

# **Making Masks, healing persons, and teaching Practical Theology**

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## **Introduction**

This paper brings together several strands in my own recent experience and reflection, not only on the nature of theology and education, but also in the broadest sense on how we might recover a sense of our own personhood within a context that will affirm both our embodied experience and our ongoing search for spiritual meaning. Though the immediate starting point is theological education, the principles and ideas explored here could be applied and extended to any sphere of human knowledge where the ultimate aim is to empower people to understand more of themselves with a view to experiencing personal transformation and celebrating their full humanity as those who are ‘made in God’s image’ (Genesis 1:28). As such, it has obvious relevance not only to the church, and to education, but also to healthcare, and to social coherence more generally.

These reflections arise out of the use of masks and mask-making as offering a ‘way in’ for people to start to reflect on their own spirituality and personhood, in a way that might offer the opportunity to appreciate new angles on their own past and future, as well as understanding something of the challenges facing those who may have different physical or other capacities. We begin with a brief look at the growing interest in the arts in theology, then move on to connect this with recent insights into the nature of learning and teaching, before describing and reflecting on the practical outcomes of the mask-making experience in two settings, the one an ecumenical seminary in Southern California and the other with a group of students, some studying divinity and others studying medicine, in north-east Scotland. The practical aspects of the method adopted are more fully documented in an appendix.

## **Theology and the arts**

Using the arts in theological education has suddenly become trendy, even within those Protestant traditions within which art of all kinds has been ignored or disparaged for generations. The question is no longer ‘Are the arts and theology compatible?’ but rather, ‘how can the arts (both visual and expressive) enable us to work out our theology for today?’ It is now almost twenty years since Wilson Yates published his book *The Arts in Theological Education*, in which he offered an invaluable survey of major US seminaries that as long ago as the 1980s were including practical experience of different art forms as a central element in their curriculum, including work at PhD level.<sup>1</sup> His work was based on fieldwork carried out at institutions as educationally diverse and theologically different as Yale Divinity School, Fuller Seminary, the Southern Baptist Seminary, Maryknoll School of Theology, Union Seminary New York, and the various seminaries that constitute San Francisco’s Graduate Theological Union (and which themselves represent a microcosm of the entire church spectrum). Even back then, interest in the arts among theologians was already so widespread in the US that he felt no need to argue for the relevance of his

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education* (Missoula: Scholars Press 1987)

research, and simply noted at the very outset that ‘there is a significant inclusion of the arts in theological education and a beginning process of their integration with theological studies’, adding that there is no art form that is intrinsically foreign to theology, nor is there any aspect of theology that is incapable of learning through art: ‘all curricular areas have some experience with the arts and some do a great deal of careful work.’<sup>2</sup> It is often said that an idea takes twenty years to cross the Atlantic, and though there is a growing interest in the arts among theological educators in the UK, their use is still not as highly developed as in America, and there is a fair degree of resistance, some of it based on theological principle and some based on fear of the unknown among those who wouldn’t know how to do theology at all apart from the way in which they themselves were taught.

In explaining the reasons for the burgeoning of interest in late twentieth century America, Yates identifies the following significant factors:

- the arts are a means for understanding culture
- the arts offer a way of understanding the Christian faith and community
- the arts enable effective personal preparation for ministry
- the arts can help shape a relevant theology and theological education
- the Christian faith offers a theological legitimation for the artistic enterprise
- the arts have flourished within the church, enhancing the life of faith
- the place of the arts in the church offer important resources for interpreting the history of the faith
- the arts are crucial for expressing and communicating the faith in today’s world

On the basis of my own reflection on the challenges facing the church in the West, I have previously proposed the following rationale to argue for the increased use of the arts in church life and witness:<sup>3</sup>

- we live in a visual and tactile age
- the Church has been dominated by a worldview that prioritizes rationality over creativity
- people are suffering, and the arts offer a key route to emotional healing
- the arts take the church back to its historical heritage
- the arts offer a way to reclaim and redefine some neglected doctrines, notably the Biblical emphasis on creation and incarnation
- Western Christians need to learn from others in the world church, who intuitively use the arts in both worship and theological reflection

There are some interesting correlations between these two taxonomies, the one based on a survey of how the arts are being used in theological education, and the other emerging from reflection on the nature of theology and the missional task now facing the church in the West. We should hardly be surprised if the arts are becoming increasingly foundational for Christian ministry, especially in relation to skills, reflection and spiritual formation, for as Yates puts it, ‘The arts claim to reflect life as it is. Theology claims to interpret the ultimate meaning of life. How can the two fail to interrelate? Hopefully, the relationship will be fruitful and one of integrity.’<sup>4</sup> Perhaps what is already taking place provides a framework, and what we now need is to engage in further integration of these two ways of understanding life, its challenges and opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education*, pp40-41

<sup>3</sup> Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF 2002), pp149-152

<sup>4</sup> Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education*, p93.

## **Reconnecting theology and the arts**

As in all other areas of life, we first need to recognize our inherited starting points and presuppositions. Romanowski cautions that ‘you must be aware of the contours of your own life vision in order to articulate and critique the values and perspective of a popular artwork.’<sup>5</sup> Conversely, Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplain remind us that ‘A worldview ... is an inescapable ingredient in all works of art. That is not to say that all artworks wear their worldview on their sleeve. For most it is far more subtle.’<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, the same thing is true of differing theologies.

In his book *Visual Faith*<sup>7</sup> William Dyrness gives an overview of the history of art and faith, documenting the familiar story of how Protestantism in all its many forms lost touch with a vital part of the Christian heritage, not only during the Reformation period but throughout the ensuing centuries.<sup>8</sup> For many Protestants, that in itself offers a significant challenge, for they will need to be convinced that the artistic heritage is worth recovering. But his work also raises another central issue, namely what kind of art is it that theology now needs to engage with? A primary reason for the arts to be reconnected to theological education is that they provide significant insights into culture, both historically and in relation to the contemporary world. Like many others, Dyrness acknowledges that for most people it is popular culture that offers a matrix within which to find meaning,<sup>9</sup> and he recognizes that much of the revitalization of the arts in North American churches and seminaries can be traced back to an eminently populist movement, namely the *Jesus People* of the 1970s<sup>10</sup> - yet he still insists that it is ‘fine art’ that should determine the agenda, with popular art being ‘always discussed in relation to the fine arts.’<sup>11</sup> There are plenty of examples of the influence of such elitism in relation to how Christians connect with the arts. In 2000, the University of Cambridge *Theology through the Arts Project* (subsequently relocated to St Andrews) organized a week-long conference to consider this theme, and there was nothing in the entire programme that could be regarded as popular art. Even in the section of the conference concerned with film - sponsored by a consortium of North American seminaries and movie-makers - it was only with great reluctance that any Hollywood productions were admitted, and there was an obvious assumption that to have any real theological significance a film would by definition appeal to a minority audience, and would almost certainly be made by obscure European directors and have subtitles.

In past centuries, there was not this great divide between ‘high art’ and ‘popular art’, because most artists were sponsored by the ruling classes, and their work therefore both reflected and helped to create the cultural ethos of the day. But beginning with the 1960s that all changed, and today’s cultural landscape is neither created nor

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<sup>5</sup> William D Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2001), p138.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, p45 - apparently from Hilary Brand & Adrienne Chaplain, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Carlisle CA : Piquant 2001, 2nd ed).

<sup>7</sup> William A Dyrness, *Visual faith: art, theology and worship in dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2001), p13.

<sup>8</sup> Like all generalizations, this is both true and false. For a more nuanced view, especially on the way in which art was used in building design in the Calvinist tradition, see Paul Corby Finney, *Seeing beyond the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

<sup>9</sup> *Visual Faith*, p19

<sup>10</sup> *Visual Faith*, p13

<sup>11</sup> *Visual Faith*, p10

sustained by the educated chattering classes, but emerges from the grass roots of society, reflecting the aspirations and concerns of ordinary people. That is not to say that high culture no longer has any significance, but it is certainly no longer the cultural trend-setter. That role has undoubtedly been taken over by the popular arts, and the rise of a digital democracy in which (at least in principle) every ordinary person has a voice means that cultural trends are unlikely to revert to the control of only a small elite group of people. In the past, the church could influence social trends by influencing the ruling classes. That is no longer the case, and to be relevant, theology needs to learn how to connect with popular culture. There still needs to be a dialogue with high culture, of course, but to focus all our attention there will be suicidal for effective theological reflection.<sup>12</sup>

Surprisingly, perhaps, one of the most outstanding examples of an approach that takes popular culture seriously, is not especially recent. Walter Wink's work goes back to the 1970s, when he began to wonder how study of the Bible might take account of what was then the emerging scientific understanding of the workings of the brain.<sup>13</sup> Though he went on to establish a significant reputation as a leading theological thinker on subjects that few others cared to tackle,<sup>14</sup> it was his experience as a parish minister that challenged him, as he realized the enormity of the gap between traditional theological scholarship and the real life of ordinary people. Moreover, his own training had not equipped him specially well to deal with this, for his theological teachers (influenced by a long and worthy tradition) had preferred to shape his ideas rather than to engage with his experience as a person. So he began to experiment with split-brain theory, blending Biblical information with its readers' own experiences as they articulated their understanding of the Bible's relevance to their own daily lives. His own understanding was informed by courses at the Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco, and included the conscious integration of insights from Jungian psychology with his previous theological training and personal life learning. Throughout, he was concerned to maintain intellectual integrity, not to abandon reason but to develop a holistic way of working that would more authentically reflect the complexity of human knowledge and ways of knowing. He was encouraged by research at the Mead School, showing that maths scores went up when children spent less time studying maths but increased their art and music by 50%.<sup>15</sup> Numeracy is associated with the left brain, and artistic capacities with the right, so what was happening was that by enhancing the ability to engage with two different kinds of ideas simultaneously, a new source of creativity was being generated that enabled new learning to take place in both sides of the brain. Through working with clay, he himself experienced 'the right brain find(ing) truth in coherence, the left in correspondence'.<sup>16</sup>

He concluded that our almost exclusive use of the left side of the brain in Western cultures threatens us with 'extinction spiritually, ecologically, politically and personally'.<sup>17</sup> This statement, originally made more than twenty years ago, was more

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<sup>12</sup> For an outstanding recent example of theological reflection on popular culture, see Craig Detweiler & Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: finding God in pop culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (London: Mowbray 1990 2nd ed - 1st published in 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Cf his works *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1986), *Engaging the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1992).

<sup>15</sup> *Transforming Bible Study*, pp26-27

<sup>16</sup> *Transforming Bible Study*, pp19-20

<sup>17</sup> *Transforming Bible Study*, p26

prophetic than he probably realized, for it finds a ready echo in so many voices today who are crying for a sense of community whether in politics, the church, or healthcare.

In reflecting on all this for a revised edition of his book, Wink observed that ‘When I first used the right/left brain research as a way of picturing for the reader the value of a more holistic approach, I was taking something of a gamble, because the field of bilateral brain research was relatively new, and continuing developments might easily have disconfirmed or outdated my report. My hunch was vindicated shortly after publication, however, when Roger W. Sperry, one of the pioneers of split brain research, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology ... Now however, I face the opposite problem: right/left brain theory has become so popularized, oversimplified, one-sidedly interpreted, emptied of its subtlety, and trivialized, that the whole subject is threatened with banality. Misuse, however, is no grounds for abandoning such a helpful resource.’<sup>18</sup>

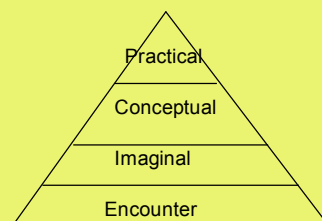
In this connection, he points out that truth itself will not be well served if the pendulum simply swings to the other extreme, which is why integration is so important. But it must be integration with a view to transformation, which is the key point at which the values we bring do make a difference: ‘the task is immeasurably enhanced when we bring to it a religious commitment to our own transformation’.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Rediscovery of Experiential Learning**

These trends in recent theology can also be paralleled in wider educational circles, with the emergence of new insights into the way we learn, and the connection between experiential and reflective learning and teaching.

John Heron proposes that learning takes place in different dimensions: physically, emotionally, spiritually, and cognitively.<sup>20</sup> Though all areas may be affected simultaneously, and in varying degrees, the body does not differentiate, and learning in one area will affect the others. In order to maximize learning from experience, certain skills need to be developed, raising the level of awareness to be intentional, and also being aware when something happens unintentionally. For instance someone may panic in a given task, while another will recognize the rising feelings and know that in that particular situation they will be afraid. The latter understands the internal archaic domain of their own personal history, while the former may not be emotionally competent to appreciate what is going on, and consequently their learning in that context will be significantly limited.

Being able to learn in and through experience demands a recognition of different levels of awareness, what Heron calls balancing the in/out experience. The diagram is helpful in illuminating this concept.



<sup>18</sup> *Transforming Bible Study*, p12

<sup>19</sup> *Transforming Bible Study*, p31

<sup>20</sup> John Heron, *Feeling and Personhood* (London: Sage, 1992)



Effective experiential learning requires that the participant engages at each stage, and only then can we begin to practice the new learning that is emerging. The imaginal section is the one that is most often omitted, as people move directly from what they have encountered to conceptualizing the experience. They quickly decide ‘that’s me again’, using old language to explain the new experience, instead of being open to new possibilities. This is conventionally conceptualized as a learning cycle, a single loop. The church has often operated this way, but when someone breaks out of the single loop something radically new emerges. This is what happened with Liberation Theology, which began with experience (people’s stories) and asked what sense could be made of God in that context. Faced with injustice, they did not start with doctrine (which would have assured them that the *eschaton* would resolve things), but they looked at injustice, asked how God engages with that - and were thereby empowered to new understandings. This *praxis-reflection* model lies at the heart of the contemporary redefinition of practical theology: experience, observation, conceptualization and reflection on the process will bring about new practice. More often than not, the experience which forms the basis of such reflection is assumed to be an individual’s general life experience, or their understanding of events which have taken place in some context that is remote and detached from the actual teaching and learning situation. Part of the purpose of this exercise has been to ask whether it is possible actually to give people experiences in the educational context, which can then in themselves become the starting point for spiritual reflection and practical learning. Teachers, in both theological and healthcare settings, are familiar enough with the demonstration of practical skills, when we show one another ‘how to do things’ - quite often with no meaningful explanation other than ‘because I was told to do it this way’ Though there is much of value in this approach (at its best it utilizes the acquired wisdom of several generations), this method offers little opportunity for personal engagement: it ignores the experiential and imaginal, and disdains such questions as ‘How does it feel for yourself?’ It needs to be supplemented with a recognition that those with more highly developed imaginal and experiential learning capacities - who may in turn be children or adults with less well developed cognitive skills - could have much to teach others. Acknowledging this might easily give a voice to groups that have often been marginalized by both the church and the medical profession.

Any creative work is likely to touch on difficult areas, which is why it was important in the mask-making exercise to unpack the experience carefully. But in doing so, it was also important to trust the experience, allowing that this might also challenge some previously held theoretical understandings. It is increasingly coming to be recognized that of the seven internal capacities we live with (memory, sensing, reasoning, feeling, intuition, imagining, and willing), traditional education enlists only memory and reasoning.<sup>21</sup> Of course, our forebears knew much of this intuitively: an old Scottish proverb claims that it is ‘better felt than told’.

### **Exploring our personhood**

To summarize, we can connect all this with education for spiritual and personal growth with the following statements:

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<sup>21</sup> Cf John Mulligan & Colin Griffin, *Empowerment through experiential learning : explorations of good practice* (London: Kogan Page 1992); Richard Winter et al, *Learning from experience: principles and practice in action-research* (London /New York: Falmer Press 1989)

### **Learning is experience**

When people discover for themselves links between their own experience and a text such as the Bible, rather than looking to experts to tell them 'how it is' they are empowered and grow spiritually. They begin to discern and articulate rather than remaining silent.<sup>22</sup> Instead of clinging to answers that are 'right' because 'someone who knows' has given them, they can come to appreciate ways in which they can live out of the right questions: they exchange conformity for struggle, in order to discover God's will for themselves in their changing lives.

### **Learning is not just imbibing information**

Not only do we need to be changed, our very way of regarding knowledge must be changed.<sup>23</sup> The new paradigm of knowledge now emerging in many different fields encourages us to recognize that true knowledge - of ourselves and of others - is not a self-contained system but opens out into the unknown infinitely, mysteriously, wondrously. Practical theologians have been at the forefront of this, but are not the only ones: Clark Pinnock, a well-known systematic theologian, takes this approach in suggesting we develop 'an open view of God'.<sup>24</sup> This kind of learning is not just about new techniques, but new paradigms. The old paradigm deals with one right answer and regards people as receptacles for information, rather than organisms equipped to discover truth.<sup>25</sup>

### **Learning is self reflection**

To be self-reflective, students need a teacher/leader who is willing to journey with them, and prepared to be vulnerable. If 'answers' are offered too readily, people are inhibited in voicing tentative ideas in case they are 'wrong'. But one's personal story can never be 'wrong' It is always authentic: we have lived it. A leader, though, can help others to voice those questions which enable people to search for truth for themselves - holding a mirror so others can see more clearly and discover new things for themselves. Wink correctly emphasizes that teachers working in this mode cannot escape being in a process of transformation for themselves.<sup>26</sup> So it is liberating for all concerned.<sup>27</sup>

### **Learning is intellectual**

This is taken for granted, especially in our Western tradition where cognitive thinking has generally been valued more than other forms of knowledge. We are increasingly aware of the inadequacy of this when seen as an end in itself. Patricia Beall highlights the way that young people today frequently miss integration of the type that previous generations knew, when cultural traditions were handed on through movement, sound and dance, gradually developing rhythm, rhyme and vivid

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<sup>22</sup> For an example of this working in practice, cf Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision* (Geneva: World Council of Churches 1992)

<sup>23</sup> *The Isaiah Vision*, p79

<sup>24</sup> Clark H Pinnock *Most Moved Mover: a theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2001)

<sup>25</sup> *Most Moved Mover*, p82

<sup>26</sup> Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, p15

<sup>27</sup> I remember studying with artist Lys Hansen, making collages. I was intent on using a pair of huge red lips torn from a magazine and finding ways of bringing them to life. I glued them into the grooves of corrugated brown paper, and suddenly they came alive. I jumped up, turned to Liz who was looking over my shoulder, and together we caught the moment: it worked! It was 20 years ago but I can still 'feel' the learning as an acknowledged expert neither abandoned me, nor prescribed what I should do, but shared the moment of realization.

imagery.<sup>28</sup> More reflectively - but no less pointedly - Don S Browning insists that 'practical thinking is the center of human thinking and that theoretical and technical thinking are abstractions from practical thinking. If one takes this seriously and relates it to theology, it fundamentally changes the historic formulations of the organization of the theological disciplines. It is a revolution long overdue.'<sup>29</sup> Walter Wink refers to the research of Michael Gazzaniga and J.E. LeDoux to highlight the danger that rationality may actually undermine true learning.<sup>30</sup>

### **Learning as emotion**

Wink describes his embarrassment when first invited to do things like paint or meditate to music, and then being given clay to work on in relation to the story of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). He found his hands doing something his body was unaware of: 'I knew immediately that what my hand had made was a revelation from God about my own need for healing even though moments before I had known nothing of its existence. But if asked, I would have denied I had any need for healing. I discovered to my wonder that the entire body is an instrument of consciousness and needs to be involved in the struggle to integrate God-given insights prompted by Scripture into the total self.'<sup>31</sup> This theme is echoed by others. Brain researcher Paul MacLean claims that 'subjectively, something doesn't exist unless it's tied up with an emotion',<sup>32</sup> while the respondents to Yates's research emphasized that 'reason alone is not enough: feelings and intuition must also be considered.'<sup>33</sup>

### **Learning is spiritual formation**

For Wink, transformation is a priority, like 'exploring all the sealed and stale rooms of this God's house we call ourselves, and offering all we find to the real owner for forgiveness, acceptance, and healing. It is unmasking our complicity in systems and structures of society which violate people's lives, and becoming ready agents of justice. It is discovering the unjust and violated parts of ourselves as well. It is a process, not an arriving; we are 'transforming' not transformed. But all along the way there are flashes of insight, moments of exquisite beauty, experiences of forgiveness and of being healed, reconciliations and revelations that confirm the rightness of our quest and whet our appetites for more.'<sup>34</sup>

Robert Banks is another one who argues that 'theory is formulated in the midst of practice. Our thinking should be embodied, experiential, and contextual, not abstract, objective, and universal. The principal characteristics of such praxis are accountability to minority groups, collaborative reflection, lives-in-relation as an epistemological starting point, cultural diversity, and shared commitment to the work of justice.'<sup>35</sup> He should know, because for almost ten years he pioneered a new

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<sup>28</sup> Patricia Beall, *The Folk Arts in God's Family* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1984), p60.

<sup>29</sup> Don S Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1991), p8

<sup>30</sup> In their experiments with a split-brain patient, they flashed a snow scene to his right hemisphere and a chicken claw to the left. The patient then correctly chose a related picture of a snow shovel from a series of four cards, and explained that "I saw a claw and I picked the chicken - and you have to clean out the chicken shed with a shovel." His left brain had no awareness of the snow scene, and simply invented a reason for the card showing the snow shovel." Rational thinking had 'invented' and explanation for the right hemisphere's knowledge that, while sounding plausible and offered as a statement of fact, was actually quite inaccurate. See Wink *Transforming Bible Study*, p32.

<sup>31</sup> Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* p19.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Transforming Bible Study* p105.

<sup>33</sup> Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education*, p84.

<sup>34</sup> Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* pp77-78

<sup>35</sup> Robert Banks *Reenvisioning Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999), p29



expression of teaching practical theology, living in community with students at Fuller Seminary in a house specially purchased for the purpose in an experiment which regarded the experience of living this way as a vital part of their education, valued as much as participation in academic seminars and the writing of term papers.

## **Making Masks**

I first came across this in 1992 at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, where I was studying with Doug Adams, professor of theology and arts. Joan Carter had developed this medium for use in theological education, mostly for dramatic performance and Biblical exegesis. At that time she was working on an exhibition, *Faces of Cain*, in which she told the story of Cain through masks that invited others 'to face the Cain in ourselves, and act confessionally as a step towards taking responsibility for the problems.'<sup>36</sup> This archetypal use of the mask is found in many cultures, both in ritual and mythological contexts as well as in the traditions of the death mask.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this might be one way in which Western Christians can learn from others, who are expressing their faith through indigenous cultures.

In 1994, I was invited to create a course for the Practical Theology programme at Fuller Seminary, *Creativity and Spirituality for Worship and Evangelism*, and I started experimenting with mask-making myself in the classroom setting, thinking it would be a way of helping people to access and face their previous life experience, with a view to transformation and rediscovering the potential of their own personhood. The course itself is structured around the concept of a house, with a different room or aspect of the house being visited each day. This evokes Biblical and theological images of Christians individually as the temple of the Spirit and corporately as the household of God, and facilitates reflection on what it means to welcome Christ into each area of our personal lives, as well as consideration of the evangelistic opportunities for inviting others to join us within the collective worshipping community of the church. Each class includes both cognitive and affective approaches to the subject-matter, though the intermingling of the two helps to encourage abstract thinkers to see the value of creative and intuitive approaches, and vice versa. Ten years later, this course is still one of the most heavily subscribed of all the electives offered in the seminary's course catalogue, and looks set to continue indefinitely into the future. Over the years, students have commented that a major part of the course's appeal centres on the element of surprise and delight in the discovery of new ways of addressing familiar questions.

By session eight of the course<sup>38</sup> we go into 'the bathroom' to make masks. Theme seven has been the bedroom, where relationships are explored, including tough issues such as abuse and violence, sexual orientation, singleness, families, and so on. Making masks in the bathroom deliberately incorporates an element of fun, with space for conversations and opportunities to allow different parts of our bodies to engage with personal hurts or joys. Water and cleansing belong together in most religious traditions, but a trust walk has also been a significant part of the experience, before the masks are removed and there is then an opportunity to unpack it all. The unpacking is essential in any use of the arts, as they give people access to emotions

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<sup>36</sup> 'Facing the Cain in Ourselves', *Church Teachers* 20/2 (Sept-Oct 1992), p58

<sup>37</sup> On all this see, for example, Gary Wyatt, *Spirit Faces* (London: Thames & Hudson 1994), John Mack (ed), *Masks: The Art of Expression* (London: British Museum Press 1994), Joseph Campbell *The masks of God* (London: Secker & Warburg 1968).

<sup>38</sup> Each session lasts for four hours.

that are often highly charged and can be hard to handle: it is never good practice to leave people without some way of addressing their needs, even if full resolution may take longer.

### **The Case Study**

Having decided to make masks with a group in the north-east of Scotland, I enlisted students from the University of Aberdeen, a mixture of postgraduate divinity students and fifth year medical students. Almost all of them were enrolled in the course *Spirituality Health and Healing* while the rest had some other reason for being interested in the subject. The medical students who volunteered for the mask-making session were equally divided between male and female, though among the divinity students, more women than men were willing to take part. The fact that a group of this kind came together at all is itself a comment on society's realization that learning needs to take place across the disciplines in order to create a new holistic paradigm in which people will take responsibility for their own health and their own spirituality.<sup>39</sup> The volunteers met for four hours one afternoon, and the actual procedure used in making the masks is described in Appendix A at the end of this paper. In reporting their responses, they have been grouped under a number of key themes which emerged, and following the actual comments of participants each section includes some specific insights that can be applied more widely, together with further questions and reflections.

### **Before and After**

Not surprisingly, there was a marked difference of perceptions before and after the experience. In talking about their feelings before the masks were made, most people admitted that they were expecting to feel embarrassed in some way, while some had more specific concerns: 'will I be able to breathe with a mask over my face?' 'what if I need to cough or blow my nose?' 'what if I get plaster in my eyes?' - and so on. Afterwards, and without exception, participants' comments were of a completely different character: 'it was totally different to what I expected', 'not at all embarrassing', 'I really enjoyed it', 'as relaxing as having a face mask' [in a beauty salon].

- **Key learning** It is worth facing up to my fears - doing this is frequently not as challenging as just thinking about them. Whether in the medical arena or in the church context, our patients/parishioners may be afraid about speaking with us: our job is to create a safe space for them.
- **Possible use** Mask-making could easily be used to help people deal with fears of all sorts.
- **A Question** For practitioners: does our speech and body language put people at ease? How might we address this?

### **The Process**

Mohammed, a medic (not his real name), knew only one other person at all well and wondered at the start 'can I trust these new people?', adding jokingly, 'they might murder you', which seemed to suggest that he felt a real threat. He later commented

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<sup>39</sup> On the wider quest for spiritual meaning, see David Hay, *Religious Experience Today* (London: Mowbray 1990); David Hay & Kate Hunt *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church* (University of Nottingham 2000).

on how quickly he felt at ease, to the extent that he relaxed and found the experience quite therapeutic.

Almost everyone experienced a sense of being cut off as their mask progressed: first they were not able to see, and then they could not talk. Some pointed out that their partner had disappeared to fetch something without saying anything, and they felt quite abandoned and out of touch with what was going on around them. Others found themselves excluded from conversations as people spoke 'about them', while others were frustrated at being unable to join in. Yet others attempted to join in with gesticulations which were then misinterpreted as indicating that something was 'wrong' with them. One or two found they had highly developed mime skills of which they had no previous awareness.

Some commented on the intimacy involved in touching another person's face; others discovered how it was possible to look closely at a person without staring at them. Overall, people said they really got to know each other in new ways, and were pleased at how well they felt they worked together.

- **Key Learning** How easy it is to exclude people  
What it's like to feel excluded  
What it's like not to be able to communicate  
Understanding how a blind person discovers how a face 'looks'  
Friendship can be created by working together
- **Possible use** Helping people get to know one another  
Team building  
Enabling folk to think about appropriate forms of touch, and boundaries
- **A Question** How do we learn once the normal means of communication and sight are removed? Is it a different learning that takes place?<sup>40</sup>

### **Learning about ourselves**

To make a mask people had to touch one another. Right away this raised questions about what was appropriate.

- **Key learning** It is important to give and seek permission before touching another person  
Consider what is a safe psychological space between people: there are different cultural norms  
The danger of making assumptions - "I thought I knew what my partner wanted"  
The need to listen more carefully and read between the lines  
It is hard work being inclusive  
An Indian male, looking at his finished mask alongside that of a Caucasian, said 'some day we will actually be the same' (transformation).
- **Possible uses** Since doing this exercise raised the question of appropriate touch with several people, this would obviously be a worthwhile thing to do with many different groups. This is a serious issue in society: frequently touch is misused, but equally we don't touch because of fear of misrepresentation. A safe place to explore these issues would be particularly beneficial to people in any kind of pastoral role, whether medical, church-based, or any other - especially when, as in

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<sup>40</sup> Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages* (London: Penguin 1971), who describes the impact of a message as consisting of: words 7%, vocal signals 38%, non verbal signals 55%.

mask-making, there is an element of fun and play involved. It could also be very empowering to use with people who have experienced violation, especially as mask-making gives them the role of marking the boundaries for themselves. It was not appropriate on this particular occasion, but in other settings I have encouraged people to use their masks in a worship context, perhaps by offering an opportunity to place them at the foot of the cross within a specific liturgy, at other times using a mime based on Ezekiel 37, with the masks laid out so as to create the valley of dry bones mentioned in that passage. Used creatively, such experiences can be transformational in many different ways.

### **Learning about other people**

These were some of the comments made by the participants

- **Key learning** “Felt for the first time what ‘locked-in syndrome’ must be like”  
“What it’s like to be blind (even for a short time)”  
“Reminded me of being abandoned by nursing staff while giving birth - the knowledge was removed - outside me, feeling isolated”  
“What it must be like to be emotionally or mentally in a different space to everyone else”  
“Exclusion - no-one spoke to me”
- **Possible uses** Many of these points relate to what patients feel in hospital, but similar feelings occur elsewhere. An exercise like this would give practitioners significant insights that could not be learned from a book because these were feelings that were being expressed and experienced. A group (such as this one) which included members of different caring professions broadens the transformational possibilities, as they bring multiple life experiences to bear on the corporate learning.

Walter Wink reminds us that ‘Insights are not just fresh ideas. They are the flicker of new life-possibilities emerging into our sight. A moment’s delay in apprehending them, and the glimmer fades..’<sup>41</sup>

- **A question** Even though we talked in advance about keeping in touch with the person having the mask made, checking out that they were OK, encouraging them with the use of a hand on the shoulder etc people still walked away or forgot to speak. Is this attention to persons much harder than we think, do we just get caught up in what we are doing, and unless someone forces themselves into the conversation we ignore them whether consciously or unconsciously. If so, what does this say to those who cannot articulate their thoughts, who are disabled in some way, suffering from mental health problems, or indeed young children?

### **Going on a trust walk**

One Caucasian male in his early twenties definitely decided that he was ‘not ready for kids’ when he realized he would have to check whether his partner had a coat and waterproof shoes before they could be taken outside (it was a wet day). He realized that she needed instructions about every step of the way, and to be watched carefully. A middle-aged white woman realized that because she felt totally dependent for directions, she found she was walking with her head down, her attitude and posture had assumed a powerless frame. When she realized this was happening, she lifted her head and corrected her posture. Further, she then tried to engage with people, putting

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<sup>41</sup> Wink *Transforming Bible Study*, p105

her hand out in an attempt to invite a handshake.

Other comments focused on the way that some failed to offer adequate instructions until they were halfway down the stairs (a semi-spiral stone staircase, almost designed to disorient people - and it did). Another felt they were 'being tagged along like a rag doll'. Others expressed a deep need to reach out in order to make contact with others ('like a stroke patient with no means of conversation' according to one).

- **Possible uses** This could be valuable for policy makers who decide how much support carers need: if they were to undergo the total experience it would surely change their perceptions of need. Many groups of people assume a posture of dependency. This could be used as a workshop to address issues of empowerment. People expressed empowerment at different levels of the experience: for some, it was empowering not to have to speak, another felt so empowered they said they would have liked to try walking on their own once they had confidence. They wanted to push themselves even further. Another started unconsciously walking in a tighter spiral on the stairs: they were becoming disorientated. The fact that the same experience produces different results serves to underline our diversity. E.g., we do not all feel pain with the same intensity. Using an unfamiliar experience helps to open up other angles on a subject simply because we approach it without feeling we have all the options 'sewn up'. Those leading struggled with giving directions. We know that the message we think we are communicating is frequently not the message received, whether delivered from the pulpit or the consulting room. A series of experiences could be created around mask-making for people to improve the way they give instructions. Participants would improve with practice, and in the unpacking they would almost certainly discover new ways from one another.
- **Questions**
  - How do you decide what is appropriate information to give, and how do you give it? E.g. how much is 'enough'?
  - Is it ever appropriate to withhold information? Where are the issues of control here?
  - When does the quality of information become patronizing?
  - How disempowered am I if I do not have all the information? (e.g. the woman giving birth).

### **Perceiving our surroundings and environment**

People navigated and became aware of the surroundings by relating to the variation in the floor texture, (e.g. change from vinyl in the room to stone on the stairways). Other significant features were walls and handrails. Even though their eyes were covered, people were still aware of light and darkness (though it was a very dull day, when they went outside it was still brighter than indoors). As they approached the door they sensed the difference in air temperature and quality. Things like the sound and feel of rain, worry about stepping in a puddle, became very important. Some found noises quite frightening. They could hear a car, but was it behind them - or to the right? Builders were at work: what were they doing? Were they near a potentially harmful situation? All these things led to feelings of uncertainty and stress. People's responses seemed to be more extreme in both directions: they were as likely to want to run faster to pass by perceived danger as they were to stop and speak in an uncharacteristically animated way with people whom they might normally have ignored. Having a degree of knowledge of the layout of the building was a mixed blessing. Folk reported trying to rely on memory when they thought the spot was



familiar, but then when they were unsure of whether they had got it right, or were uncertain of their location, they were happy to trust their companion much more and were more willing to be guided by them.

- **Possible uses** The experiences reported here are largely an extension of what was spoken of when the masks were being made, and therefore many of the same uses will apply. The specific significance the exercise offers is developing trust. You have to trust more when you are walking than when just sitting. This could open up the discussion on who we trust, why we trust them, are there signs to warn us to be guarded in our trust? How does this trust relate to faith? This would be a good way to enter in to the experiences of those who are dependent on others to do simple tasks such as moving around. It strikes me as I write this that it would be interesting to do this with people with various impairments.
- **A Question** Could people with impairments bring a greater depth of learning to able bodied people?  
Would the experience be heightened if working with both groups together? Might their carers add another dimension? What would teenagers be like? Would the daredevil streak surface?

### **Some general comments**

There were one or two significant comments particular to this group. Sharon is an Indian woman in her late thirties, and in this situation she was far more animated than anyone had ever seen her before. She herself commented that, because she was responsible for the well-being of another person, she was aware that she was behaving as she would in India, rather than as she was required to do in the West. She introduced her mask-making partner, and gave all sorts of information about them. She identified this as a significant difference between the two cultures. Whereas in Scotland people just exchange a greeting and then pass on, in India people would be more likely to have a conversation: 'hello this is my brother, he has come from ... to stay with me for ... weeks' and so on. Equally, the person to whom they were being introduced would be asking questions such as, 'are you married, are your family here, are you on holiday, what is your work?' - and many other questions, some of which would be regarded as intrusive in the West. There are obviously significant cross-cultural lessons that could be learned by doing this with a group of people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Sharon's husband is also Indian. I found myself working with him, and I found it difficult to get him to unpack in a way that I felt was forthright and open. He kept referring to me as 'the expert', 'the one with the knowledge', and according to him that made him feel completely safe in whatever I might choose to do to him. I tried to get him to explore his feelings in different ways, but that was obviously difficult for him. In fact, he was unable to do it: there was a cultural preference at work which meant that because I was perceived as the leader: I had 'power'. Two other members of the group were aware of this in the discussion as we unpacked the experience, but commented later to me in private that it was obvious to them that he was going to be resistant to any counter-suggestion I might make. In going back over this, I recalled that he was the one who described a feeling of being like a rag doll: was this a cultural dependency at work on his part, or were my instructions too prescriptive? Obviously more time would allow for deeper discussion. Also I think that with certain cultural groups it would take more than one session to begin to be able to dig beneath the

surface. Maybe some of us have several masks on already!

Another interesting comment was made by Charlie (white American in his early twenties), who said that initially he wasn't sure how to describe his experience - but once he had heard other people's stories he was able to come at his experience again and 'peel back the layers'. It reminded me of an African American man who once admitted in a class at Fuller Seminary, 'All my life I have wanted to be white. The white folk seem to have all the good jobs, the best houses, the biggest cars, and the most promising opportunities. But you know what I found today? I've seen myself white-and I don't like it. I now know what it means to be really free.'<sup>42</sup> That was a moment of self realization that made a significant contribution to his entire disposition, and he was much happier when the next day he returned with his mask, now painted brown instead of the pale white plaster of paris it had been originally. Images of birthing and discovery are commonplace as people describe their experience, and many jokes can be made in among the profound comments. Indeed, it is the fact that it is alright to laugh that also gives permission for people to cry if that is appropriate for them.

Though it was not my primary intention to compare Californians and Scots, there were some significant differences between this group in Aberdeen and my previous experiences with students in Fuller Seminary. The overall circumstance was quite different to start with: the students I have worked with at Fuller have always been doing this as part of a course, and I was the professor who would eventually give them a grade, whereas this group were self-selected volunteers who owed me nothing. My California experience also spans ten years, and no doubt my impressions of responses there are compressed so that I remember the most interesting examples from different groups.

One striking difference, however, was the preponderance of social understanding as distinct from specifically spiritual comment between Scotland and the USA. This probably reflects the generally greater social awareness of people in Europe, and also the Scottish reluctance to talk openly about matters of spirituality. In Californian culture, personal and spiritual formation is highly prized, and the intentional behaviour patterns that will empower people in their search for personhood are encouraged and promoted, whereas the prevailing British culture tends to tell people that it is inappropriate or shallow to raise such questions.<sup>43</sup>

### **What has this project added to our teaching of practical theology?**

This project demonstrated generally that the people taking part were not simply using a praxis/reflection model as a means of reflecting on their own prior experience, but they were actually creating and giving new experiences to one another that in turn were leading to further new reflective opportunities.

Within these new experiences elements of personal formation were facilitated as the participants made personal reflections. They did this corporately in the group, where their discussions helped one another, and then they reflected individually before giving further responses. Their personal reflections demonstrated a holistic model using right brained as well as left brained observations, offering a new angle on theology by 'doing' as well as 'thinking' Engagement with others was essential to the process, fostering sensitivity and awareness of one another, and in this context one of

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<sup>42</sup> Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns Storytellers Disciples*, p39

<sup>43</sup> What David Hay has called 'the social destruction of spirituality' - cf David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount 1998), pp21-39.

the most significant aspects of the entire project was the way in which the experience of making masks created a safe space in which people of different faith positions felt able to work and share together (the major religious traditions represented within the group were Islam and Christianity, along with people who professed no faith). Moreover, as the group exchanged thoughts about the actual experience which mask-making had offered to them, they tended to progress into a more expansive storytelling mode, in which reminiscences from earlier life and lessons learned from family and other relationships were combined to offer a matrix within which to process the current experience. As such, the mask-making exercise became a striking example of the truth of what Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio have proposed, that 'when we encourage students to articulate and process experience through storytelling we provide them with opportunities to clarify and question their assumptions, one of the hallmarks of a reflective practitioner ... the result is learning experiences that are more challenging, interesting and stimulating to students.'<sup>44</sup> Future explorations could include experiences with painting, collage, or any, the use of water, clay, or any natural substance, dancing, mime - or indeed any artistic medium which enables a way of learning not totally bound by cognitive skills.

## **Conclusion**

There is overwhelming evidence that there are many ways to learn, and that most of us do not develop all our available capacities in learning. Increasing the variety of available experiences expands opportunities, and by engaging body, emotions and spirit, as well as mind, we can help to create a more holistic style of learning - which in turn enables us to address areas that remain untouched by simply using cognitive skills. We have seen that if we do not engage the whole person we end up seriously out of balance with ourselves, our relationships and the wider community. Not only does a more holistic form of learning offer new possibilities for valuing as persons those who are not cognitively skilled, but a more integrated form of learning may also begin to redress the imbalance created by excessive specialism in all fields of knowledge. Learning across different disciplines and utilizing different personal skills not only offers new understandings of how others operate, but the sum of the learning is generally greater than its individual parts.

A more inclusive style of learning empowers people in different ways. Some will assimilate the same quality of information simply by doing rather than thinking. Those who might be regarded as impaired in their ability to access factual knowledge frequently demonstrate outstanding ability when offered a different sort of challenge other than a rational one. Moreover, children and adults can learn together, because here issues of physical or mental ability are not the essential criteria. The role of the teacher is also changed: at best she is a facilitator, but will always be a fellow traveller with others, in a process of mutual transformation within the learning group. These benefits are frequently acknowledged, but not taken forward either out of fear or because the task seems too expensive or too complex. When that happens, we actually all suffer because we are prevented from reaching our own potential. This challenge is one that the church in particular cannot avoid. Jesus (quoting from Deuteronomy) advised his followers 'Love the Lord your God with all our heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12:30),

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<sup>44</sup> Janice McDrury & Maxine Alterio, *Learning through Storytelling in Higher Education: using reflection and experience to improve learning* (London: Kogan Page 2003), p175.

an injunction that runs remarkably parallel to Jung's prescription for whole persons.

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## **Appendix: How to make a plaster mask**

I always demonstrate how to make a mask on a willing volunteer, even in a class where everyone will eventually be expected to become involved. No matter how often I have explained or handed out written lists of what to bring, people are still surprised when we use actual plaster and water! The human filters work very well, and generally say that if this is education it ought not to be play, or fun, or messy! If the floor is carpeted it is wise to cover it in plastic first, and in advance I always tell students to wear clothes 'that don't matter' - plaster of paris will wash out, but then it might block your washing machine! When dry any splashes will flake off.

Firstly find a partner to work with.

Decide who is going to have the mask made first.

Place the seat comfortably for the one having the mask made

Place the materials being used so the one making the mask is working comfortably - in particular not straining their back.

Play instrumental music in the background.

## **Requirements**

Vaseline

Roll of plaster bandaging 2-3" wide

Bowl of water

Scissors

Container for strips of plaster

## **Method**

Cut the plaster of paris bandaging into strips about an inch wide

The model should cover their face in Vaseline, paying particular attention to the eyebrows and for men, moustache or beard.

Men with large beards may at this point decide to make a half mask. Crucially the decision must always be left up to each individual.

People who are worried about their hairstyle could wear a disposable shower cap (most people decline them!)

Once the model is comfortable, place a towel over their chest and round their neck and also cover their knees to keep them dry.

Take a strip of plaster, dip it in the water and place it on the face. When demonstrating, I start from the brow and work downwards, though I am not generally prescriptive about how to place the strips except for encouraging mask makers to identify points where it might require additional material in order to give extra strength to the mask.

The object is to cover the entire face with the plaster of paris, overlaying the pieces in different directions to give the mask strength - but trying to capture the detail of the face, not doing a reconstruction job!

Three layers are sufficient. Using the third or fourth finger of the hand to smooth the bandaging into place (rather than the forefinger) generally produces greater accuracy as it exerts less pressure, especially around sensitive areas like the eyes. On average, students take 30 minutes to do this process.

Within 10 minutes the mask will be totally dry and then the person who made the mask can lead the one wearing the mask on a trust walk.

When they return the mask is removed much more easily than you might imagine. A bit of flexing of the facial muscles, with a bit of help from the mask-maker around the edges and the hairline, and it will come off cleanly and easily (you can now understand why the application of Vaseline was so important at the start of the process). The model can then clean up, taking care not to get any stray pieces of plaster in their eye - though, being soluble, plaster is easily washed away with no lasting effects.

The partners then swap places, and the process is repeated.

When everyone is finished we sit in a circle and in turn talk about what we felt and thought about the whole experience. We leave the total cleaning up of the space till the end.