

**“SINGING UP THE SACRED: ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES
TRAIN THE TRAINER IN B.C.”**

The title of this paper came from a lesson taught to me by a wise friend and gifted teacher, Mark Wedge, who lives in the Yukon Territories. He has worked and travelled widely, and brings his Aboriginal understanding of circles as a universal way of resolving conflict to many different contexts. When I asked him how do you “bring” spirituality into a mediative setting or peace-making circle, he gently reminded me that it is already there. When we truly recognize our interconnectedness as humans and acknowledge our interdependency with the natural world, we are reminded that the spiritual aspect in life is not separate from us. It is not “outside” of us, despite the heavy emphasis on the secular in mainstream Western thought. In truth, we are all spiritual beings. What Mark suggested was that third-party intervenors, mediators, or keepers of the circle need to find ways to “sing up the sacred”, to find the rhythm or beat that brings it up in those who are present.

This story is one example of the many influences and teachings I have received through my involvement in conflict resolution teaching within Aboriginal communities. That context has proven rich in learning experiences, and has led me to exploration of peace-making circles, deep-rooted conflict, the effects of victimization and family violence, white privilege, and the significance of culture in mediative settings.

Coming from a world where the sacred and the secular are viewed to be mutually exclusive, I noticed that those kinds of division are not made in Aboriginal learning environments. There is always time for an opening prayer, for a circle to gauge everyone’s readiness for the day’s work, for the sharing of food, jokes, appreciations and difficult matters. There is time for exercise when needed, time for rituals of celebration and closure. And giving time to these aspects of life increases the ability to focus on the subject matter of the teaching when it’s time to do that – be it interest-based negotiation, working in teams in multi-party settings, or interpersonal conflict resolution.

In working in Aboriginal communities, I learned that for people to be fully centred in the work at hand, it is indeed necessary to attend to all aspects of one’s being – the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. As teachers, we tend to focus on the mental – to parcel out the other aspects of being as not part of the agenda. In the more holistic ways of being of Aboriginal learners, the various aspects are actually

inseparable. For instance, if a person is having difficulty concentrating because of an emotional crisis at home or a lack of sleep because of a new baby, that person is given whatever support is needed. The group knows why the person is not fully engaged because they have taken the time to listen during a circle round. That person's well-being affects the whole group. When everyone is ready to proceed, the group works with clarity and focus. Learning tasks are taken seriously and approached in depth. Time frames that are too short to accomplish the task in a complete way are adjusted (or ignored).

Integrating the sacred into the work of conflict resolution does not necessarily mean that people will offer prayers as part of the process. That choice is one the participants themselves need to make. What it does mean is that the intervenor or mediator brings her or his full presence to the process, a humble self-awareness, and a compassionate strength. The intervenor seeks to assist in ways that bring up the best (the highest or most sacred parts) in the parties themselves. Sometimes this means asking for photos of the children in a family mediation and placing those photos in the centre of the table as a symbolic reminder of why it is important to resolve the matters in dispute.

Bringing people together in positive ways may mean, in the context of a land-use/ public policy dispute, that the parties make a field trip, a shared outing, to the place that is the subject of the dispute. During a time of impasse in the midst of a complex environmental planning process around the Spatsizi Wilderness Area in Northern B.C., a field trip to Mt. Edziza Provincial Park was undertaken by the whole negotiating table. The group was flown into the area in a series of helicopter trips and retrieved later in the day. The trip made a lasting impression and helped the table clarify its priorities. It helped the group solidify its identity despite its differences. It helped promote the articulation of differences in a respectful way.

Working within Aboriginal communities has taught me the importance of story-telling as a way of sharing experience. Sometimes it means exchanging stories about our mothers or other relatives during a break in the process of a difficult mediation. Our life experience may be wildly different, but we have great commonality in that we do have families, fully engaged in their unique cycles of living, aging, and dying. Anecdotes and stories about our families reflect our shared humanity.

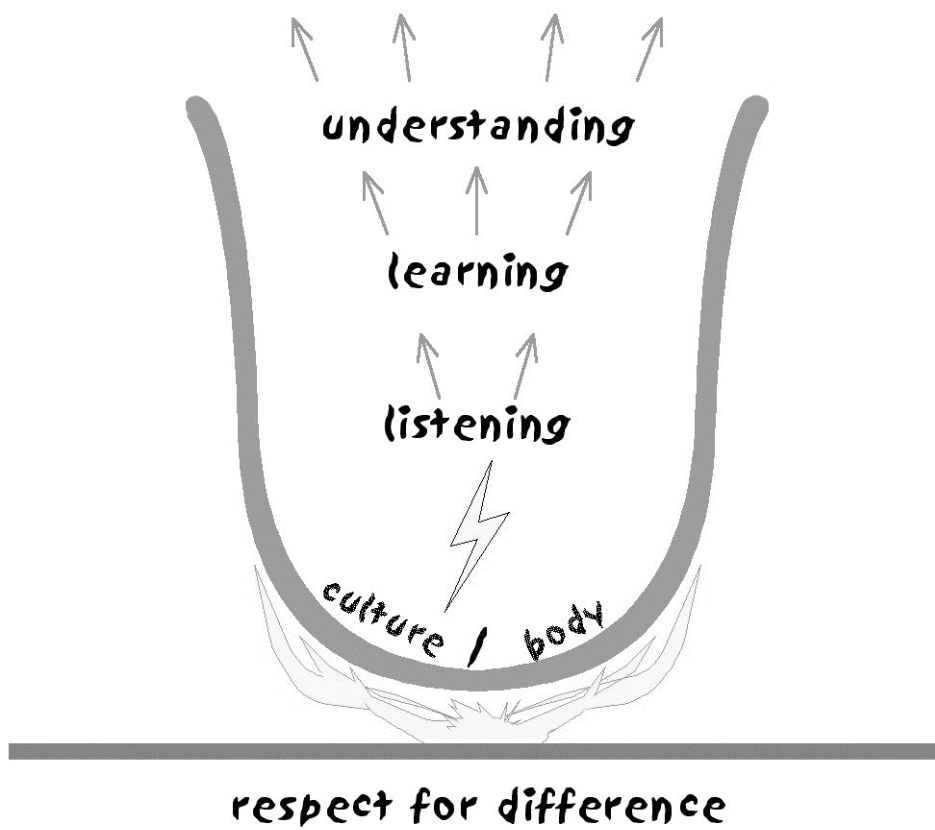
Stories are an invaluable teaching tool. The old non-written ways of communicating speak to us at a deeper and non-linear level of our being. They show respect for the learner as a person who will draw his or her meaning from the story, taking what s/he is ready to absorb at that time. Stories and metaphors work on our psyches at the symbolic level; we don't need to analyze them to get the teaching they offer. These indirect ways of learning enhance genuine inquiry rather than dictate

answers. They may be ambiguous and somewhat mysterious. They help us expand our ways of perceiving rather than narrowing them down.

For some, this sense of open-endedness or ambiguity is very unsettling. This may be due to a particular type of personality that wants clear agendas, solid answers, and closure. It may be the reductionist nature of much of the way of thinking of dominant Western culture. Westerners are taught to “break down” the issues, separate out the parts, to make them more “manageable”. Often they are framed in oppositional and distributional ways, or in terms of rights and entitlements. (“The question is whether or not they are entitled to exclusive use of that parcel of land for a heritage site. The issues of logging in the adjacent valley, the road through the reserve, and damage to the watershed are not on the table. Those involve different Ministries and we can’t speak for them”.) For many in Aboriginal communities, this way of looking at problem-solving is inappropriate. All these issues are connected and impact upon each other. From a perspective that sees interconnectness in all of nature, this kind of abstract compartmentalizing of the issues might be considered fundamentally unworkable. An Aboriginal-centred discussion around these issues might start with stories of the land, myths about the land, elders’ recollections, an exploration of values surrounding the land. It would probably involve being on the land as well – not only at the negotiating table. The water, the logging, the road, the community would all be part of the overall exploration. It would take the time needed for full discussion and resolution.

Basic cultural differences between how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups in B.C. approach disputes invite reflection and consideration of process. As teachers, what ways can we offer other than staged, linear models such as that which evolved from the Harvard Negotiation Project in the 1970’s? This paper presents as a teaching tool, a metaphor for dispute resolution process that can be applied across a broad spectrum of difference. It offers a way to approach conflicts that is culturally-sensitive, a way to proceed when “standard” models don’t work. This metaphor is intended to be a starting point for discussion and exploration of the key concepts in resolving disputes. It is not offered as the right way, the new way, or the only way – merely as one way of looking at the “big picture”.

A Metaphor for Process



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A METAPHOR FOR PROCESS

People work with conflict in many different ways. In North America, the field of conflict resolution has had the benefit of various staged models which identify ways of approaching a dispute and map out routes to resolution. Built into these models however, are assumptions about preferred ways of working with conflict and about what success means. There are also assumptions about peoples' ways of thinking and their order of problem-solving. What works for some may not work for others. Presented here is a humanistic model or framework for process – one that is inclusive, based upon certain universal core values, and has room for an infinity of approaches.

This framework uses the metaphor of a vessel which holds the conflict and creates an environment for the working it through. It visually shows the what, how and when of a conflict-resolving process. The metaphor offers a simple and understandable route to moving through conflict within a safe place. It names the fundamental components that make a solid foundation for the work, together with a sense of the open-endedness and creative potential that emerge from good process. The vessel can “hold” any number of different ways to resolution, showing the infinity of ways people will give expression to the core components.

When teachers of conflict resolution and mediation need a starting point for discussion about process, this metaphor may be useful. Working with this framework can help make the whole resolution process more meaningful for students. Treated as a “work in progress”, it offers learners a visual aid to develop their thoughts, clarify objectives, and explore the many ways of approaching the daunting task of addressing an entrenched dispute, either as an intervenor or disputant. Its simplicity makes it instantly accessible to people. I have found it is the kind of tool people take home from a course and discuss with their spouses at dinner!

The metaphor shows the primary goals of listening to one another to learn and to build understanding, and yet its flexible structure allows participants to shape their own process rather than trying to fit what is unknown into a model established by others.

This metaphor has a number of parts all of which affect the whole. Because it is a symbolic framework, it can also be interpreted on a number of levels simultaneously.

THE FOUNDATION:

The vessel rests on a solid foundation of respect for difference. Respect for the other as a human being who sees things differently from me. Respect for a person's entitlement to disagree. Respect for a process that may allow us to speak and listen to one another and to learn something. This does not mean I need to respect the other's behaviour, actions, or even the values and beliefs that seem to inform those actions. I do however need to respect the individual's right to have differing views from mine. An intervenor "models" this respect for difference from the very first contact with the parties in dispute.

THE VESSEL:

The vessel holds the process. It is a container formed of a living, breathing membrane which can expand to hold what is necessary - matters difficult to speak about, the tension, the seemingly vast differences that divide people in conflict. The word "vessel" has connotations of the sacred. It represents something to be handled with great care and reflects the very nature of transforming conflict. This can be the deepest and most important work of our lives. Calling upon all our skills and resources, at times it can feel very dangerous. A safe place is needed to hold or contain the energy within the conflict – the vessel represents that place.

The sacred aspect of the vessel is symbolic of matters of significance. This is as it should be for our conflicts; they are our toughest and best teachers. On another level, the vessel can represent the spiritual challenge of being fully present each moment in order to be able to sense what is needed in the conflict. A mediator bringing "conscious awareness" to the process, with mindful presence, helps create a place for heartfelt discussion. In that sense as well, the vessel is a sacred space, a space for honouring people's difference and their attempt to reconcile those differences that are getting in the way, causing pain and difficulty.

The membrane breathes in and out, suggestive of real-life physical processes – we expand and contract in our thinking and our actions. Our allies and supporters can both narrow and broaden our perspective. Prospects of settlement can seem both near and far away. Clarity is with us, then lost in a haze. Hope waxes and wanes. The membrane is flexible and its capacity to expand allows room for parties to move and explore, to create space for thinking and building understanding.

In the poetry of Hafiz, the 14th century Sufi teacher, ¹ a cup or vessel symbolizes the human heart or even the human being as a vessel of love. Conflict and the fear that permeates it can constrict our capacity for love. A constricted state places us within

a closed rather than open system. A closed system is reactive, narrow and inflexible. It is connected to an oppositional mindset – them and us, you versus me, the victim/villain paradigm. An open system, as represented by the vessel and its membrane, open at the top, is free to breathe and expand. It is flexible and able to recognize connections and choices.

Vern Neufeld Redekop, in his work on deep-rooted conflict and processes of reconciliation, calls systems such as these “structures of blessing”, which he defines as systems which are open, free, creative, life-oriented, generous, and involving many options. ²

ALCHEMY:

The idea of alchemy provides another aspect of metaphor. ³ The potential for transformative change exists within the vessel. On a symbolic level, we have the capacity to turn lead into gold, to take the raw material of the conflict, the “prima materia” as the alchemists called it, and work with it. Alchemy involves processes of refinement of what is rough and unshaped - mining the dross for the infinitely valuable discoveries or gems hidden inside. This is not to suggest that processes such as mediation promise a magic “fix” or sudden transformation. More often, the changes that occur within mediative processes are slight shifts in perception, tiny openings, new awareness, or movement toward closure. Sometimes disputants are not fully aware of these shifts until time has passed. A number of people have told me years after mediation that the experience changed their lives in a positive way, yet they did not know at the time how profound the change would be.

The idea of alchemy also speaks of energy at work, energy not always understood by logical process, by analysis. There is a heat reaction, a spark created, that sets the process in motion. In this framework, the energy- the heat- is contributed by the conflict itself. It is represented in the metaphor by the flames under the vessel. Inside the vessel the spark of conflict engages. Here is how conflict can be of great value in our lives. Its spark demands our attention. Ignored, it can develop into a conflagration, something highly contagious and potentially very damaging. Attended to, it signals the need for something to change – our attitude, perceptions, behaviours. Bringing the spark into the vessel starts the process. The alchemical refining in the metaphor includes our willingness to listen to and learn from the messages that are contained within the conflict rather than push them down or blame the other for our difficulty.

When we are avoidant about dealing with conflict, we often become more entrenched by looking for justification and reinforcement of our current mindset. We feed what playwright Joanna McLelland Glass calls “our carefully nurtured sorrows”. ⁴ As disputants, we rehearse our anger and resentments, building alliances by how we tell our story. Many times people come to mediation with just

such a mindset. Assumptions upon which the dispute rests have often been bolstered by what is or is not let in to the conversation; these assumptions have not been brought out of the closet, aired and examined to see if they still fit. Instead, we armour up to protect ourselves. Closed systems make conflict resolution difficult. The light and heat of new ideas can't get in. Information which calls into question an assumption will be ignored or minimized. People who don't agree with us will be dismissed or their ideas dismissed. It is easy to stay locked in the closed circle of conflict.

Given appropriate attention, the spark of conflict generates needed change and growth. Intervenors work with the heat as an energy. It has a momentum, a liveliness. When alchemy enters in, something mysterious happens. The heavy lead of the conflict gets shape-shifted, altered in some way that allows its positive potential to emerge. People start thinking: what can be learned from this conflict? What opportunities does it hold? What choices are presenting themselves through this experience? What does closure mean for me, for us?

Energy is also added to this mix by parties' very intention to participate, to enter into a process which involves risk-taking, moving into the unknown. It may involve reopening old wounds to properly cleanse and treat them, or painful examination of one's own role in creating and perpetuating the dispute. The concept of "growing pains" is truly applicable in the challenging realm of addressing our own conflicts. Mediators assist in this alchemical process by normalizing the work being done, gently raising awareness, modelling humanity and respect for all involved, and bringing clarity and compassion.

GROUNDING THE PROCESS:

Within the vessel are held all the assumptions, beliefs and ways of being of the culture(s) of the parties to the conflict. In fact, the process is grounded in the very basic values and beliefs that shape who we are. This means I need to know and understand my ways of thinking and being in conflict, and to try to learn and understand those of the person(s) with whom I am in dispute. I need to remember that these ways are often unspoken, unquestioned and unconscious. Culture is like the water a fish swims in. It so permeates the atmosphere around us that we literally may not notice it and we often do not appreciate how differently those of another culture would approach the same problem. Recognizing and respecting cultural differences are fundamental to good process.

At the same time, there are core values that all humans hold important, values such as respect, compassion, courage, forgiveness, generosity and honesty. These too are brought into the vessel and create the glue between people. Unearthing and naming for the parties their shared core values are ways that

mediators help to bridge difference and melt the oppositional mindset of those in conflict.

On an even more basic level, we ground the process in our own bodies. We need to be attuned to what our bodies are telling us about the conflict and our response to it. We need to notice our breathing, have our feet on the ground, fully balanced. We need to see with eyes that are focused and clear rather than clouded with judgment. Our minds need to be fully present, giving the dispute the non-anxious attention it deserves. We need to manage our “head noise”, the thinking that gets in the way of new learning. When we are in a reactive mode, our thoughts will work to reinforce our positions. We cannot be fully aware of what is happening now if we are clinging to the past, nor if we are “leaning into the next moment”, as Jon Kabat-Zinn says in his work on mindfulness.⁵

As well, fatigue can shape our thinking in negative ways. It saps our motivation, closes down the capacity to listen, and plays havoc with our sense of possibility. Simply paying attention to our own energy level and state of nutrition makes a difference. The integrity of the process can be greatly affected by intervenors’ attention to the fatigue level of disputants. All participants need to be able to fully concentrate and stay focussed. The goal is to enable people to bring their best selves forward, which very often calls up a similar response in the other disputant(s). So an effective mediator will be sensitive to everyone’s level of energy, helping shape processes that ensure parties build in time for nutrition, rest, reflection and consultation with advisors.

THE PROCESS:

The core elements of good dispute resolution are the opportunity to listen and to be listened to by the other, in ways that work for all involved. This can be easier said than done. Third party intervenors offering process assistance need to recognize how their presence alters and impacts the climate, how they bring their own cultural conditioning and body energy to the container. Sometimes mediators can actually get in the way of the parties’ listening. Too many of their own ego needs may be involved, so they take up too much space in the vessel. They make it their process, their responsibility, their success. They unconsciously place themselves in the centre and crowd the disputants to the edges of the process. If they bring respect, humility and self-awareness to the vessel, however, mediators – be they professional intervenors or trusted friends - can greatly assist the listening process. Mutual listening begins to unlock the elements of the dispute and creates movement toward resolution.

Often a mediator, not personally caught up in the heat of the conflict, can assist the process with reflection on the dynamics at play. The complexity of the dispute may call for detailed analysis and design of an effective approach. In this case, the

metaphor of the vessel can be a tool for “conflict mapping”, a visual way of examining the various aspects of the conflict and the relationship of the disputants to one another. Parties may need to consider and place in perspective the impact of legislation, policy or regulations upon their dispute. How essential are these to resolving the matters in issue? Where do they “fit” in the picture? The scope of their mandate may need clarification. What else may need clarification at the outset? What conflict styles are emerging? Who else needs to be “in the vessel”?

The metaphor can also help disputants see what needs to be “outside the vessel”, out of the parameters of their process. They can use the membrane concept to acknowledge outside influences that will affect resolution, and develop ways to accommodate them. Conversely, they can use the idea of the membrane’s capacity to breathe and expand to envision how their process will impact others who are outside the vessel. What will seep through? Is the conflict poisoning the environment of others? How will others discuss this conflict and its resolution five or ten years from now? What potential exists to learn from the conflict itself, and transform it from a negative experience to one that has actually become positive?

As for choice of process, parties may wish to follow an interest-based model, exploring interests, uncovering mutual needs, and identifying criteria and standards upon which they will rely. Such a model can fit within the vessel. Parties can use the diagram to talk about the needs and interests that they want to include. Which do they share? Which need to be acknowledged to build understanding and go forward? Which will need more exploration and discussion? Which need to be addressed in some substantive way in order to reach agreement?

It is helpful to remember there are many ways of working with conflict. Naming core values may be the basis of the resolution process – we may use dialogue to raise and explore our fundamental beliefs and see where there is a bridge between us. Creating a quiet space and giving genuine empathic attention to the other may be the route to resolving the dispute. An apology made sincerely and appropriately may create a breakthrough. We may use peace-making or talking circles to work through conflict. Intervenors –a mediator, facilitator or trusted advisor or friend may or may not be involved. Sometimes in conflict, we may simply take a walk together as our process choice, reminding ourselves of our common connection to the earth, to something larger than ourselves. The vessel can hold any of these approaches.

If listening truly happens between the parties, there will be learning. New learning leads to understanding the situation in different ways. As Jack Kornfield says in his book *A Path with Heart* :

Denial and confusion are unsuccessful strategies to avoid conflict and seek peace. When we acknowledge them consciously, they become transformed. They can lead to a spacious acceptance, a resolution that holds all the voices in conflict, in harmony. Through working directly to transform their energy, we can find true peace. ⁶

Understanding leads directly to opening of the mind. It is at this point- this moment of a new insight, of a fresh way of perceiving the dispute - that “magic” can occur. Debate becomes dialogue. A closed system starts to breathe, expand and find new life.

We may stay mired in conflict for extended periods of time - years, generations, sometimes centuries. Turning the energy around to a path of reconciliation is a process with its own pace. It is a process of movement. It can happen between two people in a moment of recognition and letting go. Where the dispute is complex, it may take more time. Harm can be done by pushing people to reconcile before they are ready. The idea of flow and flexibility within the vessel includes acceptance of the parties *finding their own pace* for resolving issues between them.

In some instances, only one of the parties is ready and able to find the path of reconciliation and forgiveness. For that party, the process involves letting go of the perceptions, the resentments, the sense of being wronged that has kept him or her in conflict with another. By forgiving the other (which may happen internally and privately), this person is able to find closure and experience a change of consciousness beyond an oppositional victim/villain frame. A unilateral move such as this, from a closed to an open system, is an empowering alchemy of the heart.

THE RESULTS:

When an open system is in place, we have a system that is creative, life-oriented, and generous. Julia Cameron, in her book, *The Artist's Way*,⁷ says that creativity is a fact of one's spiritual body. It is not something that must be invented. It is within all of us and we tap into that wellspring of imagination when we are in tune with who we are, with our deeper selves. Allowing and indeed encouraging our creativity to inform us offers the possibility of many options. When earlier there was rigidity, now there is flexibility. When there was a sense of confinement, there is now freedom and empowerment. When the mindset was one of scarcity, there is now a feeling of abundance of choice.

The metaphor of the vessel is open at the top, symbolizing a sense of limitless possibility. Sometimes understanding something in a new way is all that is needed for people to go forward. The new understanding may be as simple as the recognition that trust is low and therefore all agreements need to be carefully recorded, reviewed and signed by the parties at each stage of the way. This too is a step forward, working with the realities of the dispute and its fallout. In other instances, new understanding will lead toward a specific, articulated course of action.

It gives us the clarity necessary to form a plan, to take next steps. When we are in the rhythm of good process, we find that we have many choices and increased capacity. The sky is the limit.

Notes:

- 1. Hafiz, whose given name is Shams-ud-din Muhammad (c.1320-1389) is one of Islam's greatest poetic and religious voices. He lived at about the same time as Chaucer. He spent nearly all his life in the city of Shiraz in Persia, where he became a famous Sufi master. 500 to 700 of his estimated 5,000 poems have survived. cf. *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, in translation by Daniel Ladinsky, New York: Penguin Books, 1999.**
- 2. Vern Neufeld Redekop, PhD. is a leader in the field of conflict resolution in Canada. His most recent book is: *From Violence to Blessing: How an understanding of deep-rooted conflict can open paths to reconciliation*. St. Paul University, Ottawa: Novalis, 2002. He directs the development of the Conflict Studies programs at St. Paul University, Ottawa.
http://webustpaul.uottawa.ca/en/fac_prog/human_sc/conflict**
- 3. Thomas Moore is an inspiring writer and thinker who has drawn upon the concept of alchemy in his writings. Reading his work, I found many parallels between this "ancient art of transformation" and the shape-shifting that can occur in mediation. A former professor of religion and psychology, he is the author of numerous books, including *Care of the Soul*, *Soul Mates*, and *Original Self: Living with Paradox and Originality*, New York: Harper Collins, 2000.**
- 4. Joanna McClelland Glass is a playwright born in Saskatchewan in 1936. The quote is from her play, *If We Are Women*, which premiered at the Williamstown (Mass.) Theater Festival in 1993.**
- 5. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. New York: Hyperion Books, 1994. This is a simple and wise book about integrating spiritual awareness into everyday life, through the practice of mindfulness.**
- 6. Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, New York: Bantam Books, 1993.**
- 7. Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering Your Creative Self*, New York, Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 1992.**

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