A Heuristic Study of Vicarious Trauma:

A Visual and Written Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this study the unique capacity of vicarious trauma (VT) to alter the self was explored and the development of positive growth in the experience of negative outcomes. To facilitate a more introspective, experiential, holistic inquiry of vicarious trauma this study utilized an arts-based approach adapting the six phases of Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic model as documented through self-narrative and creative processes. Research documented disclosing experiences of personal history and visual and written modalities that constructed meaningful connections between creative processes and the impact of trauma upon the emotional life of the researcher’s self. The data included artworks and journal entries created during the researcher’s eleven-month art therapy internship. A thematic analysis of these visual and written responses revealed themes of disrupted identity, disrupted meaning systems, new concepts of self, and changes in worldview. These themes indicated vicarious trauma’s unique capacity to alter the self in a process called vicarious transformation. Future studies were recommended.

Keywords: vicarious trauma, heuristic study, art therapy, internship, thematic analysis
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all caring professionals and lay caregivers who have taken the step to work with traumatized clients, or in environments of deprivation, poverty, or cultural disadvantage, and have suffered from the debilitating effects of vicarious trauma. The cost of their care can be related to the words of Viktor Frankl (1963), one of the twentieth century’s great traumatologists, “That which is to give light must endure burning” (p.129). This thesis is also dedicated to art therapists exposed to highly stressful events and who have witnessed individuals’ painful stories of loss and hopelessness as an integral part of personal transformation through the process of art making. I would also like to recognize my church and pastor, Jim Wood, who takes the view that all Christians are responsible citizens of the world, and whose advocacy improved conditions for the poor, has reached minority populations in our community, and aided destitute peoples around the world. This influence and sensitivity to vulnerable human beings has helped me realize it is always upon nothingness that God is pleased to rear his works, an attitude I carry with me as an art therapist. The work of my thesis is therefore dedicated to individuals who have struggled like those described in this paper, who have shaped me in important ways and strengthened my resolve to pursue the therapeutic use of art for healing.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Bearing witness to trauma can be overwhelming (Figley, 2012). Americans have routinely compensated for disturbing realities by isolating it because witnessing suffering hurts and can even wound our heart (Stone, 2008; Fish, 2017). Helpers who offer services and direct care to those who have experienced trauma are often critically involved and frequently become the ones who hear and hold the “unspeakable” details of trauma. McCann and Pearlman first introduced the term vicarious trauma as a concept in 1990. The term acknowledged the changes that commonly occurred in helpers who continuously and consistently witnessed these traumas. Pearlman and McKay (2008) identified symptoms of vicarious trauma to include an altered sense of self, spirituality, worldview, interpersonal relationships, and behavior. Service providers impacted by the worst of human experiences have described how their work left them feeling numb, overwhelmed, isolated, disconnected, and depressed. Observations of such signs and symptoms allowed for connections to be made about the effect of the emotional impact of witnessing trauma on caring professionals, leading to substantially increased interest on the emotional impact of witnessing trauma on caring professionals over the past decade (Devilly, Wright, & Varker, 2009). The field of vicarious trauma has since focused on the self and well-being of helpers, rather than the traumatic event (Boals & Schuettler, 2009; Cameron et al., 2013).

This study was inspired by this researcher’s vicarious trauma experienced as a helper in Nicaragua and Kenya, and later as an art therapist intern. These experiences included working with vulnerable families, children, and adolescents who were adversely impacted by severe poverty, abandonment, incarceration, and various kinds of trauma. From these personal
experiences, the researcher sought to provide an authentic description of vicarious trauma through the exploration of the creative process, reflective writings, and art products. Examples of expressive artworks and corresponding written entries facilitated communication and arts-based analysis (Kapitan, 2010). Additionally, they served as an inquiry into an unfolding process, which invited the construction of individualized meaning in the varied expressions of vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; McCormack & Adams, 2015; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).

**Statement of the Problem**

In the last decade, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2004) brought national attention to the prevalence of trauma. SAMHSA acknowledged the need to create trauma-specific interventions and trauma-informed environments for those impacted by trauma, as well as the professionals working with trauma and trauma clients. Van der Kolk (2014) suggested that psychological trauma was one of the West’s most urgent public health issues. Vicarious trauma was defined by the American Counseling Association (2016) as the watching, hearing about, or otherwise bearing witness to and taking on part of traumatic experiences, often developing from being attuned and connected with those we help. For those who work with all forms of traumatization, vicarious trauma result in the negative transformation of the personal frame of reference (e.g., identity, spirituality, worldview), relationships, ability to self-regulate emotional states, judgment or decision-making abilities and/or bodily experiences (Figley, 1995; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

Although previous research has recognized vicarious trauma as a severe challenge, the study of vicarious trauma has tended to focus only on symptoms and events (Boals & Schuettler, 2009; Collins & Long, 2003; Figley 1995). For example, individuals impacted by vicarious
trauma reported experiencing benefits from vicarious transformation, including an expansion of their faith, discovering what is important in life, and feeling stronger (Jayawickreme & Blackei, 2014). Other research on posttraumatic growth or vicarious transformation indicated a positive personality change as an experience of improvement that for some persons was deeply profound (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

**Purpose of the Study**

As a heuristic endeavor, the purpose of this study was to promote a more sensitive awareness of vicarious trauma and explore how the researcher found meaning and value from the traumatic experience, particularly through creative processes. Investigating one’s own vicarious trauma through art-making, combined with writing, presented an opportunity to make sense of experiences and achieve greater self-discovery. In effect, the goal of this research study was to explore alternative ways to completely know oneself, as both good and damaged, in order to compassionately engage all aspects of oneself and bring healing to others. Ultimately, results from this heuristic study may provide insight into how art and reflective writing can be used with all helpers who hear trauma stories and become witnesses to the pain of trauma. The results from this study can also be used in higher education to emphasize the use of arts-based methods of reflective recording that sensitively address issues of diversity and sociocultural context within student reflections.

**Research Question**

This heuristic study was guided by the question, *what meaningful discoveries can be made utilizing visual and written modalities in the effect of witnessing trauma on the emotional self?*
Basic Assumptions and Rationale

Foundational to this research study was the belief that the researcher’s revisiting previous art experiences would reveal truths that would build a deeper understanding about vicarious trauma. Intentionally disengaging from earlier artwork provided a fresh perspective on past creations, providing a deeper appreciation and insight into these experiences. The assumption was made that identifying patterns and themes would occur best as a heuristic process and arts-based study.

Operational Definitions

**Empathy.** Vicariously experiencing the emotional meaning of suffering and bearing witness to it; resonating with the experience of others’ suffering in emotional and physical ways (Figley, 2012).

**Compassion fatigue.** Sometimes called secondary stress disorder, it is a form of caregiver burnout (Reeves, 2014). It explains the factors, which contribute to emotional and physical symptoms resulting from compassionate care (Figley, 1995).

**Helper.** A helper or service provider, professional or otherwise, empathizing and being devoted to the suffering others may open the helper to feeling maladaptive and traumatic responses (Figley, 1995, 2012). Stamm (2016) expanded this definition to reflect an ever-widening range of individuals who experience difficulties associated with vicarious trauma including professionals and non-professionals.

**Trauma or primary trauma.** This was described as disruptions to ongoing experiences and development, including profound alterations to their brain and psychobiology, as well as loss of identity and sense of self (van der Kolk, 2014). This was also defined as an event that has a lasting negative effect on the self or psyche (Shapiro & Forrest, 2004).
**Bearing witness.** This was described as understanding, viewing, or experiencing the emotional meaning of a victims’ wounds, which resonates in deep emotional and physical ways; in a secondary manner, through empathy and compassion (Fish, 2016).

**Vicarious trauma (VT) or secondary trauma.** Reeves (2017) defined anxiety and stress as exposure to the manifestation of trauma and witnessing traumatic incidents. This term also refers to the emotional residue of cumulative emotional and negative psychological impact of vicarious trauma on professionals (Hernandez, 2010; Pearlman, 1990).

**Vicarious transformation.** Sometimes called Post Traumatic Growth this is a process where the individual intentionally seeks to transform vicarious suffering and allows it to transform them in a positive way. This can often lead to spiritual growth and a process of constructive engagement with the negative changes that come about through trauma work (Pearlman, 2014).

**Intention.** A statement written in the present tense that clearly articulates what one hopes to explore, accomplish, or learn from an experience, to explore a situation, feeling, or personal reaction through imagery (Fish, 2017).

**Spirituality.** A deep sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith (Hernandez, Engstrom, & Gangsei, 2010).

**Justification of the Study**

Psychological studies have only recently begun to probe deeply into the impact of psychological traumatic experience on helpers in addition to primary victims (Figley, 2012). This heuristic arts-based study provides an alternative way to explore the long-term emotional and negative psychological impact of vicarious trauma on professionals and lay caregivers. The researcher chose heuristic research as a particularly important methodology that supports
qualitative research. In this study, a heuristic process recognized the broader context of ways in which vicarious trauma was shaped through these influences (Kapitan, 2010).
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Recent research highlighted the serious consequences of both lay workers and professionals who experience traumatic stress reactions that can affect their professional and personal well-being. These processes were explored, as well as the transformational consequences from experiencing vicarious trauma.

Vicarious Trauma

Secondary or vicarious sources of trauma included witnessing trauma or stress experienced by others and exposure to the manifestation of trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman, 2014; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). Examples consisted of observing disturbing images through artwork or other visual encounters, and being exposed to the painful stories of men, women, and youths, and witnessing incidents (Chapman, 2012; Fish, 2012; Malchiodi, 2013; Wadeson, 2000). Rothschild and Rand (2006) identified empathy as the greatest risk factor for vulnerability to vicarious trauma. Lamm, Batson, and Decety (2007) believed the primary mechanism for vicarious trauma was empathy, and different forms of empathy may result in different effects on helpers. Lamm et al. distinguished two types of congruent responses that can lead to vicarious trauma: feelings of empathy and feelings of personal distress, such as being deeply troubled or alarmed.

The current trends in research regarding vicarious trauma include the need to better understand the irrevocable effects of these experiences on caring professionals and helpers, especially as it relates to the sense of self and personal meaning systems. Stamm (2016) conceptualized the long-term effects and specific and immediate ways in which traumatic vicarious stress permeated throughout the entirety of a person’s life, infusing into their sense of
self. DeVries (1996) related this profound experience to a loss of identity. Individuals indirectly exposed to trauma by watching, hearing about, or bearing witness to it have also found meaning and understanding, but experienced significant alterations in how they make meaning in their lives (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Neimeyer, 2002).

Historically, research on vicarious trauma primarily focused on clinicians and mental health professionals with chronic exposure to emotional trauma (Figley, 1995; Figley & Boscarino, 2008; Steed & Bicknell, 2001). However, the adverse effects of trauma has been recorded in a variety of groups, including lay mental health workers in Haiti (James, Noel, & Pierre, 2014), humanitarian staff (Strohmeier & Scholte, 2015), art therapists (Fish, 2012, 2017, Wadeson, 2003), and staff workers in carceral institutions (Reeves, 2016). Stamm’s (2016) substantial bibliography on the research surrounding the effects of vicarious stress on helpers illustrated the vast range of effected helpers. A small sample of those included in Stamm’s list were emergency medical technicians, art therapists, practitioners, music and dance therapists, counselors, first responders and firefighters, psychologists, correctional officers, mission workers, military personnel, and suicide interventionists. These diverse groups of helpers’ acted as witnesses to many forms of trauma, and expressions of their emotional effects are varied.

The complexity of the trauma experience emerged when clinicians were working with combat veterans who had unique exposure to caring for their fallen comrades (Garret, 2009). Marines assigned to Mortuary Affairs were responsible for the search, recovery, identification, preparation, and burial of fallen service members. The necessary and solemn duties Garret described required Marines to adopt the unfamiliar role of caregiver, resulting in trauma symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, and dysphoria. Researchers realized through the impact of care in Military Health Care Providers how exposing oneself to the suffering of others, especially
with intense empathy, caused vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue (Garrett, 2009; Weidlich, 2013). Additionally, the vicarious expressions of Marines subjected to this unique exposure spoke to the distinct nature of vicarious trauma.

**Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma**

In their work, Brady, Guy, Poelstra, and Brokaw (1999) concluded that the construct of vicarious trauma was based on symptoms and effects caused by traumatic experiences. The effects of exposure to traumatic events in the trauma literature have been identified as compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious traumatization.

**Psychological symptoms.** Research highlighted the serious consequences of trauma caregiving, including health decline, addictions, and the impact of responding to suicide (Stamm, 2012; Ting, Jacobson, & Power, 2006). Psychological difficulties or emotional states have mimicked those of primary trauma including increased sensitivity to violence, inability to tolerate strong emotions, feelings of numbness, fearful thoughts, depression, hypervigilance and reactivity, and other problems (Figley, 1995; Forester, 2007). Curtois and Ford (2009) recognized post-traumatic stress responses in the helper, such as avoidance, numbing, reenactments, aggression, and impaired judgment or decision-making abilities. Related indicators of psychological distress included nightmares, flashbacks, and intense imagery influenced by the trauma experiences of the helpers’ clients (Figley, 1995; Herman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Pearlman and Caringi (2009) regarded the symptoms of vicarious trauma and their escalation to be a significant factor in the development of additional anxiety and substance abuse disorders; in fact, patients with trauma often meet the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis such as PTSD.
Vicarious trauma also presents with secondary traumatic stress, also called compassion fatigue. In one study about Bachelor’s-level social workers, 42% stated they suffered from secondary traumatic stress (Adams et al., 2006). In another study, 70% of Master’s-level social workers exhibited at least one symptom of secondary traumatic stress (Bride, 2007). Bride’s research also documented between 5% and 15.2% of therapists experienced secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma symptoms at clinical levels. British counselor and psychotherapist Alison Barr (2006) found that 73.9% of mental health professionals have experienced psychological or physical trauma and attributed this experience to their career choice. Barr defined psychological trauma as “the effect of one or more traumatic events that had significant impact on the study participant” (p. 1). The researcher noted various causes which may have contributed to the survey participants’ psychological trauma, including abuse, the professional’s own mental health issues, the ill mental health issues of others, bereavement, physical health problems of the self and others, family life stressors, and life-threatening events.

**Physiological symptoms.** Vicarious trauma often presented in physical symptoms, which could lead to the identification of the helper’s traumatization. Forester (2007), a psychologist who observed the physical impact of trauma material on helpers, focused on the important role of the body in defining vicarious traumatization, emphasizing physical responses experienced by caring professions that included dissociation, increased heart rate, numbing, freezing, and muscular tension. Those who experienced vicarious traumatization also complained of somatic complaints such as headaches or gastrointestinal distress (Figley, 1995; Herman, 1992). Psychological problems closely associated with physiological symptoms included difficulties with regulating arousal, consisting of habitually shutting down or becoming enraged, overexcited, or disorganized (Figley, 1995; van der Kolk, 2014). Additional physical
markers for vicarious trauma included sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, intimacy and sexual dysfunctions, somatization, and other bodily responses (Pearlman & McKay, 2008).

**The Effect on Meaning Systems**

When service practitioners were confronted with trauma, they experienced a profound disruption of previously assumed worldviews and beliefs (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2001). Pearlman and Caringi (2009) suggested in their research and anecdotal evidence that professional workers, if not all helpers, experience negative transformation in their frame of reference in terms of spirituality, worldview, and identity. When a helper constantly witnessed suffering and began questioning the meaning of events, stress became an excessive burden that shook the foundations of faith and hope (Pearlman, 2014). Pearlman added that spiritual disruptions also affected the way helpers saw themselves and the world, and that they must re-evaluate what is truly important. A meaning system approach, which acknowledged the personal and varied expressions of grief, provided comfort and the hope of renewal. Neimeyer (2001) concluded that meaning reconstruction in response to loss “was the central feature of grieving” (p. 47), and that this was often an attempt to reconfigure a viable self and worldview in light of loss, proceeding from deeply personal and intricate social levels. Thus, an altered sense of self resulting from a helper’s vicarious suffering might work together with beliefs regarding meaning, purpose, connection, and hope to facilitate the reconstruction of a meaningful world disrupted by loss (Curtois & Ford, 2009).

**Constructivist self-development theory.** Vicarious trauma has constructivist and self-development conceptual roots, where personal meaning is understood as occurring from the individual’s own experience of the trauma (Edgeson, 2006; Neimeyer, 2002). Pearlman and Saakvitne’s (1995) constructivist self-development theory (CSDT) provided a holistic conceptual
framework that illustrated the interplay of complex factors that led to disruptions in cognitive shifts like those resulting from traumatic experiences or witnessing. Also, CSDT incorporated self or self-capacities as the ability to establish an identity or sense of oneself that is consistent over time, and frame of reference as the mental framework through which people interpret their experiences (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). As an exploration of self, meaning unfolded and invited the construction of individualized meaning in the varied expressions of vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Further, art-making and writing within this framework allowed for the construction of meaning in the varied implications of vicarious trauma.

Related cultural factors. The impact of trauma has ranged from deeply personal, to largely collective and communal. Working in collectivist cultures or in developing countries has posed challenges for Western-trained helpers who were individualistic in their orientation. Any effort to understand cultural diversity in developing countries must include an awareness of ethnic, cultural, religious, social, traditional, and existential factors that can greatly affect how individuals how trauma is understood, conceptualized and responded to by differing groups (Wong & Wong, 2006). There were many broader cultural factors that also influenced how symptoms were judged and the way individuals experienced stress and distress (Ancis, 2004). Extending and receiving assistance also varied in the creation of stress in the helper, particularly in hard-to-reach populations and unfamiliar cultural settings (Pearlman, 2014). Witnessing those who have the greatest need and responding to sociocultural realities, such as extreme poverty, homelessness, and injustice, while not having adequate resources to help them, has contributed to helper’s frustration, hopelessness, and vicarious trauma (Pearlman & McKay, 2008). This has
been particularly traumatic for the helper when the negative experiences were ongoing and exacerbated by outward stressors.

**Transforming Vicarious Trauma**

The process of change following a traumatic event consisted of positive cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and spiritual consequences which tested the traumatized person’s willingness to see the world in a new way, challenge creativity in addressing issues, and strengthened resolve to take bold and decisive action (Manning-Jones, de Terte, & Stephens, 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Vicarious transformation, or posttraumatic growth, has been positively associated with greater life satisfaction (Mols, Vingerhoets, Coebergh, & van de Poll-Franse, 2009). Many researchers described the deleterious effects of caring for the traumatized as the catalyst for their psychological, spiritual, and emotional transformation (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001, 2004; Cohen & Collens, 2013; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). In *Transforming Vicarious Trauma*, an informational video produced by the Headington Institute (2014), world-renowned trauma expert Dr. Laurie Pearlman posed this question about workers of trauma: *How have they been able to retain a sense of vitality in the face of horrible things?*

While it is true that many who have worked with the traumatized have suffered from the debilitating effects of vicarious trauma, recovery is a process of repair that arose from and was necessitated by vicarious trauma itself. Pearlman (2014) called this process vicarious transformation. Symptoms of vicarious trauma were conceptualized not only as disruptive and adverse effects of caring for the traumatized, but also as sources of strength, pride, and beauty when transformed. Thus, the physical and emotional scars can result in positive change, maturation, and resiliency in the lives of caregivers. According to Pearlman, vicarious transformation is recognized by a deepened sense of closeness with all living beings, a broader
sense of moral inclusion, a greater sense of an individual’s gifts, a greater sense of meaning and
of hope. When helpers embrace vicarious transformation, they can build meaning from the
negative effects of trauma.

The U.S. Department of Behavioral Development Services (BDS) conducted surveys
reviewed by Mary-Louise Gould (2001) to investigate the impact of vicarious trauma on
caregivers in Maine. This survey yielded responses, which spoke of gratitude and the special
benefits and intense demands of choosing to care for the vulnerable. In this study, 355 helpers
confirmed both the great challenges which human trauma presents to caregivers, while also
acknowledging the rewards and privileges derived from working with survivors of trauma. A
survey of 100 graduate-level psychotherapists in Maryland and Virginia spoke of the strength
and resilience they witnessed in the healing process of trauma survivors (Gould, 2001). Gould
discussed another study surveying female anti-violence workers, including psychotherapists,
who said that their suffering had produced positive changes and transformation. The women
surveyed in these studies represented the strength, dedication, and courage of all helpers. They
demonstrated that any dedicated, caring professional or caregiver could adapt to the shift in
worldview caused by vicarious trauma and learn to see the world anew. Pearlman (2014)
believed a deeper connection with both individuals and human experience was possible and a
greater awareness of all aspects of life helped to explain their experiences. Instead of viewing
the symptoms of vicarious trauma as a pathological condition, Pearlman saw the unique and
personally transformative nature of trauma as growth. From this perspective, a helper could
continue towards maturation and develop caregiver and self-care styles and practices. Beyond
the negative symptoms of vicarious trauma, helpers could view their experiences as a
transformative opportunity born out of empathetic suffering.
The transformation of vicarious trauma can also lead to spiritual growth (Hernandez Engstrom, & Gangsei, 2015). Areas of positive change identified among trauma workers included gaining a new appreciation for spiritual paths, a heightened awareness of the individual’s blessings, and a strengthened sense of optimism (Arnold et al., 2005). As caring deepened, many experienced significant transformation and a spiritual renewal in the way they perceived their work and ultimately themselves. In her heuristic dissertation, Bennett-Baker (2004) addressed her personal experience with vicarious trauma and the meaning she gained. In her experience of vicarious traumatization, the transformation she underwent was through spirituality, and she explained this was the bridge to healing. Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) encouraged caring professionals to find self-worth not based on professional achievements, but rather urged therapists to develop and nurture spiritual lives by replenishing their spiritual resources (Pearlman, 2014). Brady, Guy, Poelstra, and Brokaw (1999) observed that some helpers saw their work as a calling that is personally meaningful; this belief may also be a protective factor mitigating the development of vicarious trauma and aiding in the process of vicarious transformation. Pearlman and Caringi (2009) suggested that vicarious transformation can be an antidote to vicarious trauma. Stone (2008) explained how “opening the self to the darker aspects of human experience contributed to personal and professional perspective and growth” (p. 215). Other research has called for a multifaceted approach to coping with trauma, documenting the importance of support that included optimism and hopefulness (Cunningham, 2003).

**Art Therapy as a Treatment to Process Traumatic Stress**

Art therapy has been understood to be a viable treatment option for those suffering from primary and secondary vicarious trauma (Fish, 2012; Gantt & Tinnin, 2008; Malchiodi, 2013,
Wadeson, 2003). Fish (2017) described the way that trauma can affect witnesses, including the tendency to absorb the pain and the tumult of others, and the impact that trauma has upon the art therapist. In reverence to processing the vicarious impact of trauma, Fish explained response art as a technique that art therapists use to contain, explore, and communicate thoughts about their therapeutic work to “engage in a way that is rich with potential for personal growth, awakening us to deeper levels of involvement and empathy” (p. 105). She further noted that the utility of our response art depends on the clarity of the art therapist’s intention to explore a situation, feeling, or personal reaction through imagery. According to Allan (1995), and Fish (2012), such artistic inquiry provides a way to understand an experience that is uniquely capable of compassionate engagement with disturbing emotions.

**Neurological approaches.** According to Fish (2017) and Gantt (2009), art therapists have responded to trauma and crises in the twenty-first century with a neurological perspective on the use of art therapy. Their work addressed a wide range of trauma-related events, encompassing direct exposure to the aftermaths of trauma, hearing accounts of trauma, and indirect exposure to traumatic images, including observing repeated media coverage of terrorist attacks and related events. In addition, exposure to violent imagery in media, including music, video games, television and movies represented a risk in overall physical and mental health, particularly in the developing brain of youth (Kardaras, 2016). As a result, present-day trauma care has been growing in neurological understanding and awareness of the ways and existent of how excessive video technology damaged the brains of children and adolescents (Kardaras, 2016). In light of recent neuroscience findings on trauma and language, art therapist Malchiodi (2011, 2013), who pioneered trauma-focused expressive arts therapy, posited an intermodal approach to art therapy that incorporates sensory-based expression, combining art making,
writing, music, poetry, photography, and other creative practices. Creative depictions of
experience opened up sensitive levels of awareness that were personally therapeutic and built
connectedness and empathy in working with those negatively affected by the experience of
trauma the phenomenon of vicarious trauma.

Over the past ten years, art therapist Simoneaux (2011) has worked in Sub-Saharan
Africa introducing art therapy methods grounded in neurological research to improve the well-
being of the vulnerable and the traumatized. While working with children with autism and
Down Syndrome who had limited or no spoken language, Simoneaux found they were
transformed and changed dramatically by communicating through their painting and in other
inventive ways. She has also used expressive art with HIV-positive women prisoners with
mental health issues, often awaiting execution by hanging (Simoneaux, 2011). She reported that
although the prison was a dismal place, whatever the women chose to paint, and create with the
brightly colored veils they were given, they were able to laugh and take pleasure in these simple
activities. This art therapy strategy to move beyond their prisoner labels raised the self-esteem of
these neglected women to a more acceptable and even joyous image, however briefly. As
indicated by neuroscience of the right brain, sensory-based techniques such as painting may
restore or enhance a damaged self-concept (Chapman, 2014; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015).

Similarly, art therapy has been shown to be an effective outlet for imprisoned youth.
According to Chapman (2014), adolescence was an ideal time to begin art therapy because these
children were able to think abstractly, so they were able to express themselves creatively. In his
foreword to Chapman (2014), Allan Schore, a leading expert in neuropsychoanalysis, described
art therapy as connected to the affect-laden properties of the visual image and to be a potential
and important entry into the child’s inner world. Thus, the adolescent stage is one of creativity
and provided a unique window of opportunity (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015). Incarcerated youth, who commonly have painful histories, could tell their story metaphorically and symbolically, instead of dangerously acting out their pain in a cycle of violence (Arrington, 2007). Moon (2012) has also noted, that genuine immersion into the art therapy process helped the adolescent let go of old images of self. Gussak (1997, 2004, 2007a, 2007b) emphasized the process of art making activities from the right brain rather than the open investigation of trauma issues. He observed from his experience working in a variety of correctional institutions that self-expression often led to self-discovery and catharsis, principal motivations for making art. From a neurological perspective this research suggested that professional helpers must develop right-brain to right-brain attunement in working with traumatized populations employing left brain functions into narratives that have been associated with mindfulness and self-reflection (Schore, 2002, Chapman, 2014).

**Mindfulness techniques.** Trauma-focused art therapy approaches, and techniques explored the transformative benefits of art therapy in helping victims of trauma and the helpers who were affected by the trauma and its long-term negative effects (Gantt, 2008). According to art therapy educator Gilroy (2006), recalled trauma was often remembered visually. Its external and visual representation was sometimes without speech but, when witnessed by the art therapist, could assist an eventual reconnection to relationship and an integration of the trauma (Gilroy, 2006). Gilroy’s research on trauma and nonverbal art therapy interventions was based on the mind-body connection with a neurological view of trauma therapy methods promoting an optimal balance between the amygdala and the hippocampus in order to restore a sense of well-being (Gantt, 2008). Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) described bodily-based interventions that promoted mindfulness as a means of providing transformative meaning making from the effects
of trauma. In the therapeutic use of response art, those at risk for vicarious trauma were being trained in mindfulness techniques such as focused breathing and centering techniques (Fish, 2012; Garrison Institute Online, 2011). Applications of mindfulness and meditation practices have been used by and for art therapists (Chapman, 2014; Malchiodi, 2013, Rappaport, 2014). Rappaport (2009, 2014) developed focus-oriented art therapy to increase emotional regulation and self-awareness, effective in stress reduction, self-regulation, trauma recovery, and overall quality of life. Future development called for additional research on neuropsychology and mind-body paradigms and its relationship to image-making to address different types of trauma.

**Creative Writing**

Horneffer and Jamison (2002) argued that one of the most effective ways to access our inner world of feelings was through writing, particularly in the self-regulation of stress and the monitoring of emotional states. For Carl Jung (2015), art and writing revealed the divine in everyday life. To facilitate people’s interaction with their own images, Jung would have them complete writing in the form of a poem or a story or he would often have them write as a form of active imagination in response to their images, to amplify meaning. After six years of engaging in therapeutic practice of art and writing, Jung transcribed insights in his journal, which became the sourcebook for all of his subsequent theoretical writings. Chapman (2014) described what happened in our brains from writing when combined with art making, positing art activates the right hemisphere and writing activate the left hemisphere. The combination of art-making and writing might enhance our deeply felt emotional states. She further explained that when the right prefrontal cortex, involved in effortful control over emotional states, is turned on, other parts of the brain that are related to strong negative states, such as the amygdala, are turned off. This
would suggest that our brains capacity to manage emotional states through the use of right-brain art activities is translated into language and words.

Deva Suckerman (1990) explored the benefit of adding the dual process of making art and writing as methods, which not only allowed for a strong emotional release, but also gave meaning to what is expressed. According to Pennebaker, Mayne, and Francis (1997), written emotional expression provided a linguistic structure that promoted assimilation and understanding of the event. Pennebaker’s (1997) assumptions were supported by a growing body of research that investigated the physical and psychological benefits of written expression, particularly in the narrative form. The capacity for reflection was considered to be extremely important in contributing to the professional growth of counselors, therapists, and students (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009). Pennebaker (2004) conducted tests with students at the University of Texas demonstrating the efficacy of language in reducing stress, improving health, increasing positive affect, and promoting coping skills through writing in those who have experienced trauma or have chronic physical illness. Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) led case studies with art therapy students and counseling students during their internships. Most were daunted by their clients’ extensive serious and traumatic histories. They found that visual journaling combined with writing was a particularly effective aspect of experience that facilitated the process of reflection.

Although much of Pennbaker (2004) and Deaver’s (2009) research has been done with college or graduate students, their findings added to the body of research supporting the use of writing by laypersons and professionals, including caregivers. Writing has been seen as an effective, occupationally-based strategy to be used with professional helpers to manage stressful work environments and their variability of symptoms in working with unique situations (Allen,
1995; Brown, 2008; Fish, 2017; Given, 2008; Malchiodi, 2003; Pizarro, 2004; Smyth & Greenberg, 2000; Wadeson, 2003). Many therapists used multimodal techniques believing that writing and reading about their artwork was important and even necessary for gaining objectivity and self-awareness and enhancing their understanding of the images (Fish, 2017; Malchiodi, 2003; Wadeson, 2003). Some art therapists used a humanistic approach, such as intention with art making and witnessing artwork through writing (Allen, 1995a), or Gestalt methods as ways of working where the image was allowed to have a voice and lead the art maker (Allen a, 1995; Fish, 2017). Working with various populations in different kinds of settings, art therapist Wadeson (2003) advised that the gift of art and writing that we gave to clients must also be given to the service provider. She provided examples of art expressions in which she described combining poetry and art as methodical work that could function as a reflective and soothing process for clients and for those who provided care for them. The therapeutic benefits of poetry, story, and reflective writing have been well documented in professional literature with those who work under extremely demanding work conditions in adjusting to losses, recognizing their mortality, fear of contagions, and feelings of helplessness (Wadeson, 2003).

As Given (2008) described, qualitative research has shared an aspect of poetry in documentation of details to arrive at common factors. As a way to meaningfully process traumatic stress through her artwork Given, though not a poet, implemented poetic craft to enhance her ability to listen and notice details creatively playing with metaphor and image to communicate. The impact of journaling on populations such as young adult males, for whom self-expression may be an unfamiliar activity, suggested that its power as a novel approach not be overlooked (Allen, 2001). For those not drawn to verbal self-expression, journaling or reflective writing offers a noninvasive, potentially self-directed approach. Pizarro’s (2004)
research has shown that writing about trauma or stress has improved health and reduced stress but could negatively affect mood. Nevertheless, its overall benefits as part of an art activity, even brief sessions of writing therapy, could reduce social dysfunction and participating in an art activity has made therapy a more enjoyable experience and encouraged participants to return and continue with treatments (Pizarro, 2004). Smyth and Greenberg (2000) pointed out that when an alternative modality of interpersonal expression is not possible or desirable, written disclosure or reflection could assume an important role. In their research about traumatic events, Smyth and Greenberg (2000) noted “such interpersonal disclosure may reduce the negative sequelae of traumatic events” (p. 121). Brown (2008) expounded on the necessity of arts-based inquiries, such as narrative, life history, poetry, and visual art, describing them as important ways of thinking that were viable as research methods.

**Art Therapy and Cultural Considerations**

Helpers who have suffered directly or indirectly from the intensity and stress of cross-cultural encounters could internalize a perception of the hopelessness they have observed around them (Kokonya et al., 2015). A group of Kenyan medical workers at the Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi were at risk for developing compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, although not much was known about their adaptability or hardiness in coping with extreme stress (Kokonya et al., 2015). Although there is little known about Western-trained helpers suffering from vicarious trauma after working in developing countries, the danger of suffering from the effects of secondary trauma is real and could only be aided through education. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of art therapy as a valuable component of trauma treatment from a biopsychosocial perspective may be helpful (Holden, 2012; Pearlman, 2014; Simoneaux, 2011). This approach required a variety of sensitive strategies to expand the effectiveness of art
therapy in addressing the complexities of trauma and its various expressions. Simoneaux (2011), who has worked for years with women prisoners in Africa, cautioned those who want to work in Africa or in developing countries that, although significant cultural tensions posed challenges for Western-trained art therapists, it is still possible to make a difference in individual people’s lives within the many cultural barriers. Since art therapy provided a means for communicating with the nonverbal mind, it was an ideal vehicle in working with traumatized individuals in cultures where expression of difficult feelings of even feelings at may be discouraged or not understood well.

Evidence provided within the field of vicarious trauma should include broader interventions and education within the various cultural experiences and spiritual frameworks of those who suffered from vicarious trauma (Holden, 2012; Pearlman, 2014). Having recognized how increased self-awareness could lead to the empathetic understanding of others, higher education should have emphasized the use of various methods of reflective recording while sensitively addressing issues of diversity and the sociocultural context of the students’ reflections. It is important for helpers to have strategies in place, so they can manage these ethically and sensitively when confronted with unfamiliar religious or spiritual values or systems (Holden, 2012). Having grasped a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of understanding trauma, the brain must be also considered in awareness and knowledge of the increasingly varied cultures we help (Chapman, 2014; Lusebrink, 2010).

**Expressive Therapies Continuum**

The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) is a well-developed construct for understanding, facilitating, and evaluating art therapy (Hinz, 2009; Lusebrink, 1990, 2008, 2010). The ETC model of creative functioning highlighted individuals’ experiences, images,
thoughts, and feelings in a variety of complex and comprehensive ways. The ETC framework established systems of human information processing that explained how art media can be used on a continuum of levels: The Kinesthetic/Sensory, the Perpetual/Affective, the Cognitive/Symbolic, and the Creative Level as an integrative function of all of the levels (Hinz 2008, 2009; Lusebrink, 2010). According to Hinz (2009), the first three levels of the ETC has helped to differentiate individuals’ unique strengths and weaknesses, the evaluation of media preferences, verbal dialogue, and behavior during the art process. Additional input on these levels elaborated on the meaning and affective value of symbols leading to verbal exchange and/or insight leading to the verification of parts of self (Lusebrink, 1990). Lusebrink (2010) further explained the ETC to reflect the different functions and structures in the brain that process visual and affective information.

Hinz (2009) applied the four levels of the ETC through activities and the customized use of media as outlined. The first level, or kinesthetic experience, incorporated art materials that involved action, movement, and rhythm with media like clay, wood, and styrofoam. The second level, or Sensory component, Hinz described applied media that is tactile, visual, and auditory; it encouraged individuals to focus on inner sensations while engaging in actions such as stroking wet clay, finger painting, and painting to music. The Perceptual dimension involved boundaries and containment, encompassing such activities as doodles of present perceptions, blind or semi-blind contour drawings, with materials such as boxes or tile that focus on containment. The Affective level was concerned with emotions and materials that encourage mood states with media activities that would include collage of faces, abstract emotion, or body maps. The Cognitive component enhanced negotiation skills, decision-making, and problem-solving, using materials with inherent structure such as wood, mosaic tile, construction paper, and collage. The
Symbolic level referred to intuitive concept formation and symbolic thought, which could be explored through experiences associated with self-knowledge and personal meaning and activities such as dream amplification, a self-symbol, or the constructing of a personal coat of arms. The Creative level encompassed the whole self, which included three-dimensional representations with activities that synthesize all of the levels leading to self-actualization experiences. The Creative level, when related to vicarious transformation, can also address expression of spirituality, a key component of vicarious trauma that is often changed.

This theory reached well beyond the application of a single art therapy technique to provide individualized art treatments (Hinz, 2009), which could be helpful in differentiating the considerable variations of vicarious traumatization among caregivers. With regards to the expressions of vicarious trauma, this theoretical framework could aid in conditions such as the release of stress or anxiety, the increase of emotional well-being, the congruence of parts of self, and the deepening of personal meaning and greater self-awareness (Pearlman & McKay, 2008).

Chapman (2014) advocated individualized approaches with carefully selected art media that encouraged expressive potential, stimulating the right-hemisphere, the area in the creative process involved in decision making that validates a sense of self. Gussak (2007a) designed an art therapy program for prisoners and worked with specific media to activate the right hemisphere to allow for affective expression by using materials such as oil pastels, watercolors, and thick Crayola crayons. He also believed that targeted treatment with the right brain self was important for those studying their vicarious trauma, especially as it works to resolve difficulties in affective cognitive abilities. In future studies, further understanding of the ETC and the customized use of media can enhance individualize art therapy treatments in the varied vicarious responses of those who suffer with vicarious trauma.
Summary

In a review of the literature, this researcher found a lack of arts-based heuristic research or heuristic studies exploring the effect of art therapy as a way to process or work through vicarious trauma. Additionally, research has not fully explored how vicarious trauma shapes lives and the ways in which individual expressions of vicarious trauma can lead to the discovery of personal meaning.

The main symptoms of vicarious trauma expressed were negative emotional responses, a disrupted sense of self and identity, and a disrupted worldview or meaning systems. Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) also defined emotional responses to vicarious trauma as an ongoing sadness, and loss of self or loss of perspective. The perception of helplessness was common for helpers to identify with and experience similar symptoms of the primary trauma (Herman, 1992), and also linked to a frustration with a failure to fully understand cultural influences (Cohen, Barnes, & Rankin, 1995). The process of change following a traumatic event could lead to vicarious transformation when traumatized people were open to seeing the world in a new way, challenged creativity in addressing issues, and strengthened resolve to take bold and decisive action (Manning-Jones et al., 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Many researchers described the deleterious effects of caring for the traumatized as the catalyst for their psychological, spiritual, and emotional transformation (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001, 2004; Cohen & Collens, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2015; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Mols et al., 2009; Pearlman, 2014; Pearlman & Caringi 2009).

Art therapy can be used to absorb the pain and the tumult of others, and the impact that trauma has upon the art therapist, particularly when working in the theoretical framework of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2009). Fish (2017) described the use of art therapy and
response art for professional processing to contain, explore, and communicate thoughts about
their therapeutic work. Similarly, art-making techniques used by the participant imparted a
clarity about situations that were difficult to assess. According to Allan (1995a) and Fish (2012),
such artistic inquiry provided a way to understand an experience that is uniquely capable of
compassionate engagement with disturbing emotions. In working in context differing from one’s
own, art therapy techniques helped service workers to come to terms with inner tensions and
awareness of privilege that could surface in serving vulnerable populations (Fish, 2017).
CHAPTER III

Methodology

An adaptation of the heuristic research method as an immersion into art and its processes provided the basic conceptual framework for this research study. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of selected artworks produced during the participant’s graduate internship at a juvenile detention center. The participatory nature of tacit knowledge, reflection, and discovery was made possible through the combination of heuristic creative processes and thematic analysis. Exploring the cognitive and emotional changes the participant experienced provided insight into the development and presentation of vicarious trauma.

Participant

The participant was a fifty-nine year-old female who identified herself as a Christian aligned with corresponding traditional values and doctrine. She was a graduate student in Art Therapy (MAAT) at Saint Mary-of-The-Woods. Her employment history included teaching in various settings including as an Associate Teacher Counselor at an alternative school for adolescents and young adults struggling with emotional difficulties, as a middle school art teacher at a private Christian School for five years, and as an art therapy intern co-facilitating therapeutic art classes to young offenders at a prison facility. She obtained a Level I & Level II Certificate in Advanced Trauma Treatment at The Ferentz Institute in Baltimore, Maryland in 2016, and completed her training and education in 2017. Last spring, she became a full-time “expressive arts” caregiver for her mother in her declining health, along with two other part-time caregivers. In this helper role, the participant lived with her mother until she passed away in August 2017.

The participant was born in an upper middle class white family in Norfolk, Virginia, and
was raised in an environment of entitlement. She had ancestors who were slaveholders, and her grandparents, born in the South in the 1890s, held entrenched, stereotyped beliefs about all minority populations. As a result of this familial history and resulting negative experiences from her childhood, she developed a sense of self, awareness of her cultural identity, and understanding of her privilege.

This participant took her graduate internship in art therapy at a juvenile detention center. During residencies at her school, she had casual conversations with other students about their internship experiences and spoke with professionals working at the detention center about their experiences within a prison setting. The realization that there were physical, psychological, spiritual, and social consequences from hearing about traumatic stories, being exposed to the pain of others, and observing trauma in art-making became ever more real. The challenges of witnessing such evocative and personally disturbing circumstances lay at the heart of the researchers desire to develop heuristic research. Reflecting on her experiences in Nicaragua, Kenya, and the detention center as a means of gaining self-awareness was the first of many life steps towards her helping others impacted by trauma (See Appendix A). As participant, helper, and artist, the creation and display of artwork that reflected some of the critical issues she witnessed during and after her internship, informed her understanding of the influence vicarious trauma has on helpers.

**Research Design**

This heuristic thematic study explored the sustained, regular practice of combined reflective writing and art making compiled during the participant’s eleven-month internship to investigate vicarious trauma. Over the course of approximately five months, a thematic analysis was conducted of the participant’s creative and reflective depictions of subjective experience.
Central to the way this study was designed was the emphases of various processes and types of reflection as essential and daily practices (interspersed with days of rest each week) to focus, structure thinking, improve understanding, and establish trustworthiness. The researcher routinely met with a peer every few weeks to reflect on the process and progress of the researcher’s work. To help the researcher stay objective during this heuristic study, these semi-structured meetings lasted approximately two hours and consisted of conversation. Over a period of weeks, the researcher compiled individual tables collecting the data of each artwork and corresponding reflection. This record was often referred to in the discernment of growing ideas and evolving themes and codes relevant to the research question of the topic. In addition to and deriving out of this table a more detailed twenty-eight-page color coded and highlighted chart with thumbnail images was also constructed over a period of weeks. This document was referred to daily as a valuable constant reference guide to process and make sense of the constant flow of new information and insights supporting this study.

Heuristic Research

The research design leading to this thematic analysis was organized by a construction of heuristic procedures: illuminating the question, immersion, incubation, and analysis. These methods were integrated from Moustakas’ (1985) research model by which the participant’s data was segmented and categorized for thematic analysis. In following Douglas and Moustakas’ process, this research was conducted through self-searching and thematic analysis to collect, code, and analyze data in terms of descriptive meanings and core thematic themes from creative illustrations and written responses of the participant’s internship experience. The thematic analysis of the artwork focused on constructive engagement with the negative changes that resulted from continued exposure to the traumatized residents at that center. The heuristic
approach of studying personal visual and written responses to traumatic experiences allowed for the possibility of a more meaningful, holistic conceptualization of vicarious trauma, which speaks to both the ways vicarious trauma damages and enriches the lives of helpers. The combined reflective practices of art-making and writing allowed for the construction of meaning within the negative implications of vicarious trauma. According to neurological research (Chapman, 2014; Gantt, 2008; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Malchiodi, 2012), art first makes personal experience visible to the right brain, or creative self. In this way, artwork may be viewed as an extension of self, therefore creating a respectful distance from the artwork that may ensure reflective distance. Furthermore, when one steps back from the art, words in the left brain, or verbal center, can be attached to a visual experience (Hass-Cohen, 2015). When applied to the personal experiences of vicarious trauma, words lead toward the discovery of meaningful connections. When art and writing are intertwined, new forms of communication develop, more varied self-expressions can emerge, and the discovery of a sense of self is possible (Arrington, 2007).

Following a heuristic methodology as a guide was foundational to the process of heuristic discernment (Moustakas, 2001). Like other qualitative methods, heuristic inquiry relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The criterion for understanding and judgment in this study encompassed psychosocial factors and sensitive cultural issues through the participation in intimate reflective work and discovery leading to fresh insight and greater awareness (Moustakas, 2001). The external context of Nicaragua, Kenya, and the juvenile detention center was integral to the researcher’s heuristic awareness and in her responses relevant to the phenomenon of vicarious trauma.

Moustakas (1985) observation of the close relationship of heuristic research with
existential philosophy can be compared to that of existential art therapist and theologian, Bruce Moon (1990), who spoke of the importance of the way in which we respond to conflict and human suffering. In emphasizing the uniqueness of vicarious suffering, the researcher acting as research instrument functioned as a humanizing element. Douglas and Moustakas (1985) recognized the validation of a self-study was by the pursuit of the truth to the extent that it is conducted through authentic self-processes with repeated examination until essences are revealed and creditability. Given (2009) believed heuristic research provides a way to examine the self and personal experience in conjunction with traditional modes of scientific research, which necessitates the heuristic subject to deliberately self-disclose and evaluate data carefully and dutifully. Furthermore, Given’s notion that repeated verification and reliability from the creative synthesis of essences and meanings is a rigorous application. Thus, the phenomenon of vicarious trauma is genuinely and clearly portrayed. Methodological rigor was increased in this study by the researcher’s immersion into artworks and written reflections, both during the internship and revision process, to consistently reflect on new interpretations and validate preexistent ones, a process Moustakas (1985) used in his heuristic model. This process of immersion in Moustakas model provided “the initial essential preparation for discovery” (p. 45) and crystallization. The passage of time of returning to this study after a period of months spent caring for her mother until her death was believed by the participant to have substantially enriched the meaningfulness of her study and its purpose, which contributed to its methodological rigor. Similarly, Braun and Clark (2006) claimed that when a thoughtful return to data happens, the researcher can produce trustworthy and insightful findings. Incorporating intentional time away into inquiry methods has been shown to enhance the trustworthiness of results (Moustakas, 1985; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). During the course of collecting data as an arts-based heuristic process,
artwork and reflections created by the participant were retained, thoroughly and consistently explored, and then used as archival data for this study.

Through a heuristic arts-based inquiry of vicarious trauma, it was possible to research more closely and gain new conceptual and practical distinctions (Given, 2008). The researcher intentionally disengaged from this earlier artwork, to respond to those pieces at a later date to evaluate the art process with greater objectivity and deeper understanding. After a long interval of rest, the researcher’s re-immersion in pursuit of the artwork and writings formed this heuristic arts-based study “with full energy and resourcefulness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 40). When applied to vicarious trauma, Moustakas’ notion of visiting previous art experiences to reveal truths capable of building a deeper understanding potentially illuminates new realities felt universally by other helpers.

**Art Process**

This heuristic research was developed during the participant’s internship as she witnessed the lives of incarcerated youth and experienced some of the rigid confinement of the prison setting. The participant sought to build meaning from the vicarious trauma she experienced as a result of bearing witness to these experiences. As a helper, she saw her efforts to serve as a call to pilgrimage, not as an expert, but as a seeker trying to better understand the suffering of vulnerable people from different cultures. This orientation recognized the role of subjective experience, both personal and professional, in finding meaning from the darkest places of human suffering.

During the participant’s eleven-month art therapy internship at a juvenile detention center, she fulfilled required weekly assignments by making creative responses to her experiences, utilizing a combination of art making and written reflections as a means of
processing intense emotions. The dual processes of art and writing came to exist within a disciplined timeframe according to when class assignments were due, were semi-structured, expressive, and process oriented. The participant first created the art and then, while observing it, responded with a spontaneous written reflection that required honesty, openness, and self-disclosure to facilitate the participant’s self-investigation of the difficult parts of herself.

The procedures and techniques she used were experimental in nature and inspired by procedures based on Moustakas’ (1985, 1987, 1990) heuristic philosophy. They were an intentional immersion into the process of seeing what an experience is for another, not its cause or reason. The participant used a Christian approach of attunement and mindfulness as a feeling of body, mind, and spiritual connectedness to experience the process of what an experience is for another. In her art process she applied the ancient practice of prayer based on the Desert Fathers. Praying the Psalms, the prayer book in both Jewish and Christian traditions, commonly known as lectio divina or divine reading of prayer the participant would pray or sing the Psalms releasing her creative process to God; no matter what she was feeling, whether it be anger, joy, broken faith, inexpressible grief, or lack of words to connect (Robertson, 2011).

In making the data, other procedures evoking self-examination and identification included the participant reproducing the same directive as was asked of the juvenile delinquents. In following the direction and pace of the incarcerated youth who were engaged in art-making, the participant applied the same or similar methods that were used in the art room to the creation of her own art work. In using their themes and working methods as closely as she could to gain deeper understanding, she became more attune to the vulnerabilities of this population (Wadeson, 2003). In deference to the detention center’s requirements, she worked with limited art materials, such as a sheet of inexpensive copy paper, Cray-Pas oil pastels, colored pencils,
and other basic supplies. To re-engage in art making at her apartment, she worked alone at night and restricted the use of her time, art materials, and modest work space much like the rigid system that was enforced for residents at the detention center. Imposing these self-limits helped enhance her perspective and increase empathy through “opening the self to the darker aspects of human experience” (Stone, 2008, p. 215). During each weekly art-making session, the participant used mindfulness approaches, such as breathing, and Centering Prayers involving soothing sacred and environmental music to give consent to God to empty her of any agenda about the creative outcome of the experience (Rappaport, 2014). To enhance the present moment, she would ask a question before beginning each artwork (a) What is important to me right now?, (b) What do I need to create?, or (c) Draw your life. With the use of intention, she gave herself permission to feel and express what was needed in her art. She deliberately chose details from the detention center residents’ artwork, enlarging and then manipulating them.

Dalman (2007) said that through these types of acts, “the world is being articulated in new shapes. Such a process entails that when the world is accepted in a new articulation, knowledge has grown and the relation to the world has changed” (p. 275). In some artworks, to encourage transparency and a more authentic expression, the participant drew with her non-dominant hand to release some of the difficult emotions, and then responded to her drawing with poetry or a journal reflection with her right hand. The pre-internship artwork was created prior to her internship and the culminating art project was developed in stages after following her internship over several months after the participant moved back to her family home.

Data Analysis

The arts-based approach of this heuristic research resulted in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), which required summarizing key features, coding, and interacting and thinking
about the data. Creswell (2014) described a systematic process for coding data in which specific statements are analogized and categorized into themes that represent the study topic. Reflection and synthesis of inner and outer experience to make valuable connections involved repeated reading of the data in an active way searching for meaning and patterns. The thematic analysis methodology utilized in this study was a flexible method of analysis that allowed the researcher to analyze and report patterns and themes as they emerged within the responsive artwork and written data (Braun & Clark, 2006). As Given (2008) outlined, coding strategies lend itself to heuristic research and is highly capable of enriching data analysis through analytic insights and inquiries. Therefore, the use of heuristic research and a thematic analysis of the resultant data filled a gap in the current literature about the use of art-making and reflective writing practices to address how vicarious trauma can transform into a meaningful experience for service professionals and helpers.

According to Braun and Clark (2006), a thematic analysis is a viable qualitative research method to categorize, evaluate, and report themes discovered within data. Through its theoretical freedom, a thematic analysis provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich, detailed, complex account of data (Braun & Clark, 2006; King, 2004). In an effort to produce trustworthy and insightful analysis the researcher continuously revisited her collected data of visual and written responses as a process of reflection and way of interacting with and thinking about the data. Braun and Clark (2006) also stressed the thoughtful return to data in endeavoring to meet standards of trustworthiness. This data was analyzed using a theoretical, constructivist approach. The intuitive and interpretive process of reflecting on the visual and written response art lent itself toward a theoretical analysis of the data. In addition, the nature of the internship placement in a juvenile
detention center demanded attention to the socio-cultural context surrounding the development of vicarious trauma and transformation. Latent themes were compared to those symptoms common with helpers who have experienced vicarious trauma and transformation (Curtois & Ford, 2009; Figley, 1995; Forester, 2007; Garret, 2009; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Stamm 2016).

Creswell (2014) described a systematic process for coding data in which specific statements are analogized and categorized into themes that represent the study topic. The researcher’s thematic analysis involved interaction with the data in several steps to summarize key features code for themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). This was performed as a descriptive strategy that facilitated and focused the search for patterns of experience and an overarching design that unites them (Given, 2008). The art-based written reflections were the foundational data for this thematic analysis as they revealed descriptive, nuanced communication that supported reflection, self-understanding, and insight of the participant’s response to her internship. Themes common in vicarious traumatization were heuristically uncovered in the art products, the process of production, and in the corresponding written reflections. Each artwork and written reflection was explored thoroughly in light of personal cognitive and emotional changes that appear to be associated with the phenomena of vicarious trauma. To aid validity, further development of themes took the researcher deeper into the meaning of the texts, exploring emergent themes through patterns in repeated language and recurring images (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

During the first phase of the thematic analysis, the researcher immersed herself in the data to familiarize herself with the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher gathered all of the data, consisting of artwork, descriptive and reflective writings,
analytic notes, poetry, and, in handling it, familiarized her with the data. One of her reflective poems was turned into a song by her aunt, which served as basis for further reflection. Seven artworks were selected from the overall corpus of work produced over the participant’s two-semester internship. The researcher photographed these seven works, in addition to pre- and post-internship artworks, created in advance to her internship and after as a final culminating project, to study them further and in more detail after internship. The researcher “entered into the material” (Moustakas, 1985, p. 42) as she thoughtfully read the reflections, using intention as a technique to heuristically search for themes. Reading each reflection several times, sometimes resting between readings, achieved heuristic discernment that facilitated the awakening of fresh energy and perspective (Moustaks, 1985).

Entering the second step of the thematic analysis, the data was reviewed the data for descriptive meanings, core themes, and creative insights of the research participant’s experience (Moustakas, 1985). Notes were made of any interesting or repeating ideas, phrases, or imagery to generate initial codes or themes manifested in the data (Figure 1), which also became written evidence to support the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A series of tables and a refined chart created by the researcher was used to process, record, and document research, personal reflections of their values, and information about self (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This organization of data forced a justification of each code to clearly define how it should be used (King, 2004).

After the emergent themes were entered into a record-keeping chart, the researcher began the third phase of conducting a thematic analysis. The initial codes were analyzed for
connections and relationships, revealing broader themes and concepts (Figure 2). For example, concepts such as helplessness, lack of control, vulnerability, and feelings of responsibility emerged as negative emotional responses. Finally, each code was evaluated in its relation to the research question, what meaningful discoveries can be made utilizing written modalities in the effect of witnessing trauma on the emotional self? The words, phrases, and images that appeared
most frequently were further condensed into overarching themes. The multitude of negative emotional responses all related to the dominant idea of overwhelming powerlessness or helplessness in the participant. These overarching themes of vicarious trauma and vicarious transformation presented below each relate to the disruption and meaning-making of selfhood and worldview (Figure 3).

*Figure 3.* Final thematic map themes of vicarious trauma and vicarious transformation.

**Ethical Considerations**

As an alternative framework for understanding responses to vicarious trauma, ethical dimensions highlighted the early spiritual and moral development of the researcher. These experiences shaped her professional and personal growth, life choices, and movement towards wholeness as related to vicarious trauma. Engaging in a heuristic study illuminated the researcher’s self as comprised of suffering and not knowing, insights that influenced the researcher’s spiritual values and sense of ethical responsibilities. Deep connections were made between her cultural identity, selfhood, and difficult emotional responses that resulted in her being more culturally aware, and self-aware, having greater spiritually sensitivity and personal meaning related in how they influenced her development of vicarious trauma. Art therapist Barbara Fish (2017) explained the presence of inner tensions that could surface in serving
vulnerable populations. She recognized the need to examine her privilege, as well as the inherent power dynamics resulting from her privileged position, in order to ethically maintain relationships with clients from vulnerable populations. How the researcher witnessed and responded to her own suffering and the suffering of others related to distress as an ethically founded response to the context of poverty and economic disadvantage, particularly in her truthful, and therefore more trustworthy, investigation. In the effort to develop an ethnic-sensitive mindset, lifestyle choices encouraged her awareness of and involvement with difficult populations particularly with vulnerable, marginalized populations, and with the destitute poor. Openly exploring discomforts through art making and reflective practices became an opportunity for the researcher to become acutely aware of issues of whiteness and privilege and the relationship this holds on her struggle with vicarious trauma and stress in transcending difficult barriers. Although she gained greater self-awareness and her eyes were opened to personal biases and resistances, the researcher realized that this awareness does not come without considerable effort.

By completing weekly art responses and written reflections throughout her internship, the researcher became more culturally attune and sensitive to the subtle ways of communicating with racial and ethnic minorities. During her challenging internship, through the art processes and products, choices and handling of media, the researcher-participant was privileged to see cultural barriers soften and some connections made. Further, she was exposed to a multiplicity of challenges posed by the desire to interact sensitively and thoughtfully with racial and ethnic minorities, various learning styles and disabilities, emotional and physical trauma. As a result, she grew in empathic understanding, and her professional orientation expanded to include a more sensitive understanding of cultural issues. Specifically, the researcher now feels that she relies
far less on distancing herself from behaviors and processes that are foreign or threatening. Through displaying of her artwork, she voiced many of the critical issues she witnessed and experienced, an action necessary in her pilgrimage as one that visually documented the impact of the cost of care.

Attempting to embrace the ethical values of AATA (2013) *Ethical Principles for Art Therapists* was also a factor in her creative journey. To the best of her ability, through ongoing self-examination, she attended to the principles of the American Counseling Association’s (2014) *Code of Ethics* in Sections A.1.a (responsibility), A.4.b (personal values), and C.2.a (boundaries of competence). Responding to its guidelines, she regularly met with a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) therapist during the duration of this study. In other important ways, she feels that her path taken with vicarious trauma uniquely prepared her to initiate this study and brought forth changes that contributed to her professionalism and understanding of the “uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts” (ACA, 2014, para. 4).

The researcher-participant also attended to the ways in which sociocultural differences between herself and the vulnerable populations she helped emphasized the need of acting ethically through cultural awareness. The ability to travel to developing countries and the privilege of interning within a prison system gave the researcher a good foundation of diverse cultural diversity and understanding of their interconnection to her own struggle with power and privilege within these contexts. Lee’s (2013) truth-inspired notions on such moral influences of the dynamics of power and privilege in acts of charity, and the power of the giver and the powerlessness of the receiver, played a role in encouraging the researcher to embark on a heuristic study in order to delve more deeply into the research question. Writing this thesis presented an opportunity for the researcher to articulate and deepen her faith in God, her values,
and system of ethics that are all important to her and what drew her to become an art therapist. Through this study, her understanding of vicarious trauma broadened as one related to ethical and spiritual pain that enabled her to more sensitively address the well-being of those who suffer with vicarious trauma as also including the dignity of suffering. The researcher’s desire to continue maintaining professional and ethical excellence in lifelong learning as an art therapist, and providing culturally sensitive and ethical services to all peoples was also realized through the writing of this thesis.

**Researcher Bias**

This study draws upon the researcher’s own experiences and understanding to construct individualized meaning of vicarious traumatization as a heuristic inquiry through visual and written modalities. As an emergent art therapist, who has undergone extensive education and training in this profession, the researcher may be biased in her acceptance of art making as a preferred tool for exploring vicarious trauma. The researcher was also the sole creator of the artwork used in this study, and it may not generally characterize the experience of vicarious trauma expressed by other helpers. As a privileged white American, the researcher may have been inadvertently biased in her feelings, opinions, and descriptions, particularly in her discussion of her work in Kenya and/or Nicaragua and in her impressions of her internship experience at the juvenile detention center.
CHAPTER IV

Results

An analysis of the data indicated four overarching themes. These included (a) disruption of self-identity, (b) disrupted worldview, (c) changes in worldview, and (d) new ideas of selfhood. Vicarious trauma was expressed in themes of disrupted sense of self-identity, as well as a disrupted worldview. Disruptions to self-identity were presented in negative emotions, such as helplessness, grief, and loss, in addition to a confused sense of self. There were also several instances when images and phrases reflected disruptions in the participant’s current worldview, especially in dissociations from the harsh, unfamiliar realities of the juvenile detention center and increasing awareness of privilege. Themes of vicarious transformation presented as changes in worldview, particularly in helper identity and new concepts of selfhood. Changes in worldview appeared in reflections about empathy and attunement, which speak to a renewal of spiritual hope in the connectedness of others. Additionally, the visual and written responses expressed new constructions of identity and selfhood, facilitated by a calming presence, openness, and willingness to self-disclose and reflect. The researcher explored these themes through the analysis of seven selected artworks produced by the participant, as well as in the artworks’ corresponding written reflections. A pre-internship self-portrait, and a culminating post-internship “found objects” assemblage, poem, and song created before and after her internship were explored in more depth.

Disruption of Self-Identity

*Helping Prison* (Figure 4), a self-portrait collage created prior to the participant’s internship, is used in this study as a reference point to introduce the seven artworks in this study’s thematic analysis. In *Helping Prison*, various kinds of hands (nine total) were
symbolically portrayed: reaching hands, touching white hands, a black hand, decrepit hands grasping a cup, prayerful hands embodying a bird, and a predatory type hand touching the participant’s head. When taken as a whole, the hands described in the text “grasping for my [the participant’s] attention” are comparable to the decrepit hands in the artwork that also seem to grasp for attention. The depiction of hands throughout the artworks often expressed inner struggles and issues of privilege in working with the vulnerable. When viewed as helping hands, they tended to the messy process of the wounds of others in pain, and in response to vicarious loss the participant. As explained by the participant, they become “hands that tend to my own wounds.” The vicarious pain of helping also included feelings of grief and loss as evidenced by the word “Goodbye” in the upper left-hand corner.

As a dominant repetitive visual presence, the hands in Helping Prison expressed a disrupted sense of self, feelings of responsibility and helplessness, negative thoughts, vulnerability, and awareness of privilege. These patterns of multiple hands that surround or encapsulate the central figure suggested rumination as invading, negative thoughts. In the text, a
sense of responsibility was also expressed, “Being weighted has made it hard to fully engage with my cohorts and freely embrace the residency experience. I carry a great deal of concerns with me I am finding difficult to relinquish.” The participant noted her need to help others: “As an adult, I still need to nurture others.” The word “need” in the reflection is repeated multiple times as, “needing me … needing goes back to … meets a need … my need.” The description of the intern’s smiling face is also repeated and emphasized: “My self-portrait portrayed smiling as a gentle and loving person … the image of a smiling loving face … a personal agenda in the image of a smiling loving face.” Prior to her internship, the participant’s artwork and reflection revealed anxieties about her confused and conflicted identity as a helper. The key word “hand(s)” that repeated itself: “hands that seem to grasp at my attention … grateful for my hands … hands needing is important because it becomes increasingly prevalent in the artworks and writings. When contrasted to the empathetic manner of touch and whiteness of her hands, the darkened, invading, predatory type hand atop the intern’s head appears especially disturbing and undesirable when related to the participant’s struggles of privilege and disrupted qualities of self.

In Restraint Episode (Figure 5) the description of conflicting emotions and negative voices surround a yellow hand. In the text, the participant identified the surrounding lines as Figure 5. Restraint Episode.
“intrusive thoughts as voices” that “function to keep me in a more predictable and socially acceptable role.” The next phrases focused on the participant’s struggle with and awareness of privilege and existential struggles. She disclosed spiritual challenges by writing, “The light and felt darkness, … a reaching hand and heavy fog-like covering like in the book of Exodus, a personal spiritual struggle.” The participant engaged in an intense struggle, asking existential questions that indicate vicarious trauma and its transformation in reflection and in confronting personal values: “The ability to ignore a life in torment literally thrust into our art studio at first seemed important, but then I realized that having empathy towards a desperate, vulnerable, human being, was actually more important.”

In *Clear Cabochon* (Figure 6), the intern used a clear stone to magnify “tiny figures”

*Figure 6. Clear Cabochon.*

reproduced from a seemingly insignificant detail of a youth’s artwork at the detention center, as enlarged this detail and then traced it. In the cabochon, the theme of feelings of responsibility and defenselessness continued to emerge in the text. “I felt it was necessary for me to cross back over her bridge drawing once again.” The act of placing tiny little figures ‘behind glass” so they were magnified and clearly seen through the glass shape represented a type of protective shield or encasement. The glass container as offering protection can be related to the threatening
environment of the detention center, and to those who suffer within it, including the participant and her helplessness in her disrupted helper identity. Additionally, the diminutive size of two enclosed figures in *Clear Cabochon* correlated to a sense of power and privilege and to the theme of detachment in distancing oneself. She wrote, “I had created a round glass window to examine, even amplify the tiny potentially private little figures.”

In *Lifting Prison Bars* (Figure 7) the participant recalled in her reflection the words of the late Nelson Mandela: “It is to be said that a society’s soul should be judged by how it treats its children.” This reflection and the next speaks to the ongoing weight of responsibility the intern continued to carry as her helper identity. In a closer depiction of the bars, she described using scissors to cut out the bars of the oppression she feels and witnesses exemplifying the intensity of the load she carries through the art process. “After rearranging the bars one last time, I placed the teddy bear within them.” In this text, bars were explained as a “preoccupation with the bars … arranging and rearranging the cell bars in various ways,” reflection on each new composition. In the bars, she noticed the symbolism of her
own imprisonment though them … I had to mentally resolve their significance even though I could not verbally interpret their meaning. … He peaks out, [the teddy bear] looking directly at the viewer, and does not appear happy. I am not sure I am happy seeing him, but I must.

The repeated images and words of restraint, grief, and the weight of responsibility within these artworks suggested the participant’s disruptions to self-identity.

**Disruptions of Worldview**

In *Portrait of an Incarcerated Youth* (Figure 8), the participant’s described choice and use of images and words vividly portrayed a disruption of worldview that presents with issues of privilege, rumination, and confused sense of helper identity. The participant described her art process, and use of media as a way to control recurrent overthinking as rumination, which included adding patterns, and lines to fill the paper of her art

*To contain some of the emotion I felt within, and that was swirling all about me… The colors lit up as if reflecting a torrent of emotion from an inner world I knew nothing*
about. I used a black Sharpie marker to enliven the composition by overlaying patterns, lines, and shapes to the watercolor marker background.

To the figures missing hand that she raises up black gloves are added alluding to the history of relatives of the deceased at funerals who would often supply black gloves for the poorer members of the congregation for fear of the shame of un-gloved mourners. Other related hand forms in *Portrait of an Incarcerated Youth* include: arm warmers, and a pom-pom, in addition to the new gloved hand. Throughout the art process, cultural awareness and questioning of the darker aspects of human experience from her privileged point of view was incomplete and disrupted from a longstanding confused sense of helper identity. In this instance, the participant’s description of difficult, unruly behavior of those around her further conveyed the confliction of her vicarious pain in witnessing the disruptive qualities of incarcerated youth in pain. She communicated the emotional difficulty of this upheaval when she wrote:

> The range of disruptive, agitated behaviors, crude stories, and occasional outburst of foul language expressed by the young residents was more taxing of my emotional energy than I thought it would be.... I wondered that the person’s hair in my collage looked similar to hers... I wondered more about these young women, and particularly, how the one who sat so close to me could have ended up incarcerated?

When associated with the missing hand, these questions function as statements of helplessness and of cultural tensions, but also paint a picture of the depletion of helping expressed as vicarious suffering. However, a change in worldview evolving from vicarious transformation were expressed in a variety of intense emotions, and in the participant’s hopeful wish: “my art is perhaps a desperate wish from these youth to be free from a life of confinement.”
Changes in Worldview

In *Lifting Prison Bars* (Figure 7), the kinetic action of cutting paper prison bars and in rearranging them spoke of her growing awareness of the recurrent theme of darker aspects of human experience. Expressions of ethical and spiritual conflicts were also reflected in observations about her growing awareness of privilege: “I am saddened, and even sickened by the way our culture of white entitlement has contributed to the disturbing realities and consequences facing juvenile delinquents.” The participant’s struggle in removing personal barriers to her evolving worldview and awareness of privilege was expressed repeatedly as a recurrent image of White hands that now lift oppressive bars. Also, hands as a metaphor for helper identity acted out emergent themes of vicarious suffering, even though in the text the participant described the meaning of what she is doing may not be clear. However, the art process of cutting and arranging bars seemed to evoke a willingness to reflect more deeply in order to self-disclose.

In *Disconnected Youth* (Figure 9), privilege and vulnerability was presented by the

*Figure 9.Disconnected Youth.*

participant through the image of a veiled woman who walks on water:
A veiled woman appears to walk confidently on a body of water, as the other figures stand, sink nearby, or are disconnected forms above; her veil shielding her from the disturbing realities around her… She walks away from the viewer … a bound figure to the right watches himself sinking. I often need to disconnect from the harsh realities of the prison setting by putting on a “protective hood” and moving to other more pleasant places.

The oversized figure of the veiled women was repeated in the middleground, highlighting her importance in the theme of priviledge and her veil as a possible covering, shielding her vulnerability to images of suffering that surround her. These images and descriptions reflected diruptions in the participant’s meaning systems. Her changes in worldview also related to her attunment to the pain of others and, with respect to vicarious transformation, spoke to the emergence of new concepts of identity expressed in times of isolation.

*Figure 10. Inside the Detention Center.*

In *Inside the Detention Center* (Figure 10), the participant reproduced the same directive as was asked of the juvenile delinquents. In her picture she depicted how she was behind the closed doors of the detention center. The repeated idea of imprisonment is amplified in the
artworks title *Helping Prison* (Figure 4), as well as other references of this kind in other artworks. The participant wrote that:

I painted the doors steel grey and added three black vertical strips to each door to emphasize the idea of being locked up… Inside, I observed a black youth standing in a corner repeatedly banging his hands up against the colored striped gym wall.

These words reflected negative emotional responses and loss and grief presented as increased attunement to the suffering of others. The darkened bars were a recurrent image that visually showed an awareness of the darker aspects of the human experience and a changed worldview, characterizing vicarious suffering. These responses also spoke to the empathy and connectedness with the deeply troubled youth she worked with and sadness in leaving them behind at the detention center, then, in exiting the artwork’s paper doors, the participant was outside, beyond the prison walls once she exited them. The participant seemed to reenact her feelings of helper imprisonment as she opened barred doors, and in one instance referred to herself as imprisoned by her own helper identity which further documented changes in her worldview and openness to vicarious transformation.

The emergence of vicarious transformation in her changing worldview is depicted in themes of connectedness, hope, spiritual renewal, increased empathy, and in the recurrence and use of bars. In *Lifting Prison Bars* (Figure 7), suffering gave rise to renewed hope and spiritual renewal in uncovering the oppression of incarceration and bearing witness to it:

I lift the bars…a cross shape emerges…every line was significant in some way… I was very impacted by the painful story of ‘J.’… I considered my stone to be a reminder of this awareness… Can I help?
The participant’s heightened empathy was expressed in sensitive attentiveness to the art process. In *Clear Cabochon* (Figure 6), hope was also illustrated in the art process of tracing over the tiny figures with thin black markers so that every line was significant which was made concrete in the tangible form of the stone. Such attunement communicated a change in worldview. She further reflected of the darker aspect of human experience, and her empathetic relating in the transformative effects of vicarious suffering.

In *Helping Prison* (Figure 4), the distress of difficult feelings suggests the struggle towards maturation in her caregiving style of ever-changing worldview and growth in vicarious transformation. Empathetic care is visible in the praying hands and in the nurturing position of white hands that seem to reach towards the most disturbing hand depicted. The multiple hands can be related to a sense of responsibility to help various kinds of hurting people and in the text the idea of hands seem to bear witness to the participant’s empathetic care as a question, “Can I help?”

In *Working with an Open Heart* (Figure 11), the participant portrayed the human heart in *Figure 11. Working with an Open Heart.*
her art as a space that accommodates love and acceptance. The participant reflected on a moving story about a chemotherapy nurse in a Children’s Hospital who, “in the laying on of [his] hands, has worked with so much pain, his own heart is very open.” The phrase “laying on of hands,” and the word hand recurs in other artworks and in this artwork. In this instance, it can be related to the empathetic touching of hands, but also in treating the pain of others, as the nurse’s responsibility was to inject drugs. The participant assessed this story as an ‘expression of openness to others’ pain, reflected in her explanation, “There is little in him that causes him to withdraw, that reinforces the painfulness of the experience of these children.” This also spoke of the participant’s growth in selfhood, with patterns of hope and openness, emphasized further in the next phrase: “I have tried to create a space of love and acceptance that can be seen as my own heart or spirit, as a symbol for love that radiates warmth and openness.” Additionally, the participant’s increased empathy to bear the pain of others in vicarious trauma was expressed:

Surrounding this image…is a green life-giving space, overlaid with swirls that suggest abundance … In my image, there is little room for judgment or acting in fear… In this art I offered a place for the traumatic stories of my heart this week.

The changes in the participant’s worldview, described in images, words and phrases, indicated vicarious transformation that strongly related to connectedness, hope, spiritual renewal, awareness of darker aspects of human experience, and openness.

In The Singing Tree (Figure 12), the participant re-purposed a found object to create a

*Figure 12. Post-Internship culminating artwork, The Singing Tree.*
tree and deer assemblage, where hands willingly tend to the messy process of bearing witness to trauma demonstrating the vicarious pain of helping. The emphasis of the negative aspects of her exposure to trauma is observed in themes of a change in worldview that presented in patterns of self-disclosure and awareness of privilege. In her reflection she explained, “the crown holds both trauma and personal transformation,” and also added that its foliage was painted orange, “a color I do not like … that strangely still signifies detention, warning, and protection.”

Furthermore, the use of symbolic hands reappeared in this artwork, paralleling the hand symbolization from the pre-internship artwork as well as in other artworks. The two hands, a white hand and a dark hand that dominate the tree’s base point to the theme of awareness of privilege and the vicarious trauma and vicarious transformation felt by the intern participant, which began to appear in Helping Prison (Figure 4). The participant explained that, “The white hand is a healing hand, the other hand is darkened and is the shadow side of my inner struggles … and issues of privilege in working with the vulnerable.” In this way, they can be viewed as helping hands and the messy process of tending to the wounds of others in pain. The vicarious pain of helping also includes feelings of grief and loss as the participant also describes them as “hands that tend to my own wounds.”

New Ideas of Selfhood.

In Outside of the Detention Center, which is Inside the Detention Center (Figure 10) with the paper doors open, a black and white photograph depicted the contorted face of young black male clinging behind a wire fence. In her words, she discloses the vicarious pain, but also alongside this recognition of pain a symbol of its transformation.

Although the paper doors in my artwork were nothing special, opening them felt liberating. The exit through the open detention doors for the last time in December will
not leave my memory of the youth I came to care for behind. In the foreground of the picture, a small single flower growing through the crack of a sidewalk seems to symbolize this hope.

In the foreground, a single flower grows and even flourishes in a crack of the prison’s sidewalk outside of the detention center. The growth of a single flower expressed the construction of self, in a new identity thriving within the very dry conditions of vicarious suffering. Its unlikely growth in difficult places can be related to the springing up of hope of vicarious trauma that then leads to its transformation.

In Restraint Episode (Figure 5), she reflected on the images giving her the ability to see her emotions expressed in a tangible form to identify them and gain some measure of control. In her reflection, the intern described her art process especially in making the yellow hand with her non-dominant hand and creating the smoke-like effect of the shadow hand in chalk pastel “to express and release some of difficult emotions that had felt overwhelming.” The images and words in this response that related to negative emotional responses and changes in worldview she described intrusive thoughts as voices as “conflicting emotions and negative voices.” Negative thoughts as intrusive and even invading have been observed in numerous artworks including Portrait of an incarcerated Youth (Figure 8), and Restraint Episode (Figure 5), however reflected her willingness to ask questions and confront concerns facilitated empathy:

Just as the choices of the youth at the detention center are extremely limited, I must work and function as they do within this restrictive environment … Do I separate myself emotionally while observing a faceless, helpless human being hauled away, or can allow my heart to respond empathically? ... The ability to ignore a life in torment literally thrust
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into our art studio at first seemed important, but then I realized that having empathy towards a desperate, vulnerable, human being, was actually more important.

With this reflection, the participants demonstrated a new concept of identity and stronger selfhood.

A new concept of identity in the transformation of vicarious trauma was also illustrated in *The Singing Tree* (Figure 12), illustrated through personification in the participant’s full description of the nearby deer and the mission it serves:

He teaches us on our pilgrimage to tread on our path with calm reverence for the unseen and unknown … his calm may comfort those lost in despair … The deer wears torn sections of the trees orange foliage as part of his mantle. … In this way he witnesses and carries all that the tree holds.

The presence of the deer strongly related to its resonance with the tree, which can be viewed as a state of attunement to the self’s experience of vicarious trauma and a state of being fully in the moment in responding to the trauma of others. The tree is titled “The Singing Tree” because it has a voice. To discover the tree’s voice, the participant responded to the landscape picture in the center in the tree’s so that she could “root out” the deeper meaning of her feelings, a necessary step of creating a poem:

*Figure 12. Song from A Tree.*

I might not look like much
On the outside, I am brown and lifeless
I don’t have power, or wealth, or resources
Yet found beneath my hardened, crusty surface is something more
Within a landscape of silenced, untapped love, beauty abides
Open yourself
Listen for the sound of my "whited-out" voice
Do you feel sorry for me
Listen again, emerging from out of the dark,
Awakened
Years of emptiness called forth in a song
From obscurity my voice rings, rages, created black, felt, heard
Magnificent tree,
I am the ripples of life that emanate with song
I am the power that touches a raw nerve
I am one who uncovers complacency, who is called
Disruptor of the peace
You, White flower, fragrant and becoming,
Reposed on your silken be of blossoms look the other way
I was never so much as to remain on your mind
Except
You imagine
As one so sad
That I can never be as you

To create her poem, an activity the participant found uncomfortable, she reflected on the tree assemblage for a period of weeks during incubation in an effort to explain and contain the inner struggle she frequently felt while working in a prison setting. In her reflection, she specifically focused on words that described a leafless tree as a symbol of barrenness, and its seemingly incongruent juxtaposition within the Tree’s flourishing environment. The prominence of this Tree in the composition indicated its personal significance. After much introspection, and to extend the poem’s meaning, the participant’s aunt, a folk singer, composed original music to go with the poem (Figure 13). Hearing the Tree’s poem sung personified the issues the participant was having in understanding and relating to the impact of trauma on the juveniles with whom she worked. The participant felt transported as she “listened again” and lost herself
completely in the rhythm of vicarious trauma and vicarious transformation intertwined with and emanating from the Tree. She was able to see the Tree as representing herself and holding truths she could not have known apart from the lengthy weeks of waiting, immersion in the creative process, and engaging in each step of her reflective practices. The participant’s poetic response, like symbols, expresses that which cannot be said and a poem wants another poem. The alternative ways in which the researcher, acting as participant, found her own voice in this study will inspire other professionals to continue their own creative processes in response to their work.

*Figure 13. Song from a Tree, music.*

and voice the difficult realities they too face as caring helpers.
CHAPTER V

Discussion

The cost of vicarious trauma had many implications for the participant. The participant’s visual and written responses describing her experiences at the detention center also reflected themes of vicarious transformation, particularly through spiritual renewal, changes in worldview, and new ideas of self. Pearlman (2014) described vicarious transformation to be when a person’s deepest beliefs were challenged and changed as a result of what they witness and experience during their work as a helper you changed as a person. To Pearlman (2014), this was a process of attunement to emotions by engaging with the pain of others, allowing it to flow through us, thereby connecting to our own pain as a way of gaining understanding or self-awareness. To Curtois and Ford (2009) transforming vicarious trauma meant identifying ways to nurture a sense of self, which can be the development of a spiritual life.

Disruption of Self-Identity

Themes of grief and loss were identified as prominent characteristics in her written reflections and in descriptions of her art process. Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) defined these emotional responses to vicarious trauma as an ongoing sadness, and loss of self or loss of perspective. The pervasive sadness or grief experienced depicted in the participant’s art may have arisen from hypervigilance or heightened arousal and her thoughts and feelings of inadequacy as a helper (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Grief and stress from loss corresponded to the participant’s profound experience of loss of identity and alterations of self. These negative emotional responses result in disruptions to the brain and psychobiology (deVries, 1996; van der Kolk, 2014), significant alterations in how one makes meaning (Neimeyer, 2002), meaning reconstruction in response to loss (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), loss of one’s wholeness (Attig,
2001), and grieving in loss (Neiyeer, 2001). Rumination and intrusive thoughts, or prolonged distress and invasive interfering of thoughts (McCann & Pearlman, 1990), were also responses visually evident in the participant’s intensive imagery (Figley, 1995; Herman, 1992), which was described as a perception of others needing her assistance as a caregiver.

**Disrupted Meaning Systems**

Other negative consequences of vicarious trauma described in the participant’s creative process included helplessness. Some researchers defined helplessness as a frustration with failure to fully understand cultural influences (Cohen, Barnes, & Rankin, 1995). For the participant, the emotional response of helplessness and powerlessness depicted in her reflections showed her extreme efforts to help people facing dire poverty and those who suffer from extremely stressful conditions and varied forms of deprivation. The participant’s life of white privilege that gave her many socioeconomic advantages and a sense of entitlement or specialness resulted in conflicting tensions and distress. The participant’s wounded childhood and cultural biases may have contributed to the intensity of these conflicts depicted in her art and writing. Privilege, recognized by Fish (2017), was the presence of inner tensions that could surface in serving vulnerable populations. Fish explained that in a context differing from her own, one must work to awaken and reawaken awareness of power and privilege in these relationships. Lee (2013) also provided a truth-inspired perspective on such moral influences of the dynamics of power and privilege in acts of charity, and the power of the giver and the powerlessness of the receiver. Dissociation, another prominent theme in the participant’s art and writing has been described as isolation and alienation (Dutton & Rubinstein, 1995). Dividing her time between living with her family in a comfortable home in Norfolk and living alone in a cramped efficiency and different city for an extended period of time to complete a difficult internship was an
emotional strain and a heavy burden that the participant carried. This external factor may be a factor in her profound sense of isolation and development of her vicarious trauma.

**Changes in Worldview**

The participant’s art process and reflecting on it through writing was a spiritual exercise that nurtured the change in her worldview. Curtois and Ford (2014) defined spirituality or meaning systems broadly to define practices such as creating or finding community, enjoying nature, or seeking awe, joy, beauty and wonder in relationships that were also observed in the participants and writing reflections. Finding hope may be understood as an aspect of spirituality, which Pearlman and Saakvitne (1990) defined as the ability to feel optimistic even when faced with traumatic material. The participant discovered renewal of spiritual hope in seeing God in the darkest places of deprivation. Through the art making process, the participant discovered the close relationship between suffering vicariously and her faith in God, as well as the connection between vicarious trauma and its transformation. Relating to spirituality, Pressley and Spinazzola (2015) defined resonance and attunement as a connection and an essential component to helping traumatized people move from maladaptive meanings to new meanings.

**New Ideas of Selfhood**

Self-disclosure, an alternative modality of interpersonal expression, was believed by Smith and Greenberg (2000) to reduce negative sequelae of traumatic events and as such could assume an important role in writing about emotional events. In investigating her own vicarious trauma, the researcher, acting as participant, contends that in engaging in artwork and reflective writing she gained a heightened sense of self-awareness, which aided vicarious transformation. Through written disclosure, she explored art making with reflective writing in increasing self-
awareness, defined as being receptive to a greater understanding of oneself, and also an understanding of the traumatized individual(s) with whom the helper empathizes.

**Limitations**

The researcher acknowledged this heuristic study was limited to the exclusive experience of herself as the researcher and participant in this study. Therefore, conclusions from this heuristic investigation cannot be generalized to larger populations due to its limitation of participants. The relationship between personal struggles and the participant’s interest in this research topic may have caused trauma-influenced biases, assumptions, and expectations that could have negatively influenced data collection and data analysis. During the writing of this thesis, the researcher was a live-in caregiver for her mother. As such, the researcher witnessed her mother’s declining mental and physical health, and subsequent death. The effects from the stress of helping or wanting to help a traumatized family member may be a factor in the themes of grief and loss prominently identified in the participant’s written reflections and art process. However, the reinvestigation and self-awareness of changes and the ongoing process of art making and reflective writing of thoughts, feelings, and insights throughout this research process was heeded to aid in the validity, reliability, and rigor of the thematic analysis.

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

Those who experience vicarious trauma can experience significant alterations in how they see themselves and others (Pearlman, 2014). Furthermore, different cultures have different requirements for those who attend to them. Future studies can focus on instilling reflective practices in graduate level art therapy and counseling students to examine sensitive and ethical issues that arise when working with those of a culture that is very different than the culture with which a professional is used to working. When implementing art therapy and the use of the
suggested directives, the mandala, individual mandala slices, and poetry are methods to raise awareness of vicarious trauma and relevant with those from different cultures impacted by trauma. In launching an art therapy group further study in graduate students transitioning to professional practice could examine the development of increased self-understanding and understanding of others whose expressions of trauma may vary in their beliefs, methods of communication, personality traits, dominant gender, and many other qualities. Critical examination of firmly held values and beliefs through a reflective lens will offer the potential for new insights and learning (Holden, 2012).

Conclusion

The use of art therapy in this study demonstrates a deeper understanding of the experiences of trauma and how trauma alters the self, which provides growing evidence that art therapy offers distinct benefits to individuals who have been traumatized and for those suffering with them. Greater discernment can be clinically used to assess the stages of trauma. Self-exploration through art making and reflective writing mobilized in the researcher the strong sense of purpose and self-direction needed to complete this heuristic study. This study began as an exploration of vicarious trauma explored through personal art making and reflective writing, but in providing a way for the researcher to express her own vulnerability and experience of witnessing trauma, it turned into a deeply moving and therapeutic process. Spirituality and transformation was realized as an important dimension of vicarious trauma that was illuminated within the context of the art product, creative processes, and in responsive writings.

Through the art processes and self-compliance in undertaking a slow, deeply contemplative and creative journey, the researcher made meaningful discoveries about the effect witnessing trauma had on the emotional self. The public exploring of her personal expressions
presented an opportunity to connect with others in a way that promotes a willingness in other helpers in a reflective and creative way to explore their own vicarious trauma. The authentic, intimate, nature of this study will draw attention to the plight of others exposed to trauma. Helpers who have been significantly impacted will recognize their experience and discover meaningful alternative creative methods to explore connections of vicarious trauma. The completion of a thematic analysis of personal art product, creative process, and reflective writings invites further study of visual and written modalities to promote a sensitive understanding of the experience of witnessing trauma. It is the researcher’s recommendation for those who suffer with vicarious trauma to explore creative ways to identity with and feel validated processing trauma from a deeply felt perspective. Research exploring various alternative creative approaches and art forms plays an important role in developing a more meaningful, authentic, and varied perspectives of vicarious trauma, a necessary investigation as trauma increases in the 21st century. Art making and writing is encouraged for others who have also witnessed trauma and experienced significant personal changes, in order to reflect and strengthen their resolve to remain committed and engaged in working alongside those who vicariously suffer. Listed in the appendices are art directives that offer methods for service professionals and lay helpers in the pursuit of a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their own vicarious trauma.
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APPENDIX A

The Development of My Vicarious Trauma

My initial research for this thesis began by looking back at formative life events, which occurred while I served vulnerable populations in two underdeveloped countries prior to my entry into graduate school at Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods College. I was drawn to participate in my church’s mission trips to Nicaragua and pilgrimages to Kenya, the outside world. In the outside world, I witnessed unsettling things that were not yet part of my understanding of the world. This inquiry significantly shaped my interest in and understanding of vicarious trauma through difficult life experiences and motivated me to remain open to the full range of those experiences. Making a continual decision to stay connected with the most vulnerable and their belief systems moved me closer to understanding my own identity. Douglas and Moustaka (1985) explained that such past experiences can be a natural outgrowth of the researcher’s personal and professional life experience, that can become the initial phase of the heuristic process.

These early personal experiences are presented as an autobiographical background to my heuristic quest to bring about a new awareness and a deepening of my own humanity and spiritual vitality through the witness of painful encounters. As I spent time with traumatized youth at the detention center, I struggled spiritually and personally with my Western mindset as I sought to embrace the cultural language of others who may have had a radically different approach to life than my own. After five years of working with African colleagues art therapist, Catherine Moon (2013) exacted a simple truth stating, “I have come to appreciate that, as a cultural outsider, my knowledge of Kenya and Tanzania is limited and incomplete. Therefore, I try to listen more than talk” (p. 374). In an effort to develop a cultural understanding my
struggle with vicarious trauma became a process and way of life that subsequently led to a positive transformation in my understanding of those who have suffered, and myself. In their work as trauma therapists Pearlman and Skaavaki (1995) similarly experienced an increased sense of connection with all people who suffer across time and across cultures. Although work in Nicaragua, Kenya, and at the juvenile detention center left emotional injuries, my experiences in those places continue to influence my approach to life as I move forward, living with vicarious trauma. From the profound effect of her intimate witness of trauma in the detention center, combined with previous experiences of vicarious trauma, I better understand the complexity and impact of traumas for others, and am now driven to acknowledge and pursue concerns in places where extreme disadvantage is a daily reality.

Engaging in art allowed me to process the various traumatic images and moments, laying the groundwork for me to come to a cohesive understanding of my own vicarious trauma. In seeking deep connections, I hope to reach others who like myself struggle to cope with the impact of witnessing trauma, and to affirm the unique ways the witness of trauma can change how one thinks and feels, and uses creative abilities to process trauma (Moustakas, 1990). As an art therapist, I among many others have chosen to enter the world of pain in order to acknowledge a deep human connection with those who suffer, and to realize the value of hope and experienced the transformation of my own vicarious trauma. The primary hope of this study was that all care providers can realize the benefits of art making and writing, as reflective tools for implementing meaning making, refinement of self-awareness, and in drawing strength from spirituality, thus securing positive outcomes from vicarious trauma. For those who suffer with vicarious trauma, it is recommended that they explore creative ways to identity with and feel validated processing trauma from a deeply felt perspective. Research exploring various
alternative creative approaches and art forms plays an important role in developing a more meaningful, authentic, and varied perspectives of vicarious trauma, a necessary investigation as trauma increases in the 21st century. Through the art processes and undertaking a slow, deeply contemplative and creative journey, I made meaningful discoveries about the effect witnessing trauma had on the emotional self. Therefore, art making and writing is encouraged for others who have also witnessed trauma and experienced significant personal changes, in order to reflect and strengthen their resolve to remain committed and engaged in working alongside those who vicariously suffer. Listed in the appendices are art directives that offer methods for service professionals and lay helpers in the pursuit of a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their own vicarious trauma.

**Witness to Suffering: The Development of Vicarious Trauma**

From my earliest memories, my identity was based upon viewing myself as a helper and rescuer. In my adult life, I realized my childhood sensitivity towards stray and sick animals was a gift of healing I could also offer to people who needed nurtured and supported. Years later, the desire to serve the most vulnerable persisted and guided my heuristic journey overseas on mission trips to the destitute poor in Nicaragua, and then on pilgrimages to the slums of Kenya. My deepest beliefs were challenged by the continual witnessing of severe cultural disadvantages, oppressive hardships, and extreme poverty of innocent people my deepest beliefs were challenged. As a result, I was profoundly changed.

While in Nicaragua, I participated in the formation of Vita Jovan, a Young Life camp where I taught arts and crafts. I also preformed basic medical procedures in a makeshift clinic, where many of the most ill and malnourished traveled to on bare feet from the nearest community ten miles away seeking medical attention. Using limited materials and equipment, I
assisted with various treatments for their infectious and often disfiguring diseases. Through collaborative efforts, we sincerely sought to meet the most severe needs of the community where we worked within their social and cultural context. I was assigned menial work such as cooking, washing pots, planting coffee trees, painting shacks, digging ditches, and carrying fifty-pound buckets of gravel the workers tied to my back for building mountain trails. These tasks were uniquely Nicaraguan and presented meaningful, transformative encounters. However strenuous these duties, the more difficult work I faced was bearing the weight of my own emotional pain and pressured sense of responsibility to do more, an abiding worldview from my long-held expectations as a helper.

Figure 14. Nicaraguan Shack.

Over times of overseas travel to developing countries during the next five summers, I fully committed myself to a people affected by multiple adversities, forming relationships with men, women, and children as I established their trust and rapport. As a privileged white American, I also relied on a well-formed agenda prescribed by my Western values and personal expectations that emphasized individual autonomy and achievement within a culture vastly different from my own. I learned from the service of physical labor that my values centered around perfectionism and the importance of planning far into the future were unknown to most Nicaraguans, who faced extreme adversity and found hope and meaning living in the present.
Within this socio-cultural context and unfamiliar approach to labor, the unfamiliar labor allowed me to investigate how my helper identity resulted in emotional pain resulting from my sense of purpose and understandings of privilege.

As I witnessed those struggling to survive, my empathy increased and gave rise to feelings of loss and grief. It is believed that grieving can shatter our familiar life patterns and undermines many of our life assumptions (Arvay, 2008). Others have described abstract or intangible losses as psychosocial loss or symbolic loss that are often not visible (Rando, 1993).

My personal experience with such traumatic disruptions was a kind of depletion and lost sense of meaning, ambition, and innocence, another dimension of vicarious trauma (Herman, 1992). Similarly, Pearlman & Saakvitne (1995) described vicarious trauma characterized as hypervigilance that may cause the helper to develop a pervasive sadness or grief. After my last trip to Nicaragua, I experienced negative changes to such a degree that I lost my enthusiasm and sense of purpose for mission-minded work.

**Vicarious Trauma: A Journey of Mind, Body, and Spirit**

The effect on helpers with vicarious trauma can be reflected in the words of philosopher and psychologist Carl Jung: “It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension.” The process of seeing the world differently through this “new dimension” is illustrated by a journey of mind, body, and spirit, a path of pilgrimage I continued two years after my last mission to Nicaragua. Despite the persistent psychological stress, which lingered after my trips to Nicaragua, I began art-as-therapy pilgrimages to Kenya. Over the course of three summers, I volunteered at the Nazareth Hospital compound where I encountered a new, far harsher level of difficult environmental factors and stressful work conditions than I had yet witnessed. As a
result, elements of vicarious trauma intensified during these trips. Nonetheless, the idea of a spiritual journey or pilgrimage and its slow and reflective pace offered me a new intention as a helper. In taking this spiritual journey, I strongly related to the Psalmist David, who wrote, “Blessed are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on the pilgrim’s way” (Psalm 84:5, New International Version). I recognized in David’s pilgrimage my own path. In the Bible, he passed by the “valley of Baca,” or “valley of tears,” known to be incommodious for travelers unaccustomed to such very dry conditions (Psalm 84:5-6, New International Version). I saw in my pilgrimage what the Christian mystic Bernard McGinn spoke of as the dark way to God as a way to be given great priority (2007). I discovered through my pilgrimage to Kenya that my own self-fulfillment could no longer be my ultimate goal.

At the Nazareth Hospital, I passed down its long hallways, room after room where the sick and dying, the poorest of the poor, were mostly left unattended and all were alone in their suffering. The bleakness of this sacred space became my “valley of tears,” resulting in the metaphorical dryness of the desert place of my mind, body, and spirit. The experience of walking by myself through the stark, dimly lit corridors heightened my awareness of my own vulnerabilities. I felt at this hospital that the development of vicarious trauma was not only my psychological pain but a guide that took me to an unknown, deeper place where new meaning was made in relearning my world. Seeing my reflection in the figure of another helped me to find my way. Out of one doorway a young patient emerged, an embodiment of the harsh realities of extreme poverty, illness, and shortened lives. I viewed him as a visible symbol of lost hope, and his darkness seemed to mirror the suffering in my own darkened heart. To his small fragile body and Kenyan way of thinking, I must have stood as a giant Wazungui, or unseen “white woman.” Still, he moved his body closer to me, reached out his frail, speckled hand, and
lightly touched my arm with one finger. In return, I reached out to him, and gently touched his hand with one finger. In this moment, we were unaware of the hopelessness and isolation of his pain, no longer separated or defined by our different worlds or physical conditions. Instead, we were fully present to each other - a presence more real than I had ever known. Our touching could not rescue the boy or make his future any better or different from the past; yet in embracing “the dark way to God,” I transformed in a deep, emotional, spiritual, and even physical way. Together, we bore witness of the creation of something else: a truthful, more complete reality that I believed emphasized hope in making his pain more bearable. At that moment, I heard in my spirit the words of David, “Blessed are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on the pilgrim’s way.”

Following this powerful emotional experience, I continued to struggle with reconciling my life-long identity as a helper with the effects of the distressing images of Nicaragua and Kenya that permeated my mind, body, and spirit. Researchers link the significant role of spirituality and meaning systems to the development of vicarious trauma (Attig, 2001, Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). Other research has demonstrated that low-level stressors are contributing factors to vicarious trauma and its lasting negative psychological impact. Furthermore, they can contribute to the development of stress-related disorders that mirror symptoms of direct trauma except they are often less intense (Pearlman, 2008).

A later pilgrimage to Kenya was to the distant slums in Nairobi. There with my pastor and three others I witnessed the extreme effects of abuse and abandonment on children. The most stressful conditions were in Korogocho, a 1.5 square kilometer mile area where approximately 200,000 Kenyans live. The locals called Korogocho “Deep Trash,” an ominous, foreboding place we could only reach by taking Kenyan buses and walking on foot for miles.
Once there, two bodyguards escorted us with our art materials and school supplies down paths carved out by streams of sewage. On either side of the sewage paths stood gaunt looking children, staring blankly from amidst the smoldering trash heaps, most of them likely orphaned and suffering from the ravages of the commonly untreated AIDS virus. At the school, the smell of disease and decaying fecal matter on its dirt floor was intense. We were told about the students’ histories, which included physical violence, sexual and emotional abuse, and abandonment. In observing their artwork as deviations from graphic details seen in the artwork of healthy children, I saw faceless, colorless drawings, fragmented body parts, and diminished bodies suggesting multiple traumas, neurological underdevelopment, and physical damage (Hinz, 2009). Bessel Van Der Kolk (2014) emphasized the long-lasting effects of trauma on children’s brains who develop in dangerous environments marked by maltreatment and grossly inadequate caregiving systems. What I witnessed at Deep Trash demonstrated the extensive consequences of interpersonal trauma for individuals’ mental and physical health, as well as on the helpers who work with them (Van Der Kolt, 2014). In “Building Hope,” an artistic response to my experience at an orphanage near Nairobi, Kenya, I am painting a large, leafless tree from which the word “HOPE” appears in the upper left hand corner.

Figure 15. Building hope.

Upon my return to the Nazarene Hospital compound from the school in Korogocho, I felt incapable of feeling or expressing emotions; I was myself traumatized. My personal
involvement in a position of caring at the hospital and in the slums of Kenya left deep
vulnerabilities that have never fully healed. These symptoms presented as recurrent anxiety,
emotional numbness, feelings of detachment, decreased interest in outside activities, and sleep
disturbances. Because of the challenges presented by these emotional and physical changes, I
realized that I must reach for new understanding of the world even as I suffered. However, it
was not until my internship at a juvenile detention center during my formal research about art
therapy and trauma that I would connect my symptoms to vicarious trauma.

Impact of Trauma: Incarcerated Youth and Caregiver Stress

I chose to take my eleven-month art therapy internship at a juvenile detention center near
Richmond, Virginia. In this placement, I had the unique opportunity to witness some
experiences of the private, traumatized lives of young offenders. My internship was a full
immersion into the heuristic process of exploring and studying the development and impact of
trauma on individuals. This section presents research on the traumatizing impact of
imprisonment on juveniles and describes my experiences working with traumatized youths in a
prison setting.

*Figure 16. Make a circle.*
Along with the facility’s art therapist, I worked with deeply troubled teenagers as young as twelve years old, children who most of the public knew only as statistics. Indeed, an estimated 1.4 million adolescents between the ages of twelve and eighteen enter the juvenile justice system annually (Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2013). The detention center where I interned were predominantly African American adolescents and other minorities with relatively few whites if any. It is well researched that persons in residential facilities experienced some type of social, economic, and/or educational disadvantage (Gussak, 2006).

Dr. Antipas Harris, African American Theologian and Professor at Regent University, in his extensive involvement with black American youths calls attention to the sobering fact that 85% of juvenile offenders were young black men, and 60% of juvenile offenses were felonies committed by black men (personal communication, June 17, 2015). He added historical sociopolitical dynamics, such as racism and class discrimination, continue to play out in everyday life for Black Americans in the United States. These erosions of self-worth are especially harmful to economically disadvantaged youth (Harris, personal communication, 2015). Art therapist Linda Chapman, who worked extensively with adolescents placed in juvenile detention centers, described their disadvantaged and stressful backgrounds to include discrimination, domestic violence, bullying, inadequate or absent parental care, and a wide range of other traumatic experiences most had experienced repeatedly over their lifetimes (Chapman, 2014). Art therapy has been used with prison inmates and demonstrated marked improvement in mood and a significant decrease in depression (Gussak, 2006).

The traumas of these adolescents’ pasts are compounded with the traumas caused by their incarceration, often resulting from neglect, abuse, and restricted daily life. Herman (1992) argued that victims of chronic trauma, like incarcerated youth, often feel a permanent change to
the sense of self, if they feel any sense of self at all. Testa and McCarthy (2004) noted that symptoms of parental neglect can be experienced as a lack of self-acceptance or inability to self-reflect. Symptomatic manifestations of chronic trauma can result in diagnoses of antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, conduct disorder, depression, and PTSD (Chapman, 2014). These diagnoses are contributing risk factors for suicide in traumatized individuals, as well as substance abuse, adverse childhood experiences, and a history of physical or sexual abuse (Simon, 2011).

This cumulative development of trauma, affecting those directly or vicariously traumatized, impacts all aspects of psychological development (Goldson, 2006; Prime, 2014). Therefore, working with incarcerated youth, whose lives are compounded with the traumas of their past and incarceration, is intense and emotionally taxing. There is ongoing stress of gaining or maintaining social control, concerns about personal safety, and heightened awareness in a climate of unpredictability which can result in vicarious trauma (Rothschild & Rand, 2006). The challenges I experienced during my internship are comparable to the experiences of any staff working with incarcerated youth. Prison staff in England and Austria, for example, describes a pressure to achieve positive outcomes for young people in their care, a concern for their own and others safety, and a struggle to trust (Gooch & McNamara, 2016). Helpers may appear to experience disempowerment and to be in need of professional development, advocacy, and support. In addition, caregivers who are already overburdened with work and emotional labor may exhibit maladaptive responses to offenders’ misconduct. When helpers are not adapting well, stress reactions may deteriorate into secondary traumatic stress disorder or vicarious trauma (Figley, 2012). It becomes more important than ever before to focus on the residual impact of trauma and how relationships with young offenders impact those who help.
During my internship, I led groups of incarcerated youth in art therapy. I witnessed daily their restricted lives as they shuffled into the inviting art studio wearing prison jumpers, some handcuffed. The art space was required to be both orderly and safe, and along with the art therapist we enforced the highly monitored way of life for the youth. With little freedom of action, I adhered to the prison’s limitations, which restricted availability and usage of art materials and supplies. To adapt to this rigid system, I was extremely careful about everything that she did or did not do, attending to the fact that many of the highly-resistant youths were detained for crimes committed against innocent victims. To most of these youths, I represented the dominant culture as a white adult, and therefore in most instances was perceived as an enemy. My consciousness about this dynamic created a sense that I was imprisoned by my own helper identity because, as a white adult, I was the dominant culture and perceived as an enemy. I looked for familiar ways to be effective with troubled youth who often regarded me as an opponent, hence most of the time felt little satisfaction or self-sufficiency. The helplessness I felt was another symptom of vicarious trauma, where it is common for helpers to identify with and experience similar symptoms of the primary trauma (Herman, 1992).

The incarcerated youth exhibited symptoms of trauma that manifested similarly in me as I worked so closely with this population. Herman (1992) describes the likelihood of therapists and caregivers to experience dreams, which feature imagery related to their patient or client’s trauma. During my internship at the juvenile detention center, I was deeply affected by seeing a teenage girl in a physical restraint incident. Since my internship, the scene replays in my own mind of the girl’s rage and intense level of vulnerability. I have recurring memories of her contorted body thrashing about, the loud screaming, and the repeated banging sounds that emanated from her cell for hours that day, as well as my own desperation and helplessness.
With the passage of time in reviewing my first pre-internship artwork, *Helping Prison* (Figure 4), in its upper left hand corner the word “Goodbye” still evokes feelings of grief and loss in the vicarious pain of helping others but also of growth in transformation. In my experience in Kenya, in *Making a Circle* the word “Hope” also appears upper left hand corner. On my pilgrimage the word “Goodbye” even when called to suffer, has opened space in my own heart for hope in the darkest places of deprivation.
APPENDIX B

Vicarious Transformation Directive I: Mandala

Title: MANDALA: TEMPLATE

Materials: 8.5”x11” mandala pre-drawn template, thin tipped markers, instrumental CD

Timeframe: 45-minute session I

Goals:
1. The creation of self through arrangement of self-statements or words. The mandala assists in the building of meaning and self-awareness of participant.
2. Words of one’s own will assist in self-awareness of vicarious growth and in the socio-emotional development of the broken self.

Mandala template
- Use own words or available texts to create mandala words
- Arrange and add to mandala on template
- Words are read out loud one at a time to oneself and reflected on by the participant and the facilitator
- While instrumental music is playing mandalas may be visualized like a musical octave with notes playing a whole range of human emotion and capacities. And from these “notes” can come the words.

*Figure 17. Mandala Template.*
APPENDIX C

Vicarious Transformation Directive II: Mandala Art

Title: MANDALA: ART SLICES

Materials: 8.5”x11” white paper, mandala circle, magazines, scissors, colored pencils, colored markers, pastels, instrumental CD

Timeframe: 45-minute session II

Goals:
1. A depiction of self through arrangement of mandala images. The images assist in the building of meaning and enhancement of self-awareness of participant.
2. Images taken from magazines or drawn will assist in self-awareness of vicarious growth and in the socio-emotional development of the broken self.

Mandala Art

- Add magazine images or drawings, or symbols to create mandala art “slices” (right) that correspond to words on the mandala template (left)
- Arrange images and attach to mandala art slices
- Mandala images and mandala words are placed side by side on a table or wall
- Images and corresponding words are reflected on by the participant and the facilitator
- The participant is asked to think about the mandala images and how they correspond to the words on the mandala template.
- While instrumental music is playing mandalas may be visualized like a musical octave with notes playing a whole range of human emotion and capacities. And from these “notes” can come the images.
- Guided questions facilitate discussion that follows

*Figure 18. Mandala Art Example.*
APPENDIX D

Vicarious Transformation Directive III: Mandala Poetic Response

Title: MANDALA: POETIC RESPONSE

Materials: 8.5”x11” white paper

Timeframe: 45 minutes session III

Goals:
1. Words create a way to meaningfully process traumatic stress through the documentation of details to arrive at common factors that are non-threatening
2. The enhanced ability to listen and notice details of vicarious growth by creatively playing with metaphor and image to communicate truths that may otherwise be unnoticed

Mandala Poetic Response

• Color mandala art “slices” to correspond to image colors on the mandala art
• Colored words are placed side by side on a table or wall with mandala images
• Colored mandala words and mandala images are reflected on by the participant and the facilitator
• Participant is asked to respond to the mandala words and images by creating a poem using the mandala words
• The participant is asked to read poetic response one sentence at a time out loud.
• Guided questions facilitate discussion that follows

Mandala Poetic Response Sample

Openness: You are genuine
Empathy: Held and accepted for who you are
Attunement: And like the beauty of a bare tree, you strove to be honest
Hope: And you are grateful
Resonance: Sacrificing for something you believed in with all your heart
Reflection: You trusted the process of art to spiritually anchor you when you were drifting off course
Selfhood: And, like a delicate flower, you have grown
Connectedness: And emerged from the concealment of water
APPENDIX E

Mandala Interventions Rationale

To meaningfully process traumatic stress through artwork, the participant implemented poetic craft to enhance their ability to listen and notice details, creatively playing with metaphor and image to communicate disrupted parts of self that have been damaged through vicarious trauma. The impact of words, images, and poetry allowed for self-expression that may be an unfamiliar activity, suggesting that its power as a novel approach not be overlooked (Allen, 2001). To find one’s voice in verbal self-expression offers a noninvasive, potentially self-directed approach that supports its use in building of meaning and self-awareness of vicarious trauma and its transformation by exploring emergent themes through patterns in repeated language and recurring images (Attride-Stirling, 2001).