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Generative Beauty:  
How Engaging with Beauty Sparks Transformation

By  
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Capstone

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## Abstract

“Be the change you wish to see in the world,” declared Mahatma Gandhi. There is a profound awareness of the need for change as individuals reflect on the impact of global and system challenges as well as community challenges. People cannot just “be the change” until *they themselves* are first changed. Beauty is a powerful catalyst for change that begins with the individual, expanding to the community. To solve community problems, program designers must find a way to unleash untapped creativity. This study explores the impact of engaging beauty via the arts (paintings, Mary Oliver poetry, and *The Lark Ascending*) on the lives of seven women (American and British South Asian) living in London. Using theories surrounding Barbara Fredrickson’s “broaden-and-build” work as well as Developmental Evaluation and Most Significant Change techniques, this multi-cultural and multi-sensory approach shows the powerful role of beauty and art to change individuals’ thinking and actions.

*Keywords:* Beauty, Art, Transformation, “Broaden-and-build,” Developmental Evaluation

## Chapter One : Introduction

THE MAN WHO HAS MANY ANSWERS by Mary Oliver (from *A Thousand Mornings*)

The man who has many answers

is often found

in the theaters of information

where he offers, graciously,

his deep findings.

While the man who has only questions,

to comfort himself, makes music.

“Be the change” is the slogan of a popular Virginia university. Hoping to inspire students to greatness, this catchphrase appears in local papers, on flags around campus, and on the website. The phrase is not original to the university but taken from a sentence shared by Mahatma Gandhi who explained, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” People cannot just “be the change” until *they themselves* are first changed. One avenue for experiencing renewal is through beauty. By sparking innovative thinking, it catalyzes the individual to change the community. Nonprofit employees and volunteers need new ideas and fresh energy as they strive to improve local and global communities. This study explores how beauty via the arts can be a starting point, a launch pad, for transformative experiences for individuals that then enables greater community flourishing.

## **Creative Solutions for Community Change**

Beginning with looking at the United States and the United Kingdom, there are countless challenges in these countries. In the last few years alone, citizens have been faced with deep areas of failings and moral questions. Beyond the inequality revealed during the Covid pandemic (e.g. access to healthcare and education) communities face the overwhelming failings of the police force, painful centuries of continuous racial prejudices, and a mental health crisis. This is just to name a mere few.

In the United Kingdom, parents sing (literally, watch the opening ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympics) about their free health care via the National Health System (NHS) and celebrate free education for the children. Yet, the broken system means children with suspected autism can't access help, waiting to begin the diagnosis process for two years. Education is incredibly varied between the free system and expensive, private one. Parents claw for space for their children at prep schools and grammar schools, beginning tutoring at age six to get ahead. While the country also experiences a cost-of-living crisis, femicide is continuing to be a significant problem with one woman killed every three days by a man in the United Kingdom (Femicide Census, 2023). This world needs answers and solutions, both of which requires creativity.

## **Problem of Distraction & A Call to Beauty**

“Here we are now, entertain us,” sings Nirvana (1991). People are living and consuming like adolescents, numbing the pain and ignoring the answers to the deeper questions. Men and women live on the junk food of the beauty world. The very vocabulary of the day reflects this. Viewers want “binge-worthy” television shows, craving the hit rather than the excellent. Mothers talk about “Pinterest moms” who make their parenting a photo display of perfection instead of the messy, chaotic, dirt-smeared reality of parenting. Young

professionals are looking to live their “best lives now” but unclear in the definition of what that really is and where that really takes them. In Neil Postman’s 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he writes, “Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials” (p.92-93). People’s underdeveloped pallets are for easy, quick entertainment that requires so little of them and also does so little for them. As St. Augustine explored in his famous work *The Confessions*, mankind’s loves are disordered (1993). And the entire world (human, animal, and plant) is suffering.

Perhaps this obsession with entertainment could be transformed into a celebration of the beautiful and the lovely. But it requires slowing down, thinking deeply, listening to critical voices, and being willing to be wrong. Men and women need the complexity, nuance, and revitalization of our curiosity. Beauty is something more than “pretty.” It is more than entertainment. It is the crux of what people need to be human.

People from all walks of life and spectrums of beliefs are noting similar needs. For example, two recently published podcasts highlight these universal questions. The first was an interview with Andrew Fellows, a pastor in Cambridge, and the second was with Amanda Ripley, an investigative journalist in Washington, D.C. While Andrew is a more socially conservative Christian, Amanda is more liberally leaning and recently published a book about high conflict. These two educated, interesting and thoughtful speakers ended their interviews with basically the same need identification and call to action. In essence, they both said communities need more creative solutions (Tippet, 2023 & Johnston, 2023) from engaged people. Interestingly, neither offered an answer to how organizations go about getting at this untapped creativity.

## **Personal Journey to Understanding the Problem & The Need**

I am a child of beauty. I have always loved it and been intrigued by that which mankind call beautiful. From landscapes to simple spaces in a home to book cover browsing to art museum visits, I never thought of myself as someone with “answers” or as someone “artistic.” I didn’t realise at the time that actually those characteristics fit together quite well. Someone who asks questions, a searcher, a wander, is also someone who enjoys the ambiguity of much in art and can soak in the beautiful without needing to understand the “why” behind it all.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these longings for the good and the beautiful led to studying art history at university, interning in a gallery for a year and a half and working for an arts council. I saw art and the art world from many angles including the academic, the artists, and the community do-gooders. I saw the overlapping, shared ideas and values, and connections in the roles of art. This became more articulated as a personal love for and pursuit of the beautiful.

But with the birth of children and some health challenges, I stepped away from formal work and spent a season quietly sowing beauty in the small corners of my shrinking world. This world both expanded and contracted when we moved to London in the autumn of 2020 for work, notably in the midst of the Covid pandemic. The strict European lockdowns meant our lives felt both compressed and expanded as we transitioned to a quite different culture and world in our diverse bit of London.

As there were not many places to go and as parents of three children (two with needs requiring extra support), we often felt exhaustion at a deep soul level. My husband began curating films for us to watch, with the goal of the viewing being more than mere amusement. Films such as *Artic*, *A Hidden Life*, *Nine Days*, *Silence*, *Of Gods and Men*, *The Breadwinner*,

*Station Eleven*, *The Sound of Metal*, and *Arrival* have graced our television these past two years. They refreshed and stimulated us intellectually, expanding our lives beyond the dreary winter days. And it was no less than the impetus for my flourishing.

### **L'Abri: Example & Challenge**

After years of hearing me reference this place I'd read about it and heard about, in the autumn of 2021, my husband gifted me a long weekend at L'Abri as a means of retreat and rest from the challenges we were facing daily. Founded in Switzerland in 1955 by Francis and Edith Shaeffer, L'Abri takes its name from the French word for "shelter." Then in 1971, a couple founded English L'Abri after a manor house was donated to the organisation by a friend. It remains an openly Christian community, offering hospitality to people of differing faiths and belief systems and describes itself as a "shelter for honest questions" (L'Abri Fellowship International, 2023). While it has grown, L'Abri remains familial in feeling. Today satellite locations exist in America, Canada, Korea, Brazil, Switzerland, South Africa, Australia, and Holland.

One of those key elements of L'Abri (and its various hubs) is the high value of the arts and culture. The co-founder Francis Shaeffer wrote, "If Christianity is really true, then it involves the whole man, including his intellect and creativeness" (Shaeffer, 1973, p.16). This attitude led to the honouring of the arts (both fine, applied, and everyday) and inclusion of different thinkers. "Truth" was seen throughout many art forms and artists, irrespective of their stance of matters of faith. This concept of "whole man" also led to a value of the comprehensive experience as L'Abri honoured beauty and still does in the workers' everyday choices.

I travelled to the English L'Abri in September and in some ways have never quite come back. Reeling from some low-level trauma associated with an international move,



impacts of Covid, and the unique needs of our children, I arrived at this old English manor house. It was large and yet quaint made of a warm brick colour with mature flowers at the entrance, looking more reminiscent of a place dearly loved than a place meticulously cleaned. A large fireplace welcomed me at the door with the smells of a recently extinguished flame. A few old cars sat in the dusty drive, clearly not the treasured possessions of those who lived here or visited here. While a huge painting of a medieval knight hung on the open staircase, fresh flowers from the garden adorned the windowsills and tables. The tea breaks included thrift store mugs as people from all over the world gathered for good conversation and friendly debate.

I remember sitting for lunch at a cramped table and my first thought was actually tasting my food. It wasn't by foodie standards photo worthy, but it was deeply memorable. I could sit, in silence, listening to the gentle murmur of conversation and enjoy this colourful salad in front of me. That night I heard a talk from a former doctor turned minister in London's Battersea neighbourhood who was currently working on a non-fiction book (now published) about issues of race in the British church from the perspective of a black British man. Other L'Abri visits have included foraging for food with an Australian woman, napping in fields of wild daffodils, listening to a local girl practice her harp in one of the sitting rooms and spending early mornings reading Malcolm Guite poetry.

My visits to L'Abri have been full and rich, and I leave feeling more alive and more human. And more and more curious as to the set-up, success, and distinctive features of this community.

### **How Example of L'Abri Can Benefit Local Community**

My curiosity extended in two main areas. First, why does something like L'Abri work? And second, could I take the raw themes of life at L'Abri and evolve them to better

meet the needs of my local community (especially one where my community in west London is not exceedingly western or Christian). At L'Abri I met such a diverse group of people including American non-profits workers, a Norwegian doctor, a South Africa doctoral candidate at Cambridge, a genetic scientist from Cambridge, a recent graduate of St. Andrews University, a Scottish primary school teacher, and many more. This place attracted people from so many walks of life and places around the world. While there were features that felt distinctly British and western, something universally human was going on here.

My second question of evolution and adaptation would need time to simmer as no empirical studies have been done as to the “why” or the “how” of L'Abri. No academic articles mention this place except one that references it in comparison to the founding of Christian study centres at universities like the one at the University of Virginia. Though I wasn't (and am not) looking to create a replica of L'Abri, I did analyse its unique characteristics. In considering my time there and my experiential knowledge of the impact of L'Abri, necessary components of the transformative power of beauty included the arts, the senses, communal gathering, and time to think critically and reflect. Both the conversations and the hours of quiet give space for the ideas to reverberate and become new melodies in the hearts and minds of people. It was a place a dripping with creativity.

### **Theories of Positive Emotions & Creativity**

While these theories will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two, here is a brief introduction in how to frame and ground the ideas explored in the study. There are many ways to initiate creativity and one avenue is with Barbara Frederickson's “broaden-and-build” theory. She explains that when people experience positive emotions, they think more creatively (Fredrickson, 2004). Positive emotions open up the door for new possibilities. While much of the news is dark and dreary, this is welcome and hopeful information. One

such powerful positive emotions is awe. Awe is a robust cognitive and emotional experience that has numerous benefits that are being studied globally. For example, awe has been shown to lead to more environmentally thoughtful and conscientious behaviour (Zhao, et al., 2022). Awe also leads to expansive thinking and new modes of operation as well as compassion and other prosocial behaviours (Jiao & Luo, 2022). One awe producing tool is art as a human artifact.

### **Beauty Via The Arts**

Beauty and the arts spark a positive emotional, awe experience. It is a jumping off point, spurring people on to others-oriented behaviours and problem solving. Beauty via the arts also has the advantage of being affordable and accessible if offered by the right curator. This can benefit many different types of communities and ethnicities. One recent study explored the feeling of awe at two art museums in London. While participants had various aesthetic preferences, the fact that art incited awe cross culturally (Luke, 2021), suggests art has a universal role. While the art world often exists on the peripheral of problem-solving tactics, it may be more integral to finding the solutions the world (with many questions) needs.

One way that people can access beauty and begin to understand it is via the arts. The arts can be thought of as having three main spheres. First, the consumptive. People take it in, seeing it on the walls of a museum, tasting it in the delights of a meal, listening to it in the grand halls. Second, the creative. Artists make it and everyone uses their own tools. The candle maker rolls the wax and infuses the scents. The poet threads words together in a tapestry of double meanings. The cinematographer captures a landscape representing the emotions of the main characters. The painter pulverizes shells into paints. Third, the catalytic

role where the thrust of my research lies. This is the powerhouse of art because people don't just make it. It makes them.

In seeing beauty, observers see themselves differently. As listeners hear excellent, truth-telling music, their mind opens to new ideas. Breathing in fresh oxygen from newly budding flowers gives hurried minds a much-needed respite from the persistent stress of modern existence. Beauty does something to people and in people.

### **Overview of Study Design**

This study explores how creative solutions and new ways of considering a problem can be catalysed by engaging beauty via the arts. The multi-cultural and multi-sensory approach included a session guiding women through intentional reflection and evaluation while engaging three types of art (visual, poetic, and musical). By using emotion-focused coping (examples of experience peace, rest, and comfort through beauty), participants were then invited to engage in problem-focused coping, reflecting on new ways of thinking and examining the impact on generating new solutions.

Participants designed their second session which included more reflection and engaging beauty by making different forms of art inspired by the artwork on which they voted to use. Details of the host's space, smells, flavours and ways participants were guided through the various arts were intentional designed to give participants an embodied and deeply humanising experience. This exploratory study mimicked a potential program design for a local intervention that could benefit people from differing spheres and jobs within the community.

### **Local Considerations**

In the local community, there are interesting dynamics of white and South Asian (predominately Indian and Sri Lankan) cultures. Religion is not a taboo topic in a nation

where the monarchy is the head of the church and the head of the state. World religions find a home here and are reflected in the neighborhoods. Hari Krishna, Jain, cultural Hindu, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians live on one street alone. Even a local home became a formal Theravada Buddhist temple and meditation center in 2022. While religious diversity is a strength, a challenge is this urban community has limited contact to beauty in nature, requiring access to transportation. Harrow could be a unique place to explore the role of the arts made more easily accessible and cultural flexible.

When I'm exploring how to take key concepts learned from L'Abri for this locality, I'm taking into thoughtful consideration how to highlight the universal values and experiences of humans while allowing for the unique and distinctive features based on cultural and religious diversity. Interestingly, spiritual experiences and those of profound beauty have many similarities (Cohen, A. B. et al., 2010). Perhaps this borough where spirituality is accepted more readily, may be primed for an experience with beauty.

The following chapters will examine in greater depth the literature surrounding positive emotions and awe, the design of the program and evaluation methods, understanding the data collected and lastly the implications both for the nonprofit sector (including community programming and the faith-based sector) and for future research.

## **Chapter 2 : Literature Review**

In this chapter, I'll be examining how people change through the lens of Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden-and-build" theory followed by exploring the related theory of awe and how beauty is a catalyst for these emotional experiences. Next I will discuss theories related to the study design including the value of art-based leadership tools, developmental evaluation, and some special considerations given the local population of the majority of the participants.

### **Broaden-and-Build: Role of Positive Emotions**

Because the study explores transformation and change, it is imperative to consider how people change and how that impacts the surrounding community. The answer of “how” uncovers the power of beauty and art to impact people in the process. It is both the journey and the destination that matters. Barbara Fredrickson wrote about and articulated a key theory of change called the “broaden-and-build” theory (BBT). She explains that “positive emotions signal optimal functioning, not just within the present, pleasant moment, but over the long-term as well” by broadening people’s “momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind” (Fredrickson, 2004, p.1367, 1369). Positive emotions trigger more creative thinking, more expansive thinking, which is exactly what nonprofits need if they are going to solve complex, societal problems. In the non-profit sector, organizations often deal with hard situations and hurting people while maintaining hopeful possibility for that change and improvement. Nonprofits need workers who can engage the work differently.

Helping people have an experience of positive emotion may be the best tool to offer because when people have robust positive emotions, “people take off. They become generative, creative resilient, ripe with possibility, and beautifully complex” (Frederickson, 2004, p.1375). Just as society witnessed negative declines in mental health during the pandemic for many neighbors, co-workers, and students, people are also capable of upward spirals towards more and more creative thinking and mental flourishing. If organizations can find a way to provide ongoing experiences of positive emotions, then the studies suggest these same organizations can expect better problem-solving capabilities (Frederickson & Joiner, 2002) in employees and volunteers as they grow and ultimately flourish.

### **Awe: Mediator of Positive Emotion**

Awe can be this mediator of these positive emotions studied by Barbara Fredrickson and others. Awe encourages mindfulness which leads to “openness, being accepting of new or unfamiliar things, curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving” (Wang, Geng, et al., 2016, p.3). Awe is the happy medium between the simple and overly complex. For something to produce awe it must transcend current categories, but it must also not be so foreign or complex as to lead to confusion. Not being able to understand at the first moment of engagement could be another way to describe “productive ambiguity” (Eisner, 1997, p.8) and the curiosity sparked leads to all sorts of highly positive behaviors including being more aware of the needs and concerns of others (Anderson, Dixon, et al. 2018). This idea of “productivity ambiguity” will be a theme in the study as the facilitator and participants embrace ambiguity and see it is a tool that helps people embrace patience and flexibility on the road to transformation.

People who are prone to experience awe are “more comfortable revising their mental structures or creating new ones” (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007, p.954). This suggests awe is an open door to growth, change, innovation and creativity. This ties into the idea of beauty being generative, that beauty leads to more beauty. Or another way of saying it would be that beauty leads to creativity, new ideas and novel ways of seeing the world. For example, we know that poets, painters, and the likes have in response to beauty of hills and dales written ballads, painted landscapes, and composed books. Think Wordsworth composing prolifically in the Lake District. But what if creation wasn't a mere response to beauty but rather it is the beauty that led to creation? As awe is a usually a positive experience (Cohen, Gruber & Keltner, 2010), beauty can produce both joy and interest which have generative responses. Joy encourages people to “play, push the limits and be creative” while “interest...creates the urge to explore, take in new information and experiences and

expand the self in the process” (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1369). If we are wanting to activate creativity and expansive thinking, then constructing interventions or experiences where a person is encouraged towards awe could be strategic.

### **Awe: Community Impact**

Additionally awe has been shown to have far reaching impact on communities beyond just an emotional reaction and transcendent isolated moment. Awe has been shown to improve attachment to one’s community and more engaged behaviors for the health of the local environment (Zhao, et al., 2022). When one experiences awe in a certain place, attachment to that place increases and behaviors that care for that environment and place increase. If organizations are hoping to encourage people to better solutions of community well-being, then not only giving them experiences of awe but helping them share that with others, may be a key method. Awe has also been shown in a study by Jiao and Luo (2002) to increase the prosocial behavior of empathy as they feel a greater connectedness with the world.

Peoples place attachment could lead to engaged behaviors with the goal of helping the community thrive. Inviting awe means harnessing people’s ability to think of others, feel compassion, and work for a better world. Beauty as seen in art and experienced in our senses is not excessive or petty but could be the underutilized avenue for transformation that impacts the members of local communities.

### **Awe: Beauty & the Arts**

Intense emotional responses from the arts, new ideas or knowledge and the vastness of nature can also be described as awe (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). This study will be focusing on how human art and artifacts such as “songs, symphonies, movies, plays, and paintings move people, and even change the way we look at the world,” (Keltner, 2003, p.



310). In the face of criticism for stopping to enjoy natural beauty and works of art after witnessing the devastation of the second atomic bombs in Japan, journalist Yasunari Kawabata stated, “It goes without saying that looking at old objects of art is not a hobby or a diversion. It is a matter of life and death,” (Keene, 1998, p. 827).

### **Beauty: A Definition**

There are many ways to define awe-inspiring beauty and there must be an acceptance of cultural differences and unique preferences. No one definition of beauty feels exhaustive, comprehensive and definitive. However, one defines his or her checklist of what determines beauty, some common threads remain. One way to understand beauty includes how philosopher and poet John O’Donohue (2003) explains,

“When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming. Some of our most wonderful memories are of beautiful places where we felt immediately at home. We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul,” (p.12).

What is helpful about this idea of “the Beautiful” is that it leaves room for interpretation of a personal nature. For example, looking at the Alps may move the soul of one person, while viewing the Victoria Waterfall in Zambia may move another. Or one person loves listening to new orchestral pieces by Alma Deutscher, but another chooses jazz songs by Esperanza Spalding. For centuries, the West at least, has been attempting to get at this concept of beauty. Keats famously wrote, “truth is beauty, beauty – truth. That is all ye knew and all ye need to know,” linking beauty with truth-telling. Blaise Pascal is attributed saying, “In difficult times carry something beautiful in your heart,” suggesting that beauty impacts us personally and impacts how we engage in the world. As artist and writer Mako Fujimura (2017) expands on a definition of beauty, he writes,

“Beautiful things are a delight to the senses, a pleasure to the mind, a refreshment for the spirit. Beauty invites us in, capturing our attention and making us want to linger...They inspire-or even demand-a response, whether sharing them in community or acting to extend their beauty into other spheres,” (p. 50).

Beauty invites a response. Looking at art or engaging the arts may lead to the experience of awe. Awe is a very powerful emotion that we have when we see or experience things that are novel and complex (Dong & Geng, 2022). In a world of readily available mediocrity, the arts provide an avenue to experience awe and beauty in an accessible and meaningful manner.

### **Beauty: Limitations**

While profound beauty is usually a very positive experience and connected to awe, it is important to note its limitations, especially on long-term personal transformation (Cohen, Gruber & Keltner, 2010). In comparing spiritual transformation experiences and those of profound beauty, beauty was overall very positive but limited. Spirituality and beauty are often linked due to a similar vocabulary and experiential understanding. The exquisite in art may be called “sublime”, “divine”, or “majestic,” but these terms do not necessarily mean the individual had a intentional spiritual experience. However, stimuli considered “beautiful” tends to have a complexity and order that leads to an attempt at sense-making and awakens humans’ minds in new ways (Berlyne, 1971). It is helpful to see experiencing beauty as something like a delicious and delicate vegetable. One head of broccoli does not health make. While a person may feel better in the moment or for a time after consumption, the affects wear off and one must consume broccoli regularly in order to reap its ongoing benefits. It must be engaged and enjoyed with consistency for maximum benefit. While this study seeks to begin to explore the ideas around the transformational impact of beauty via the arts, it does not provide a comprehensive answer due to time constraints.

## **Art: A Tool**

This is an abstract expressionist, Rothko-esque approach to change, while not always obvious or prescriptive that doesn't mean less real. Art has been used as a tool in a variety of studies and researched fields. It has power and the ability to impact humankind in numerous ways because

“Art may make the literal difference between life and death under circumstances of trauma or disaster, even for victims of tertiary trauma, especially if we understand life to include not simply physical existence but its emotional, spiritual, psychological, and moral dimensions” (Miller, 2014, p.272).

What Kawabata instinctively knew has been shown to be true in modern research. Four examples that reflect the power and potential of art are as follows. One study evaluated the benefits of art therapy on children diagnosed on the autism spectrum (ASD). In the majority of children they saw improvement as defined as “happier and more stable and [children] had an improved sense of self and were better at emotional regulation” (Schweizer, Knorth, et al., 2020, p.7). Another study looked at the impact of arts in high school curriculum beyond graduation rates. Though hard to quantify, the arts impact students in crucial ways supporting emotional development, increasing connection with the broader world, and training in the practice of ongoing reflection (Davis, 2012).

In 2015, a study explored the role of art therapy as an effective treatment for adults suffering PTSD, finding that evidence suggested “art therapy interventions are effective in reducing trauma symptom severity and anxiety in traumatized adults” (Schouten, de Niet, et al., 2015, p.226). In 2021 a study was published showing the positive impact of art in the well-being of older people with chronic mental illness and dementia. Not only were moods improved but the “collaboration between artists and caregivers stimulated creativity, beauty,

and learning from each other, as well as evoking emotions” (Boersma, van der Ploeg, & Gobbens, 2021, p1). From childhood through old age, art has been used to improve people’s lives. Beauty has the potential to be, to do, and to impact perhaps even more.

### **Research Gap**

While there are examples of organizations intentionally using art to instigate community transformation, there is a not empirical studies about these community, grass roots efforts. For example, in considering London, there are various art galleries that focus on healing and wholeness such as All Change, The Studio Upstairs, and Into Art. All Change gives voice to the unheard, highlighting art as a tool for social change and justice initiatives, especially for women. The Studio Upstairs provides classes, studio space and exhibitions for people with emotional and mental health challenges (including those recovering from addictions) and Into Art aims to give people with severe learning disabilities the opportunity to be visible and established artists. But to my knowledge there are not many exploratory studies trying to understand the use of the viewing, engagement and experience of beauty as seen in the senses and in the arts to initiate transformation both at a personal and communal level.

Though established places for rest, growth, and personal development exist like L’Abri (as discussed in the introduction), there are no studies explaining how and why these places provide such profound experiences. L’Abri is immersive, multi-sensory and intentionally thoughtful, creative, and beautiful, but it happens in a setting that is more reminiscent of a retreat rather than a program one could easily attend at the end of a workday and before putting the kids to bed. The “otherness” of the time is both rejuvenating but limiting since it requires time and resources in which to partake. While a breathtaking

landscape and location aid in the experience of awe, my study aims to make beauty accessible right here in Harrow.

### **Implementation Plan: Theories**

Based on the literature review above, this study explores how can beauty via the arts sparks creative thinking and problem solving through personally transformative experiences. To examine this question, the study has been designed based on the following theories regarding leadership, formative design process, developmental evaluation, and Most Significant Change evaluation techniques. Key factors for design include experiencing beauty in numerous ways (including the five senses and through the arts), while acknowledging the impacts of time, gender, nationality, and participant involvement and ownership.

### **Leadership Development: Art-Based Interventions**

While organizations could continue to develop programs that are hyper-focused on one area of urgency (and this is needed too!), this program looks to benefit many areas of importance at once. Instead of only inviting participants with a shared struggle or felt weakness, this program seeks to empower all community members in their spheres of influence. In the study, community members were brought together for a shared, tangible experience of beauty, and to reflect on their areas of responsibility and domains within the community.

Leadership can be developed through many approaches, including via engagement with the arts. This should not be considered secondary or less-than from traditional approaches as seen in Thomas Garavan's study (Garavan, McGarry, et al., 2015) in which art-based leadership development outcomes were significantly higher than conventional leadership development interventions. It is a conscious raising experience that is

transformative and requires a high level of personal engagement by participants and gives them a “transforming aesthetic experience to develop non-rational, non-logical capabilities...cultivating experiential knowing, aesthetic awareness and in general the so-called soft issues of managing and leading” (Garavan, 2016). Arts-based inquiry looks for new ways to gain knowledge while “embracing intuition and imagination” (Latham, 2014, p.123) and the important leadership skill of “openness to new experiences with an internal lens of evaluation” (Latham, 2014, p.126). This is very important for leadership as life’s problems are complex, and clear or obvious solutions are not always the best solutions. This type of embodied leadership is essential for an embodied community that hopes to become healthy and thriving at numerous levels.

The generative nature of art means that when it impacts leaders, it impacts employees, thereby impacts clients. The same “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotion has been shown to impact creativity in employees. Employees can be encouraged to make and generate new and pragmatic outcomes in their work through strong relationships with leaders (Lin, Kao, et al., 2016). So, whether the participants are “leaders” in formal settings or in the fact that they all have area of responsibility and significance, positive emotions are still incredibly important and powerful. Engaging with beauty can either directly impact employees and clients (as in a community-based arts program) or it can engage the leadership who then strengthens their employees via the positive emotions and relationships nurtured.

### **Program Design: Formative Design & Developmental Evaluation**

The overarching design approach is formative process and developmental evaluation. Both frameworks share the value of “productive ambiguity.” In formative process design, there is a unique ability to engage in real world settings (Gobat, et al., 2021) rather than highly controlled environments. Allowing for variables likes conversation, pivoting plans,

questions, and suggestions is more conducive in this model. Being that the study is exploratory and innovative, maintaining flexibility as both a program and as a leader/facilitator is important. Formative process also allows for data collection through written narratives, open-ended questions and aimed at encouraging deep thinking (Bastos, et al., 2021). It is essential to acknowledge the participants are being formed as much as the program is. Both exist in a dialogue with one another, while also adjusting for the other.

The awareness and creativity required here is reflected in Michael Quinn Patton's Developmental Evaluation that "supports innovation, adaptation, and systems change," (Patton, 2016, p. 291). That is reflected in the accepting of ambiguity for what the program will look like, and how it will move forward and improve. Truly it is more of a dance than a march. This evaluation model requires short cycles of design and feedback, creation and reflection (Patton, 2016). While aspects of the program have been planned and chosen, other elements remain unknown and open to the response, needs, and articulated desires of the participants.

People have quite different artistic preferences and perceptions, so it is important to include modern and contemporary art as part of the experience. These art forms require meaning-making but because they lack obvious answers, can accommodate differences in people's experiences quite well. When people experience beauty and the arts, they have both cognitive and emotional responses (Leder, et al., 2004) and so the study must account for both and in fact encourage both. By giving time for exploration, personal education, reflection, and sharing, a participant is wholistically considered. Often positive and self-rewarding aesthetic experience (Leder, et al., 2004), can be harnessed to propel change.

### **Special Considerations for the Participant Population**

The concept of action-reflection-action or praxis is used throughout the program. This is a new program and though I enter it with my personal ideas, I want, and must account for

the fact that I cannot know what everyone needs or wants from the study. So, the participants will try new activities and then give feedback via written and spoken reflections so that as a program designer, I can best adapt to the local contexts (Gray & Shaw, 2019) and in-moment needs of the participants.

The other intention of praxis is giving voice to the participants, irrespective of their age, nationality or cultural background. Because my study will be reflecting this particular local community, attendees will include American, British, and South Asian (Indian). While the potential for rich conversation and sharing of experiences remains, I must also acknowledge the history of people groups impacted by governments. As researcher Nicole Bowman shares, “Decolonizing your cognitive and other constructs is an important method to incorporate. A colonial/privileged assumption is that the evaluator’s position is neutral or objective” (2021). Having the participants lead discussions and even assist in planning the program’s second session is an attempt to recognize that the best, most qualified person to tell a program designer what the participant needs is in fact his or herself. The artistic choices and beauty preferences do not need to reflect my bent but rather can reflect the local community.

### **Evaluation Method: Most Significant Change**

The final component of the study is the summation of evaluations. Though there is an ongoing cycle of action and reflection, a third of the study is focused evaluation. Humans grow emotionally and cognitively through reflection and assume the position of learner as they hear from one another and evaluate their own personal experiences. The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique highly values the voice of the participants even over that of the observations of the evaluator. The MSC data collection is “non-threatening...(where there are no right or wrong answers, no assumptions of opposing outcomes such as expected/unexpected or agreed/disputed meanings) permits total



acknowledgement and recognition of participants’ often culturally specific perspectives” (Choy & Lidstone, 2013, p.4). The participants share their stories, identifying key points of interest in a way that encourages feedback and discussion. Because the driver of the sharing is the individuals, MSC is effective at helping to identify unintentional, complex and diverse outcomes, often more challenging to measure in scientific methods (Choy & Lidstone, 2013). Qualitative data is also viewed through a lens of nuance for what long-term change may look like (Henry, et al., 2022). Transformation is at the heart of the questions being asked and curiosity about the catalytic nature of beauty towards that change. While the study cannot include the ideal length of time, it can ask the preliminary questions, exploring how to best engage beauty for the sake of the participants prospering and that of their community’s flourishing.

### **Chapter Three : Method & Findings**

This chapter provides detailed information regarding the sample, sample selection, recruitment and methods used in the study, followed by a discussion on the findings from the study and noted patterns within the answers given by participants. The final section provides limitations to this exploratory study.

#### **Sample**

The sample reflects the cross-cultural, multi-national population of Harrow, London. With 61.8% of the population identifying as an ethnic minority and 155 languages spoken in school (Harrow Council, 2018), this borough is quite diverse. The study sample includes seven participants identifying ethnically as British-Asian, South Asian, or American. While not random, this purposive sample followed certain criterion discussed in the following section.

The participants reflect a variety of ages and generations as well. The youngest participant is 24 years old, and the oldest woman is 63 years old. Other ages of participants are 30, 33, 36, 51, and 55.

### **Selection**

First, one criterion for selection was being a woman. Because of the highly personal nature of self-reflection and sharing, I decided to only include women. In South Asian culture, women and men still do many things separately, especially socially. I believe that women in this community are more open to honest and vulnerable feedback if the group only included one gender.

Second, another criterion for selection was being a part of the local community. The study happened in person, precluding anyone only able to participate online (e.g., via Zoom). Considering the potential experiential difference between a face-to-face versus virtual session, I decided only to focus on in person experiences.

Third, I wanted the participants to accurately reflect the diverse nature of the local borough, specifically including the South Asian contingent. Of the seven participants, only two identified as American. Though not a driving factor in recruitment, it is important to note that jobs and connections to the community were diverse. Professions include counselor/therapist, volunteer at a charity, charity shop (thrift store in America) manager, two young professionals, former nurse turned community aid worker, and a stay-at-home mother. Three other women were recruited for the study but could not attend. Their professions include a teacher, a donor support lead for a central London based charity, and a multi-cultural counseling center manager.

## **Recruitment**

I invited all participants by email and followed up with either an email, phone call or an in-person conversation. Initially, I invited ten women to whom I had some connection or contact with, either through volunteering together at a weekly Mums & Tots group, attending the same sangat (faith community) and/or have met locally. Two women who were initially invited asked to also invite women who they thought might enjoy the study but to whom I had no prior connection. I agreed to their invitation. One was able to join the study, one was not. Another woman initially agreed but then ended up being out of the country on the dates of the study. So, of the initial eleven invites, six attended plus a friend of an attendee who joined us for both sessions.

Seven women attended both sessions, though one woman had to leave abruptly during the second session due to a family emergency and was not able to complete the study. Therefore, six women completed all four hours and answered all questions asked in the participant notebooks. However, I am using all available data so there is some variation in the total number of participants. All data from the first session is from seven participants and all data from the second session is from six participants.

## **Instruments Used for Data Collection**

Participants provided data in three ways. First, I provided all participants with identical notebooks containing a series of questions asked over the course of two, two-hour sessions. Participants privately recorded answers in pen and shared personal reflections and evaluations in the notebooks. Second, as facilitator, I invited participants to share answers out loud in front of the group for a select few questions, though this was not a requirement. Some of the responses were recorded by audio recording on a phone. Third, I had impressions and

observations as the lead facilitator of our sessions. See Figure 1 for a sample of evaluation questions and see Appendix A for a complete list.

**Figure 1. Sample Evaluation Questions**

(1) Question #6: How are you feeling right now? Where in your body do you feel it? (In response to the art piece and sharing about the piece)
(2) Question #11: Homework: Over the next two weeks, would you please... a. Notice something you find beautiful and be prepared to share about it at the next session. b. Notice something that inspires a sense of awe and wonder and be prepared to share about it at the next session.
(3) Question #15: Can you reflect on how the homework you had and sessions you participated in may have impacted how you think about your challenge?

**Location & Dates**

The study took place over two, two-hour sessions. The first session occurred in the home of a participant and the second session occurred in my home. I had hoped to use a local community hall, but it was already spoken for on the only dates the group of women had availability. We met on Sunday, February 12 from 3-5pm and on Sunday, February 26 from 3-5pm. The sessions were two weeks apart.

**Procedure**

Participants were intentionally given limited information and explanation in advance so as not to lead them to any particular conclusions. They were simply invited to participate in my graduate study that would be looking at the role of beauty and art in the nature of community well-being.

The two sessions were broken into two blocks each, a total of four blocks of time. The first session included block one in which participants were oriented to the time together, practiced personal reflection and participated in three art engagements. Block two was a time of group planning for the next session. Per developmental evaluation, the participants would

be designing part of the program. The second session included block three in which participants would continue reflection time and then engage the arts as they had planned and directed at our prior meeting. The final fourth block was a time of final personal reflection and program evaluation.

Ambiance was thoughtfully considered and constructed. In order to give participants time to settle in and enter the time unhurried, women were asked to arrive at 2:45pm for a hard start at 3pm. The homes used for the study were quiet, empty of extra people, candles were lit throughout, and textiles were warm and inviting. Once women arrived, they poured cups of freshly brewed tea and chose snacks from a varied selection.

Next, I began by orienting them to the participant notebook, an overview of the activities we would be doing together and answered any last-minute questions. Then we began by answering several questions of self-reflection regarding an area of responsibility or a sphere of influence. After choosing one area, the ladies privately brainstormed pain points, areas of weakness or opportunities for growth. Then they brainstormed ways they could respond to these pain points, after which they set aside their notes to reconsider at a later time.

Next began our formal engagement with beauty via the arts. I provided thirteen printed images, ranging from abstract to representational and asked the women to each choose one image they liked or that moved them and share why. Appendix B provides a sample of images provided. After sharing and personal reflection, we then read a poem by Mary Oliver entitled *The Man Who Has Many Answers* (provided at the beginning of chapter 1). After a group discussion and reflection, we then listened to *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Again, they wrote reflections in their notebooks and then took a group break.

When we came back together, I explained that the participants would be designing our second session (in two weeks) as in line with Developmental Evaluation. In Developmental Evaluation participants guide the design of a program and the leaders take on a role of facilitator. Though we started by brainstorming ideas in the three categories of arts explored during the first session (visual, written, musical), what we did and how we interacted with the art was entirely up to them. I offered only minor feedback and acted as facilitator and recorder in the planning portion. Appendix C shows the brainstorming boards for each “art engagement” as planned by the participants. We ended our time with discussing homework and I handed out three flower bulbs to each participant to be planted in their respective gardens. The bulbs had several functions. First, they acted as a culturally sensitive (i.e. frugal) symbol of gratitude for participating in the session. Second, the bulbs were a tactile gift inviting women to literally get their hands dirty and smell the earth while they planted them in their small urban gardens. Finally, they served as a reminder of our session and the things examined in conjunction with the given homework. The homework questions (as seen in Appendix A) asked participants to find one thing they considered beautiful and one thing that inspired awe over the two weeks break and be prepared to share about them with the group at the next session.

Upon gathering for the second session, I led the group through a palette cleanser/reset activity, acknowledging we all entered the time with distractions and burdens. We listened to *Kingfisher* by Spell Songs and then began our time by sharing about our homework. Given the growing trust in the group, the time lasted longer than anticipated as women shared more freely and in greater detail than expected. Next, we began to implement their chosen activities. I provided four images and the women voted on one image to serve as their inspiration for art making. Appendix D shows the inspiration image and examples of the work created.

Sensitivity to participants' feedback and needs is an important role of facilitator in developmental evaluation as is being willing to alter the program plan. The art time was going on for so long that the women decided they did not want to stop creating art, so we then pivoted and decided to listen to their chosen musical piece, *The Sunken Cathedral* by Claude Debussy, while continuing to work on their creations. During this time, I also had a poetry station set up based on ideas and parameters given by the women during the planning time. Here women could either add lines to create a poem together (an exercise called "Pass the Poem") or make a "found" poem in which one takes existing lines of different poems and reconstructs them into an original work. Appendix E includes both of their poems.

Our final activities included reflection and evaluation. For the reflection time, we turned back to the areas of responsibility or spheres of influences identified in the first session and reflected on ways participants had engaged these areas over the last two weeks whether in thought and/or in action. Then women were invited to reflect on new ways to engage these pain points.

Inspired by the Most Significant Change Evaluation model, participants broke into two groups to share stories of impact as they evaluated the sessions together. Women then shared ideas to the whole group, and we had a final discussion on any of the women's insights as we ended our time together.

### **Data Collection & Coding**

After all the sessions were complete, I read through the participants notebooks and listened to recordings of the group discussions. Figure 2 provides an example of the coding method used for the written responses from participants.

**Figure 2. Example Coding from Participant #7**

Question	Can you reflect on how the homework you had and sessions you participated in may have impacted how you think about your challenge?
Answer	Varying perspective on some piece of art made me reflect on the <b>varying perspectives about my challenge</b> . The time together reminded me of my fondness of art and reflecting on art → can <b>use my time to focus on this</b> or <b>use art as a coping mechanism for challenges</b> .
Color Key for Fig. 2	<b>Red: new ways of thinking</b> <b>Blue: Empowerment / Hope</b>

The main ideas from the notebooks were then put into a spreadsheet and different themes were highlighted in different colors. See Appendix F for more examples.

### **Data: Engaging with the Arts**

As reflected in the concept map (see Figure 7), data was collected about how participants engaged with the various art forms. During the first session, when reflecting as to why they chose the art piece they did (from options provided), five out of seven women used words around memory, longing and nostalgia. Art is often an intimidating concept and perhaps people are drawn to what is familiar because it feels a bit safer. People are constantly making meaning of what they see and experience, including in the arts. Two of the seven women referenced the calmness and sense of peace being appealing and one woman noted the abstract image allowed for multiple interpretations with no one right way to look at it. Note that this last participant I had not met before the study and had no idea of her interest in art or how she was coming into the time.

Reflections on the poem by Mary Oliver were very interesting. Engaging with the poem felt the most challenging for the participants though all tried to consider it thoughtfully. I asked them to practice noticing and wondering in the poem to orient themselves and their



mind to the text. The poet herself is noticing and wondering about someone who appears to have all the answers and someone who has only questions.

The final art form engaged during the first session was the musical piece *The Lark Ascending*. After listening to the piece, participants noted in their books feeling a strong sense of calm and three of the women specifically used the word “relaxation” or “relaxed.” Six of the seven women were able to identify where in their body they felt something. Interestingly, the first time I asked a question about noticing where in their body they felt something (after viewing and sharing about an art piece), only four of seven participants used words about physical sensations. This suggests a growing awareness during the art engagements.

### **Date: Positive Emotions**

Throughout the two sessions participants were asked to thoughtfully reflect on the experience, how they were feeling and what they were noticing. When reflecting on looking at and sharing about the visual art (Question #6) and after listening to *The Lark Ascending* (Question #8), six of the seven participants used positive emotion language in their responses both times. Words like “happy,” “joy(joyful),” “calm,” “peaceful,” “refreshed,” and “confident” were spontaneously volunteered in answers to other reflective questions as well. Though one participant did share as to “feeling numb” after choosing an art piece that she liked, by the end of the first session she noted she was leaving “quite refreshed” and “exposed to new thoughts and ideas about art forms that I didn’t have → love this.” During the first sessions, my impressions included the women smiling throughout the sessions, sharing their eagerness to return for the last session and seeing them hug one another before exiting the home. I also observed countless cues of positive emotion as they openly discussed their enjoyment in attempting to make art and heard laughter throughout the entire session.

### **Data: Group Outcomes**

Homework was given at the end of the first session. Participants were asked to identify something beautiful and something that gave them a sense of awe or wonder and be prepared to share about those at the next session. All women completed the homework and of the six women present at the second session, five noted how the homework led to more intentional noticing and reflecting over the two-week break. In the homework, participants noted beautiful and awe-inspiring things in nature (e.g. stillness in the air, moon and planetary alignment, new blossoms, peacefulness of the Peak District) and things in people (e.g. children's smiles, connecting with adult child living away). The only woman that did not speak at an increase in noticing due to the homework, explained she already thinks about these things regularly, noting this is not a new practice for her.

To measure transformation, participants were asked at the beginning of the first session to identify areas of responsibility and identify areas of needed change/growth. Examples included a neighborhood that has challenges with litter, limits in care for elderly adults, lack of green space for children in an urban environment, company hierarchy, and a relational rift due to ongoing disrespect and inequality. Then they were asked to reflect and choose one pain point and privately brainstorm solutions. When asked to reconsider these same pain points and solutions at the end of the second session, all women experienced some sort of change or transformation whether in thought and/or action. Three women had definitive actions associated with their problems that they had accomplished the last two weeks. Five women used language around new ways of thinking from "new ideas for family time," to "thinking more creatively, outside the box," new realization about noting the power of small changes instead of focusing on one huge change, looking forward to the future because the sessions "makes me responsible and reminds me about...changing my life in the

future,” and that while some situations are not in one’s power to change directly, “it may be more how I deal/cope with it, can I move past it without it being resolved.”

Another common theme was empowerment and hope. Participant #2 shared in the group evaluation time that she “felt more human” for having done the study and “felt the reset and joy in midst of having to do a really hard but good thing” outside the study one day. Participant #3 shared she is “approaching [her challenge] with a little more freshness and hopefully more compassion.” Participant #4 reflected both in her notebook and more comprehensively in the group evaluation time that she realized the impact of just showing up to an experience. She said “doing something creative feels like it requires a lot. Being in a creative and reflective space together made me realize all you have to do is show up and experience something beautiful. I was thinking in light of my challenge how maybe it’s less challenging then how it feels.” Participant #5 wrote that she is “now looking forward to the future” and in the group evaluation she said this experience “made me feel that I can move forward and look forward to something. Not ‘I can’t do it.’” Participant #6 shared that this time “makes you think about details and the smaller things” and that she now looks at things differently. Participant #7 wrote that she “integrated my life outside the study which I wasn’t expecting.”

All women noted the value of doing this together and with other women. The opening question invited women to consider how they were coming into the time (e.g. what they felt excited about, distracted by, and curious about). Five of the seven participants said time together made them excited. During the evaluation phase at the end, one participant said she “feels richer for being with others” and another said she was excited to “join the ladies [for] fun.”

When considering the participants notes all together, all women used language of positive emotion, and all women noted a new way of thinking and/or action in response to their personal identified pain points. The time together engaging beauty sparked a transformative experience for them personally that then led to new ways to engage in their communities (whether neighborhood, family, job, place of volunteering, or work with the elderly). See Figure 7 for a summation of findings as a concept map.

### **Strengths of Study Design**

It is important to note the strengths of the study design and certain intentional decisions on my part as facilitator in order to gather uncorrupted data. First, questions for participants to answer were stripped of language that would inadvertently reveal the larger scope of my project. They were open ended and intentionally excluded language about “change” or “transformation.” Second, participants were told numerous times that there was no “right or wrong” answers but that I requested honest, candid answers. Third, majority of the responses were written down in the notebooks given to participants. These answers were not shared publicly to the group to avoid undue influence. Group discussions only happened when each woman shared about the art piece she liked, sense making of the poem, and in deciding how to design the second session. Reflections were done without group input. The final evaluation consisted of two small group discussions which I floated between and then gave the groups the option to share with the whole room. Finally, I did not read or look at the participant notebooks between sessions so as to respond to and be able to navigate the group design model without additional bias.

### **Limitations**

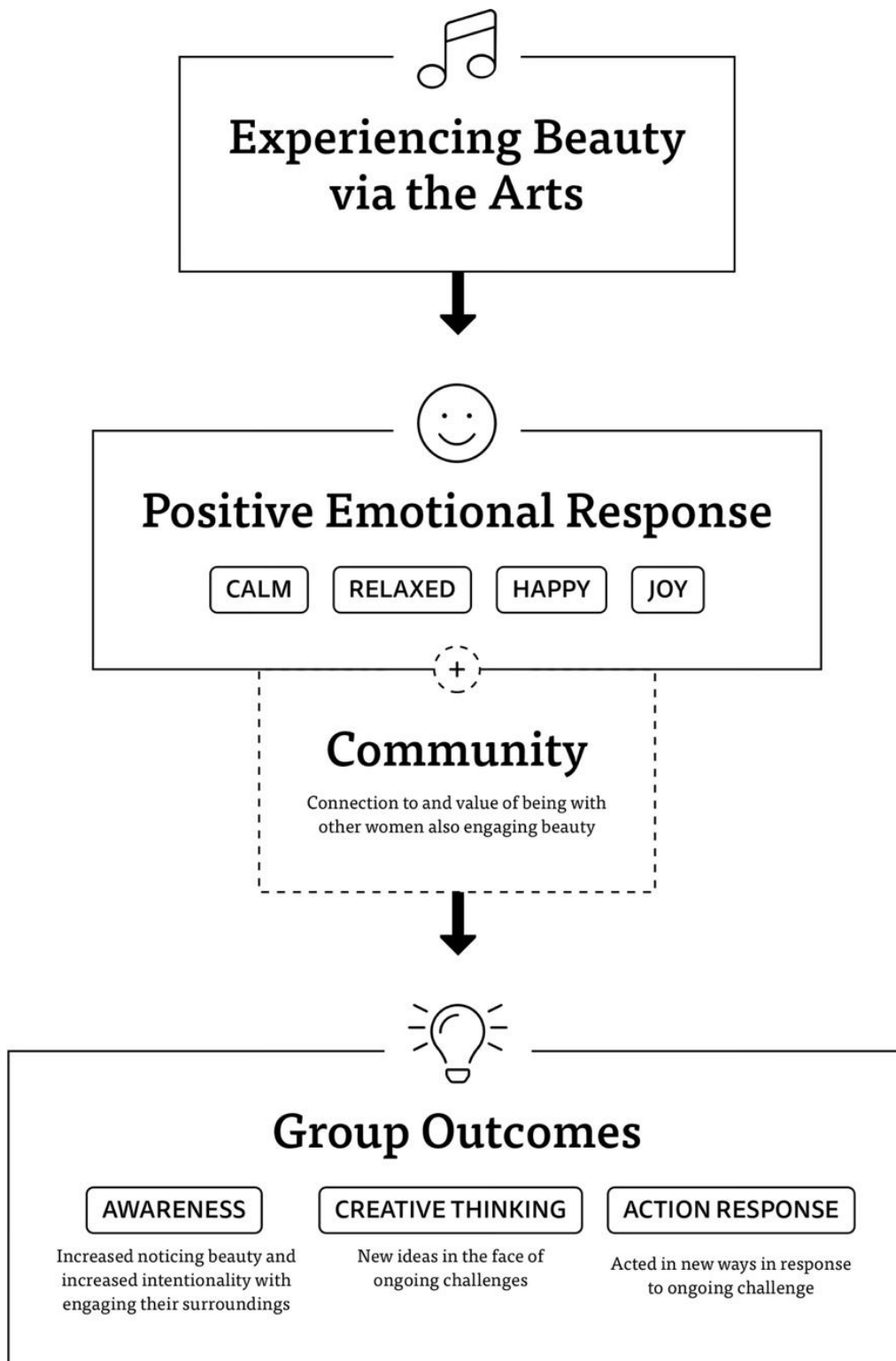
There are several limitations to the study. First, only women were recruited and participated. Results may vary for men, and this would be an interesting study to rerun with

both a co-ed group and men only group to compare results. Perhaps depth of reflection, comfort in sharing ideas, or the intensity of the group bonding may vary depending on gender of participants. Second, there were no white British participants. The answers reflect ex-pat Americans, Indians and British South Asians. There are many nuances here and cultural values at play, for example, hospitality is a high South Asian value as well as decisions by consensus. So, while the study took place in London, it does not directly reflect a white British contingency which is stereotypically more reserved and private. Third, time was also a limiting factor. If time allowed, I would have liked to interview participants a month and then two months out from the study to understand whether the study sparked an ongoing engagement with beauty and how the participants were thinking about their areas of influence. While an intimate group size worked very well for the activities and reflection times, I also recommend doing multiple small groups and comparing results between groups. Different groups will have unique dynamics and personalities that could impact results.

### **Summation**

In sum, the results of the study show that when all participants engaged with beauty in the arts, all experienced positive emotions. All participants valued being together and being with other women. There are three main outcomes. First an increase in noticing beauty in their everyday lives, thinking differently about their stated problem and engaging the problem differently. This suggests a transformative experience both personally for participants and in how they engaged the need they identified in the first session. This is shown in the concept map below.

**Figure 7. Concept Map**



*Designed by Robert Musser*

## Chapter Four : Discussion & Conclusion

Humans long to live a “good” life: one that is happy, meaningful, and psychologically rich (Oishi & Westgate, 2022). In 2012, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (a nonprofit began by the United Nations) published the first World Happiness Report, ranking countries by the happiness of their citizens. Books about the happiness in places like Denmark are bestsellers (e. g. *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living* by Meik Wiking sold over a million copies) . But the “how” of the good life remains elusive in many settings. People want thriving lives in blossoming communities. Yet, headlines point out daily the extreme challenges facing the planet and its inhabitants.

Innovators are working to imagine new ways of addressing real world needs with sustainable solutions. For example Doughnut Economics, created by economist Kate Raworth, goes against the drive for the ever-increasing GDP as a measure of a country’s success. Instead she promotes focusing on living in a way in which all members of a community have needs met without taxing the local environment (Raworth, 2013). She explains the necessity of balance and living within boundaries. This type of creativity is needed across disciplines. Nonprofits also need to find innovative ways to address ongoing challenges. I propose beauty in the arts is a powerful catalytic tool for unleashing transformative experiences and creative thinking that may lead to community well-being.

### Study Questions & Goals

To explore how beauty in the arts impacts individuals, I designed a study that would serve multiple purposes. First, it would give participants an opportunity to engage with beauty in the arts through a curated experience, requiring no prior knowledge or expertise in the arts. Second, the sessions provided time for quiet, private reflection amidst the busy and noisy modern day. Third, the study invited ownership by the participants as the design

(inspired by developmental evaluation) meant the participants planned the second half of the study themselves.

To examine the idea of “transformation,” participants were asked to first choose an area of responsibility or sphere of influence and then, in light of a problem or weakness, brainstorm potential solutions. Next I led participants through engaging the arts (visual, written, and musical) and facilitated the planning of their next art-based session. After the second session’s time of creating, participants were then asked a second time to reconsider their initial problem. They were asked if they had engaged it in the last two weeks or if they had any further thoughts about potential solutions. Throughout all sessions, participants were asked to reflect on their cognitive, emotional, and physical states.

While most of the reflections and feedback were provided in written form in the individual participant notebooks, group conversations were recorded, and I had impressions as the facilitator. Participants shared some answers in front of the group, but to avoid too much social influence on individual responses, most answers remained private, especially in regard to the areas of responsibility and possible solutions.

While future studies may want to consider co-ed or male groups, this female-only sample featured the voices of women that reflect the diverse population of Harrow. Five of the participants identified as British South Asian or Indian and two participants identified as American. The presence of only women allowed for a safe atmosphere in which the vulnerability of personal reflection was protected.

### **Key Findings**

As reflected on the conceptual model (Figure 7), all participants experienced beauty via the arts. They looked at art pieces, read and discussed a poem and listened to a musical piece. Each art engagement included time for personal reflection and note taking. As a result



of engaging the arts, all participants noted positive emotional responses both in written reflections, group discussions, and nonverbal cues. For example, participants used positive emotional language (e.g. happy, calm, relaxed, peaceful) when reflecting on the visual, written, and musical art pieces. They also gave nonverbal cues like smiling, closing eyes when listening to the music, laughing, and leaning forward during group discussions. Another group experience was the benefit of being in community and doing the study together and with other women.

In response to these positive emotions, participants noted three main outcomes. First, participants had an increased awareness both of beauty and of their surroundings. Second, participants noted creative thinking in regard to their chosen problems. Third, participants took actions in response to their chosen problems. Some participants noted both a change in thinking and action, while others only provided examples of one. These results support Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory that states, "distinct types of positive emotion serve to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires" (Fredrickson, 2004, p.1370).

### **Implications: Positivity Resonance as a Goal & a Tool**

Positive emotions were experienced by all participants and were spontaneously noted in their participant notebooks and seen in nonverbal cues. Based on the broaden-and-build theory, when people experience positive emotions, creativity often follows (Isen, 1987). One type of positive emotion that is unique to a group (consisting of two or more people) is positivity resonance. For positivity resonance to occur there must be three components present in the social contact which are shared positive affect (experiential), caring nonverbal synchrony (behavioral), and biological synchrony (physiological) (Fredrickson, 2016). While

unable to study these components in a laboratory setting, both the program design and data suggest something akin to positivity resonance may have occurred. For example,

- Positive Affect (Experiential): Shared experiences of (a) looking at the same art together, (b) reading and discussing the same poem, (c) listening to the same music, (d) creating art based on the same painting, (e) constructing a poem from the same lines, and (f) being asked to reflect and evaluate during the same intervals
- Caring Nonverbal Synchrony (Behavioral): Shared responses of (a) smiling at one another throughout the sessions, (b) leaning forward during discussions, and (c) hugging one another upon exiting both sessions
- Biological Synchrony (Physiological): Similarly noted physical sensations including (a) six of seven women used either or both “calm” or “relaxed” after listening to *The Lark Ascending*, descriptions include noting (b) ears tingling, (c) warmth from deep within, feeling the ups and downs of the music in her body, (d) feeling the music at the top of her head down to her fingertips, and (e) experiencing a growing warmth in the body

Because all participants noted being together and being with other women as a valuable experience during the study, I believe positivity resonance was an unintended result of the study. It manifested as profound group bonding.

Positivity resonance is a powerful tool beyond the pleasant experience of love and bonding that accompanies it because it encourages prosocial motivations. A study published in 2022 explored the role of positivity resonance in building “compassionate communities or those that function with goodwill and civility” (Zhou et al, 2022, 31). By measuring participants prosocial tendencies of spirituality, altruism, and humility, researchers discovered that people reporting higher levels of positivity resonance also reported more

prosocial tendencies and fewer self-centered tendencies (Zhou et al, 2022) including “spiritual, helpful, and humble behaviors and experiences of oneness, compassion and humility” (Zhou et al, 2022, p. 42). These are ideal characteristics when considering community health and well-being. Happy people help people.

Though there is not research on the impact of positivity resonance on creativity directly, the correlation to positive emotion and the data suggests that it may be a key component in enhanced creative and innovative thinking. For nonprofits considering employee team building, positivity resonance is an important piece as it could lead to greater bonding and connection within the team or group. The data suggests that engaging and reflecting on beauty *together* may be an essential piece to the group outcomes. For example, a leader would be wise to incorporate the art engagement and beauty reflections to group experiences rather than by independent means (e.g. email). Nonprofits could also consider how to design programs that allow for positivity resonance. Engaging the arts and including times of reflection, quiet and gently facilitated group discussion allows for biological and nonverbal synchrony.

### **Implications: Psychology and Nonprofit Studies Partnership**

Instead of maintaining siloed disciplines, psychology and nonprofit studies should be in partnership when working to design, implement, and evaluate programs. The broaden-and-build theory has numerous implications as it explains the extensive benefits of positive emotions. Nonprofits would be wise to learn and then integrate this knowledge into their programs. Especially as nonprofits seek to improve communities and the well-being of citizens, they should consider what they can learn from this theory which suggests, “positive emotions fuel human flourishing” (Frederickson, 2004, p. 1373). This flourishing is described as optimal functioning and thriving that includes growth, longevity, beauty, resilience,

generativity and complexity (Fredrickson, 2004). As these words convey similar goals and values for many nonprofits, they would be well to learn about these theories.

Psychologists have an opportunity to share about these theories in practical ways, offering their expertise to the planning and evaluation of programs. By looking for positions on boards of nonprofits or initiating inter-disciplinary conversations, they can seek to both share their knowledge of how people function as well as learn from nonprofits and receive critical feedback on the applied value and limitations of their theories. Because positive emotions trigger upwards spirals of emotional well-being (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002), nonprofits can make the most of these emotions. In working together, professionals from these two fields can encourage community and human flourishing.

### **Implications: Nonprofit Program Design**

Beauty as experienced through the arts may be an underutilized tool for nonprofit program design and evaluation. The participants in the study were not recruited based on personal interest in the arts and yet all left having been impacted by beauty and engaging the arts together. Integrating beauty into program design may allow for a positive emotional experience that benefits both the participants and thereby the community.

Nonprofits could consider this in terms of planning meetings or employee development. Good ideas must come from somewhere so why not begin a meeting by reading a poem together or engaging in an art reflection before a brainstorming session. Maybe pause in the middle of complicated problem solving and quietly listen to a musical composition together. Light a beautifully scented candle or take a walk together and note the various colors of flower petals. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in an 1893 journal entry, “treat things poetically.” Stop and consider the clouds and discover how these moments of pausing and delighting in beauty may fuel the creativity needed to address problems with fresh

innovation. By engaging beauty through the arts and senses, employees can experience positive emotions together and thereby the benefits of creative thinking. These art engagements could become predictable rhythms throughout the work week or left to the spontaneity of who is leading the meeting. For example, every Monday morning meetings could begin with a poem and group reflection time, allowing for employees to reconnect after the weekend away. Or during a particular stressful meeting or program session, a leader could have the tool of pausing to engage beauty as a means of reorientation and positive emotional experience.

### **Implications: Faith-based Nonprofit Program Design**

Based on personal experience, faith-based nonprofits often have program goals in which specific spiritual or religious language is used during a program or in the evaluation of a program. However, as a follower of Jesus, I intentionally deleted any religious language from my study though I saw overlaps of value and thought in both the psychology and nonprofit theories with my beliefs. Instead, I focused on beauty and how to assist people in experiencing and engaging that beauty in an embodied and holistic manner.

Reflecting on my times at L'Abri and the value of the arts and hospitality experienced there, I attempted to practice similar elements in my study. I wanted the participants who have beliefs on a spectrum of Christianity, Hinduism, and Jainism to feel welcomed and at ease during the sessions. While no questions were formally spiritual or religious, the offering of beauty does connect with my personal beliefs about the nature of the Divine. As one participant stated at the end, the time in both studies made her feel more human, suggesting an embodied experience, beyond a cognitive one.

Perhaps these types of holistic experiences should be a program goal for faith-based nonprofits. While this is not a space for theological discussion, I do think theology has a

place at the table for faith-based nonprofit program design. What if these groups, rejecting Plato's dualism of flesh and spirit, focused on helping people feel more human, more connected to the earth and one another, bringing back the dignity to being human? Not only could this lead to greater unity (and collaboration) with other nonprofits that do not share the same belief system, but also open doors to learn from other practitioners about best practices in community work with the shared goal of a thriving, flourishing world.

Collaboration allows for the best minds to work together, learn from one another and support each other's efforts. As faith-based nonprofits could focus on mutual interest, the possibilities for collaboration increases. For example, I have seen a church aid in litter picking in their borough and a mandir host a community food drive. In regards to beauty specifically, a church could partner with local temples, mosques, meditation centers to host an arts night where community members are invited in for a lecture, followed by discussion and concluding with group art making. Or a faith-based nonprofit could offer their community space as a location for concerts in the summer, bringing in a variety of styles of musicians and host artist talks after. The focus would not be on overtly religious music but excellent musicians and invite conversation surrounding the deeper questions of life and the human experience.

### **Future Research & Other Recommendations**

There are several recommendations for future research. First, as explained in the limitations section, I recommend running the study with co-ed, male, and multiple small groups to better understand how beauty sparks positive emotions and creative thinking for various sub-groups. It may also be interesting to see how these different groups will engage in the planning of the second session. Various preferences and personalities will inevitably rise, leading to potentially quite different sessions as seen in developmental evaluation. It will

be necessary for the facilitators to remain flexible, open to ambiguity, and quick to pivot in response to the immediate needs of and direction by participants.

Second, I recommend studying the impact of beauty on transformative thinking and community engagement over a longer period of time. Participants could be interviewed in set length of time (e.g., one month out, two months out) from the initial study and see how their ideas and actions related to community needs diminishes, remains, or increases.

Third, I recommend doing a similar study in which participants are lead through individual engagements with beauty in the arts rather than group engagements. One could then compare and contrast the impact of experiencing beauty together versus separately and see if that plays a role in one's ability to think creatively about community needs. An individual-focused study would eliminate the possibility of positivity resonance which would provide helpful data as to the necessity of positivity resonance with transformative thinking.

## **Conclusion**

Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky is attributed with saying, "Beauty will save the world." While this may appear as the whims of a novelist and essayist, it is an important prophetic word for this generation. The drive for beauty and the impact of beauty is being seen in various disciplines. For example, Boeing commissioned renowned writer David Whyte to compose an original poem to mark the introduction of the Boeing 777. Biomimicry scientist Janine Benyus explained "beauty is the signal of the good" (2020) as she explored how nature can teach architects, engineers, and designers how to create in gentle and sustainable ways. Beauty can be made by people but it also makes people. It has catalytic power that can be harnessed and enjoyed for innovative and humanizing purposes, generating more and more good.

Nonprofits face many challenges as they confront countless needs in local communities. Creative thinking is in constant demand to find better solutions to improve the lives and wellbeing of people, animals, and the environment. The study suggests that beauty in the arts can be employed as a tool to encourage positive emotions leading to more expansive and innovative thinking. Organizations are looking for new ideas and they may just be on the other side of a quiet encounter with beauty.



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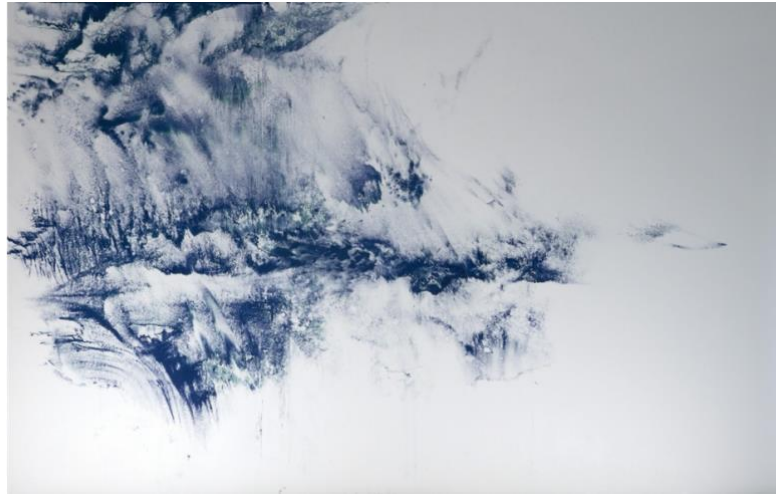
## Appendix A : Evaluation Questions

- (4) What are you feeling excited about, curious about, distracted by? Does anyone want to share with us?
- (5) Please write it down are of responsibility/sphere of influence in your life.
- (6) Jot down weakness, challenges, pain points, opportunities for growth, things you wish were different, etc. about this area or sphere of influence.
- (7) Choose one area of weakness/challenge/pain/opportunity from growth and spend 2 minutes reflecting on possible solutions.
- (8) Choose a piece of art from 15 options that moves you. Share feedback as to why you chose this piece.
- (9) How are you feeling right now? Where in your body do you feel it? (In response to the art piece and sharing about the piece)
- (10) What do you think about the poem? What do you notice? What do you wonder about? (In response to Mary Oliver's poem *The Man Who Has Many Answers*)
- (11) How you are feeling. Where in your body do you feel it? (In response to listening to *The Lark Ascending*)
- (12) Facilitation of group discussion regarding design and planning of second question. Facilitation questions to include:
  - a. So, related to the visual arts, any ideas of what you'd like to look at or discuss?
  - b. What about music? Should we listen to any? Perform? Not do it?
  - c. Any interest in poetry? Reading one together? Writing a poem? Learning about a certain style or poet?
  - d. Making art? Watercolor? Something else?
  - e. Finally, food and drink. Preferences? Ideas?
- (13) Spend a moment reflecting on how you are leaving this time. What are you feeling excited about, distracted by, curious about?
- (14) Over the next two weeks, would you please...
  - a. Notice something you find beautiful and be prepared to share about it at the next session.
  - b. Notice something that inspires a sense of awe and wonder and be prepared to share about it at the next session.

At the second session:

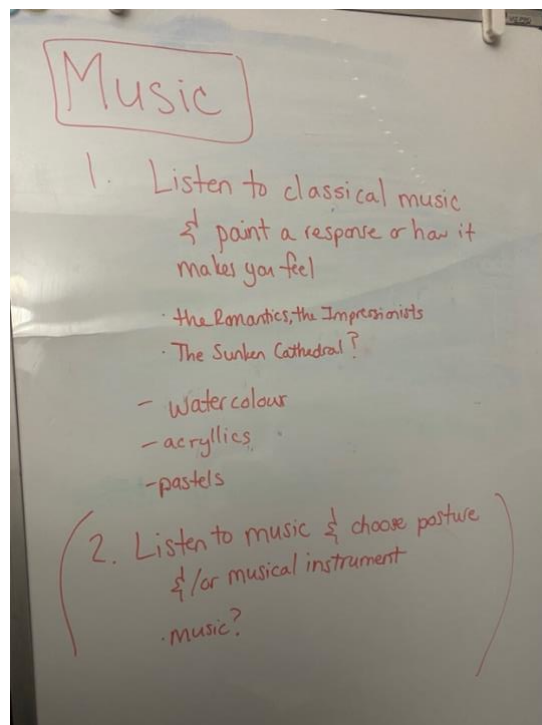
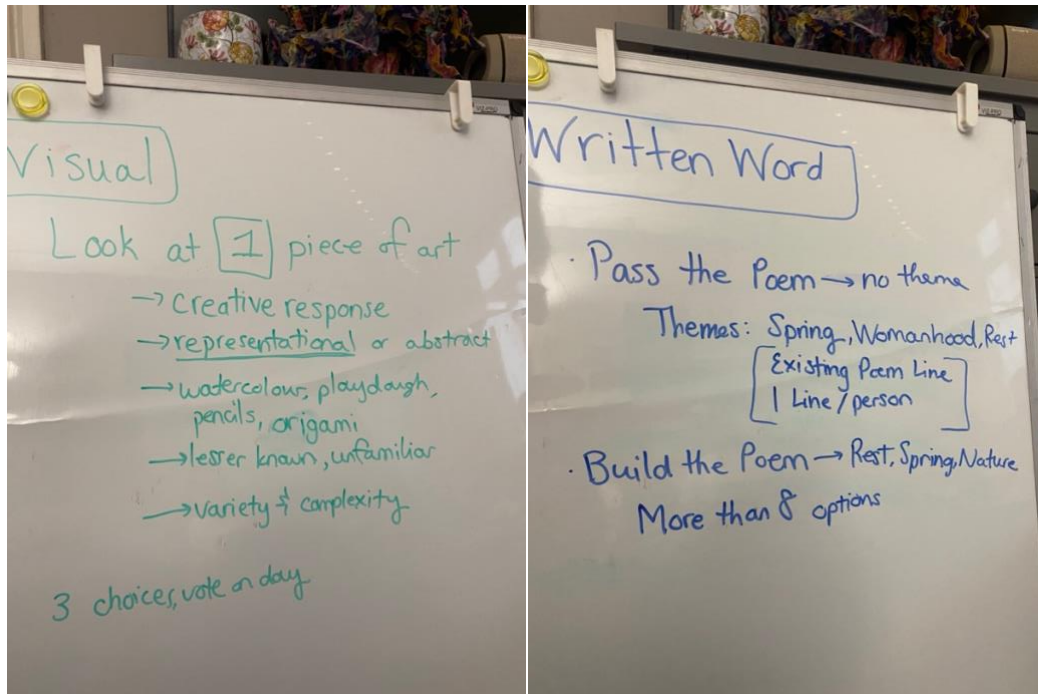
- (15) How are you feeling about it now? Have you engaged with that challenge in any way over the last two weeks?
- (16) Spend about 2 minutes now, considering any fresh ways of addressing this issue/problem?
- (17) How was the homework for you? What did you notice about doing it?
- (18) Can you reflect on how the homework you had may have impacted how you think about your challenge?
- (19) What were you anticipating when I invited you to participate in this study? How has the reality been different from the expectation? What has been better? Harder?

Appendix B : Sample Images



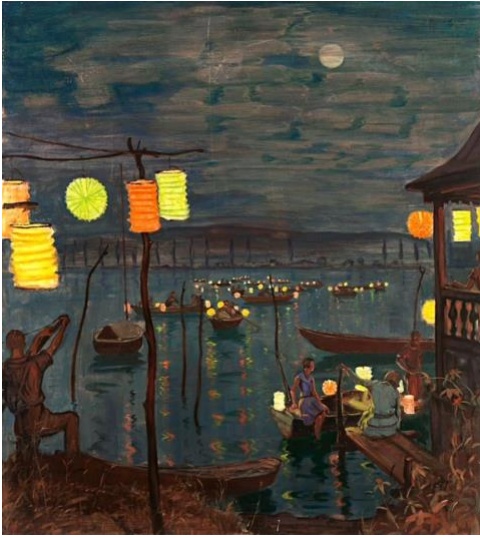


## Appendix C : Brainstorming and Planning Boards



## Appendix D: Visual Art Engagement

### Inspiration Piece



*View of Lake Konstanz* by Hans Dieter

### Examples of Art Creation Time



## Appendix E : Written Word Engagement

### Pass the Poem

“Hope” is a thing with feathers...

Light and warm

A precious place under its wings,

Though tucked up tight,

It may be dark, but it is safe.

Hold it lightly, hold it firm yet ever so gently.

With tender touch, wings spread wide,

It soars to unfathomed heights.

### Found Poem

I know what I know.

You are absolutely right about the weather. It is a juicy morning.

The smell of the earth is good.

There is no bird or beast today.

River and brook and fountain play,

Do you ask what the birds say?

The lark's on the wings; the snail on the horn.

I never knew the charm of spring. I never knew my heart could sing.

The rain was always welcome. Each drop a cold thrill that relaxed and washed  
away.

Winter relaxed its grip.

The rainbow comes and goes, and lovely is the rose.

The tulips dyed their green to red in cottage gardens,

But we bring violets.

West winds are a pleasant change,

Nothing is so beautiful as spring

You are brief and frail and blue—little sister, I am too.

What can spring renew more fiercely for us than the need of you?

Has put a spin of youth in everything.

Young leaves everywhere,

And fallen petals lie wind-blown, unswept upon the courtyard stone.

## Appendix F : Additional Sample Coded Questions

	Question <b>8</b> <b>How are you feeling? Where in your body do you feel it?</b>  (In response to listening to <i>The Lark Ascending</i> )	Question <b>14</b> <b>Spend 2 minutes now considering any fresh ways of addressing this issue/problem.</b>	Question <b>15</b> <b>Can you reflect on how the homework and sessions may have impacted how you think about your challenge?</b>
Participant <b>2</b>	Relaxed, ears tingling, joy, song was smooth like butter, can feel it in my lungs, fresh and deep breaths	(1) Have not spoken with neighbours yet though wondered about it (2) Did—tidy front garden, removed rubbish around home, washed front door and entry cove (3) New ideas for family time—good cooking, simple time together	Wanted to create more beauty around us. Being asked to notice beauty felt like a reset and lifted my mood. Make my spine tingle, joy perhaps even.
Participant <b>3</b>	Happy, joyful, calm, peaceful, hopeful, reflective, warmth from deep within	Thinking more creatively outside the box. Making space not just time.	Approaching it with freshness, compassion, need to discipline my subconscious, wanting to give dignity back to older people
Participant <b>4</b>	Calm and relaxed as if I had watched lark on sunny day in a lush landscape	Use what I have, take kids with me, small changes makes it feel more mine *	Sometimes just showing up is all that is needed to experience something beautiful
Participant <b>5</b>	Deep relaxation, peaceful mind, the tone goes up and down, goes through my body	Looking forward to Fridays and working with kids. Hope renewed.	Greater sense of personal responsibility. Empowered to change life in the future. (It was a very good way to move forward as it makes me responsible ... changing my life in the future)
Participant <b>6</b>	I felt it move through the top of my head down to my fingers by the time we got to the end.	Make sure to start thoughtfully at the new company in giving intentional quarterly reviews and see how employees feel so it stays a great place to work	Noticed small things and notice things are not always in my control. Managed stress in a more conscious way and take time for myself. Spending two hours away from a screen and engaging mind and thoughts.
Participant <b>7</b>	Started with a busy mind but feel transported to serene landscape, restless in legs, growing warmth, made me feel I was listening to the background music of a fulfilled person's life	Realize I may not be able to change situation b/c solving issue isn't what everyone wants or needs but I can change myself and my response. Hope to move past without resolution.	Varying perspectives on art made me think there may be varying perspectives in my challenges. Wondering how I can use art to cope with challenges in the future. Time together reminded me of my fondness for art.

\* As explained in Question 12, Participant 4 shared, "Spent time cleaning garden with son adding better soil ... new realization → If I go out to enjoy the garden, kids will follow. Small changes or adding beauty instead of focusing on huge changes."

### Themes

<span style="color: red;">■</span> Increased intentionality and noticing	<span style="color: green;">■</span> Newness / Hope / Empowerment	<span style="color: blue;">■</span> Longing / Grief / Nostalgia
<span style="color: orange;">■</span> Community / Togetherness / Learning together	<span style="color: teal;">■</span> Limits in areas of responsibility / Tension between desire and reality	<span style="color: purple;">■</span> Doing or responding to challenge differently (after two weeks)
<span style="color: yellow;">■</span> Happy / Joy / Refreshed	<span style="color: cyan;">■</span> Physical experiences / Sensations of being relaxed, calm, peaceful	<span style="color: pink;">■</span> Thinking about challenge differently (after two weeks)