

The Outstretched Arms of Sorrow and Joy

This painting is, in part, an exploration of **Mystery**, which is an important theological place for me, and also expresses how I feel I do my work as a chaplain. I found myself wondering about what are often considered opposites. Joy and sorrow, for example. Why not drop such a dualistic approach to understanding our experiences? Inside the joy of birthing a baby, one also experiences the loss and subsequent grief, of losing personal freedom. Inside the pain of the deterioration of a relationship, one discovers the excitement of personal growth and potential. Rather than defending a dualistic approach to life, couldn't we entertain that the emotions of joy and sorrow run simultaneous and parallel inside a person? My experience has been that to the extent I am willing to participate in the depth of suffering with an open heart, I am also able to encounter an equitable height of joy.

While I used religious images of a crucifix and the buddha in my paintings, I was spiritually engaged in several ways. I began the task of creating, but I did not know the destination. This required trust in the process. It also required surrender to the outcome. The paintings would become what they needed to be if I was willing to begin, let go, and persevere. Making was, itself, exhilarating, and I experienced flow state in my unmarked hours of work. This contributed to the physical benefit of feeling enlivened and vital. Because I am a multi-faith chaplain, this artistic exploration enhanced my occupational wellbeing. It allowed me to non-verbally explore one of life's difficulties that I encounter regularly.

The crucifix is an archetype of sorrow and suffering. My figure is pregnant; with what we do not know. The womb is an important symbol for me, connoting potential, expectation, waiting in darkness, incubation, faithfulness, and being held. In the figure's sorrow and misery, is all of this lost or will it be saved? The original cross shape on which the figure is drawn was cut from discarded mat boards and taped together with ordinary masking tape. I intentionally preserved the stamped number on the board as a way of noting the reality that so much suffering is perceived as non-specific and unseen. What goes on in a room in a house in a town in a country far away from me is very real, but I do not know it. Because I do not know the name of the person who is hurting, it does not mean it is not happening. In short, there is just so much affliction and heartache. The papers and paint at the bottom of the image suggest heat and activity and passion, e.g. suffering. Above the image and the gold halo made of a simple paper doily, the paint and collaged papers follow the shape of that symbol of holiness but are lighter and gentler, connoting transformation and release. Much can come of suffering if it is allowed.

The leap of a dancer portrays joy or lightness of being. Outstretched arms extend into the air like the wings of a bird in flight. Beginning with a photograph of my daughter, I enlarged the image with oils, utilizing the pale pink color and airy tulle associated with ballet. I then cut up a piece of silk that had been previously painted with dyes and collaged with papers. The repeating circles allowed me to express movement. I included the face of Buddha as a spiritual symbol of enlightenment. This eastern icon brings a multi-faith dimension to the whole piece. So much of religion requires metaphor in its use of language to express what is ineffable. Incorporating the

beauty of religious expression into art-making acknowledges this noble reach toward the Transcendent.

The two pieces of this one painting find confluence in the outstretched arms. In the crucifixion, they are pressed into the suffering of a torturous death. In the ecstasy of a dancer's leap, they are extending in expansiveness or exultation. One and the same physical position of the body holds and represents very different meanings. Two different experiences find overlap in one similar pose. This is all somewhat of a mystery.