Unification of Art and Spirituality

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Unification of Art and Spirituality

Abstract
David Wagenfeld, an artist and resident of Kalamazoo, Michigan, provided the cover art for the Summer 2024 edition of The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy (OJOT). "Word Fusion" is a piece made from ink on paper that uses words to depict an image of a person walking through an environment. The image is rooted to the ground in love, joy, calmness, and peace. The person is one with themselves and their spirituality with arms portraying presence, joy, and serenity. David shares his experience of self-discovery and understanding of the beautiful dance between art and spirituality.

Keywords
David Wagenfeld, art, spirituality, occupational therapy, highly sensitive

Credentials Display
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David Wagenfeld, an artist and resident of Kalamazoo, Michigan, shares his experience of self-discovery and understanding of the beautiful dance between art and spirituality. His piece “Word Fusion,” ink on paper (see Figure 1) is the cover feature for the Summer 2024 edition of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). This piece uses words to depict an image of a person walking through an environment. The image is rooted to the ground in love, joy, calmness, and peace. The person is one with themselves and their spirituality with arms portraying presence, joy, and serenity.

David was born and raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan to Jeanne and Morton Wagenfeld. He is the third of four children, and one of his sisters is an Occupational Therapist. As a child, David was introverted, preferring to be alone, and enjoyed drawing, writing stories, and being creative. While he enjoyed art, he did not realize the talent he had until he was in his second year at Western Michigan University (WMU). He was taking a “non-art major” drawing course at the time and was strongly encouraged by the instructor to become an art major. In 1992, he graduated with his Bachelor of Fine Arts from WMU. David identifies as a highly sensitive person. Highly sensitive people are individuals with genetic traits that are associated with increased sensitivity to external stimuli resulting in the sensory system becoming overwhelmed. This term can be used interchangeably with Sensory Processing Sensitivity (Acevedo, 2014). As a result, David has challenges coping with noise, electromagnetic frequencies, light, and smells. In 1995, David read *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron for the first time. This led him on a journey to understanding the connection between art and spirituality. This taught him the art of harnessing how to quiet his mind, allow positive energy to flow through him and into his art, and gain confidence as a unique individual. David refers to being a conduit for what he calls the “divine,” which is ultimately the energy source that exists to counterbalance the negativity and hostility that can exist in the physical environment. This divine being can be something different to everyone, such as the Universe, God, or Allah, whatever is empowering a person to make or share positivity with others. David is completely committed to his creative process to inspire and create hope in others.

David uses a wide variety of mediums to create his pieces: drawings with ink or pencil, watercolors, cartooning, and computer art. Because he is highly sensitive, David avoids acrylics and oil paints as the smell is noxious. In addition, he has embraced the art in the written forms of haikus and poems. He is a full-time creative and has accounts with Redbubble and Substack to share his art and written words. David’s Substack account is called “Divine Downloads” where he posts every week to share a message and piece to go along with the discussion.
He states that his approach to art is “not traditional” and does not follow mainstream production; this can sometimes make it difficult to get his pieces out in the public eye. He also states that he embraces his approach because nothing about him is traditional. In one of his Substac posts, David states,

I decided to start embracing being “weird” and being that “odd duck” . . . then something shifted, and I started to realize that there is a subtle discounting, nasty edge to the word “weird” and that by embracing that word I was also embracing that nasty discounting energy that comes with it. So, I opened myself to receiving an alternative way to describe what I am, that actually celebrated my individuality and all the awesome qualities that come with that, without the nasty edge. And that is when I was given the phrase ‘Uniquely Myself.’”

This has empowered David to see himself in a more positive light, and he hopes others can celebrate their unique individuality.

David shared a bit about his preparatory process: he does not start a piece with any specific plan. He identifies external barriers and removes himself from that space to quiet his mind. Once he achieves that level of peacefulness, he just simply begins to create. He states that when one can accept the presence of positive energy and embrace the unconditional acceptable of just being, that is when it so much easier to allow love to shine through you. There are times when the noise and distractions become too much, and that can immediately shut off the creative flow. This could be excessive exterior noise, physical pain from an injury in 2015 that continues to impair his physical mobility, or just not being able to shift his mood to allow for his energy source to find him. This takes practice and is something he continues to work toward through reading, using his own style of meditation and continuing to build trust in his process. In another “Divine Download” post, David stated, “We are denying a fundamental part of who we are and what we were created to be. And the suppression of that can lead to very intense emotional pain, depression and in many cases physical pain.” This is a true testament to his belief in sharing his creativity.

David recommends several books for those who are interested in learning more about being a creative:

- *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron
- *Life, Paint and Passion: Reclaiming the Magic of Spontaneous Expression* by Michelle Cassou and Steward Cubley
- *Blessed are the Weird* by Jacob Nordby
- *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- *The Spiritual Artist* by Christopher Miller

In Angel Soul (see Figure 2), a 9x12 watercolor, David shared a story about his mother being at a nursing home where she was refusing to eat. It was a stressful time for him and his younger sister, as they shared the responsibility of preparing and delivery every meal to her daily. This took
away from his time to create pieces, so he began to leave sketchpads and a watercolor block with paints in the kitchen so that when he was able to take a moment to channel energy, he could take the 30 min or so to let that energy flow through him. He remembers feeling the explosion of energy through his paintbrush which resulted in numerous other pieces over the next several weeks, including several sketches and phrases in his sketchpad.

David created Big Dude Push (see Figure 3), a comic, in 2024. This followed David’s process in which the piece simply started with only the initial space and location of boxes. As he continued, the images and background details began to outline the story of feeling trapped and invisible. David comments that society has conditioned people to believe certain things about who we are and what we can do. The chains in the background represent how chained we are by this. The final box shows “Big Dude” breaking outside of the box and becoming who “he” should be rather than what society tells “him” to be as we see him racing away, with his heart illuminated.

This unique approach to art has allowed David to find incredible self-expression and empowerment in not only his abilities, but in celebrating his individuality. Each piece shares a message deeply rooted in being true to yourself and to your purpose; to love, share positivity, and embrace acceptance of others for who they are. In a time when this world can feel divided, these reminders can serve as a beacon of light in the darkness.

View more of David’s work in the OJOT Gallery: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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Reference