the value of art-based research to be recognized further, we need to help others understand the value of self-enquiry as a research tool. As educators, we need to include self-reflection as a tool for discernment, providing access to inner wisdom; we need to clear up misperceptions that it is only a means for self-indulgence. We need to educate others to understand that what comes through the arts and what is symbolized through the arts is essential because words alone cannot capture the felt meaning. This way of knowing is rooted in ancient wisdom traditions, leading to self-discovery, insight and transformation. We need to refine this way of knowing and protect it from being lost into more dominant, conditioned ways of thinking and definitions of evidence.

REFERENCES

- Gendlin, E. T. ([1962] 1997), *Experience and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981), *Focusing*, New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Ikemi, A., Yano, K., Miyake, M. and Matsuoka, S. (2007), 'Experiential collage work: Exploring meaning in collage from a Focusing-oriented perspective', *Journal of Japanese Clinical Psychology*, 25: 4, pp. 464–75.
- James, W. (1999), *Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, NY: Random House Publishers.
- Knill, P., Barba, H. and Fuchs, M. (1995), *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy*, Toronto, Canada: Palmerston Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1990), *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Rappaport, L. (1987), 'Opening the heart: Psychological and spiritual dimensions', Ph.D. dissertation, Cincinnati, Ohio: Union Institute and University.

—— (2009), *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy: Accessing the Body's Wisdom and Creative Intelligence*, Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Rappaport, L. (2013), 'Trusting the felt sense in art-based research', *Journal of Applied Arts & Health* 4: 1, pp. 97–104, doi: 10.1386/jaah.4.1.97_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Laury Rappaport (Ph.D., MFT, REAT, ATR-BC) is a professor at Five Branches University and Director of the Mind-Body Department. She is the author of *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy: Accessing the Body's Wisdom and Creative Intelligence*, Certifying Focusing Coordinator with The Focusing Institute, and Founder/Director of The Focusing and Expressive Arts Institute. Laury is the former Academic Coordinator of International Expressive Therapies at Lesley University where she has taught for over 30 years and former Associate Professor in the Art Therapy/Marriage and Family Therapy Department at Notre Dame de Namur University.

Contact: Five Branches University, Mind-Body Department, 3031 Tisch Way, San Jose, CA 95128, USA.

E-mail: laury@focusingarts.com or mindbody@fivebranches.edu

Laury Rappaport has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
