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In Public Spaces: Hosting Religious Conversation Across Diversity in Secular Quebec

Abstract

In Quebec, attitudes to public religion range from cautious to overtly hostile. This paper documents La Presence-Qi's effort to engage religion in the public sphere by creating a multidisciplinary site for practice, research, and learning in a Montreal neighbourhood. Researchers formed circle conversations to create a space for dialogue across religious, spiritual, and cultural diversity. The results of our analysis reveal the difficulty of creating such space in the context of Quebec, the potential efficacy of our process for creating meaningful dialogue, and the ways narrative and artistic practice helped move the participants into deep encounter, mutual understanding, and meaning making across diversity.

Introduction

The context for this research is a community project of the United Theological College (at McGill) called *La Présence-Qi*. La Présence integrates ministry formation, research, and community engagement around issues of religion and spirituality in the context of neighbourhood redevelopment. The project seeks authentic ways to talk about issues of deeper meaning and values within the wider secular society. It brings together theology students, researchers, and community residents around activities that include spiritual practices, collaborative community programs, and facilitated workshops and discussion about faith, religion, and spirituality.

La Présence is based La Petite-Bourgogne, a Montreal neighbourhood characterized by wide diversity (economic, linguistic, religious, cultural ethnic, racial, etc.). For example,[1]

- Forty percent of community residents were born outside Canada (the majority of recent immigrants are Bengali Muslims)
- Although there are roughly equal numbers of Francophones and Anglophones, 27% of the population has a first language other than English or French
- The neighbourhood has historically been home to Montreal's working-class, English-speaking Black community; 43% of residents are members of a visible minority, of which Black Canadians still constitute the largest proportion[2]
- La Petite-Bourgogne has the highest proportion of social housing of any Montreal neighbourhood[3].

It is important to situate the project within the broader Quebec context, as the project was created with the intention of filling a societal gap, that is, the lack of space for conversation and connection across religious and spiritual diversity.

Within Quebec, widespread hostility to religion and suspicion of religious institutions arises from Quebec's own religious past.[4] The story Quebecers tell themselves about their own history describes the Catholic church as a central oppressive force, that stole children, destroyed families, and dominated all facets of life, including education and access to higher education, careers, and even the intimacy of personal relationships. The concept of a clean break with all their religious past, along with its values and trappings, is central to Quebec self-understanding. The term Grande noirceur (literally great darkness/Dark Ages) is used to refer to Quebec's religious past, revealing how strongly Quebecers feel about the pre-Quiet revolution history of

[1] Ville de Montréal, Profils du Quartier, 2011 http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=6897,68149735&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL
[2] Centraide du Grand Montréal, Portrait-Le-Sud-Ouest 2018-19, Analyse Territoriale http://www.centraide-mtl.org/documents/69375/upload/documents/Portrait-Le-Sud-Ouest-2018-19_Ptlf2bc.pdf
[3] Centraide du Grand Montréal, Portrait-Le-Sud-Ouest 2018-19.
[4] Zubrzycki, G. (2016) Beheading the Saint: Nationalism, Religion, and Secularism in Quebec. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

the province. Five decades after the start of the Quiet Revolution, this sentiment persists in the form of resistance or hostility to any overt expression of faith or religiosity in the public sphere.

The discourse of Quebec secularity re-categorizes Christian culture as religious patrimony or heritage; as such, it has become part of the unrecognized backdrop of Quebec. For example, Catholic religious signs permeate the Montreal landscape (the many streets and buildings named after saints or bishops, a 30-metre high cross atop Mount Royal, religious architecture, wearing crosses or crucifixes), but these are somehow invisible. As Christianity has faded into the background, the discourse of secularity has pushed non-Christian religions to the foreground of public debate. When those of non-Christian religious traditions express their religiosity they are seen as somehow overt in the way that Christian culture is not. Further, secular Quebec discourse assumes that culture and religion can be kept separate, an attitude that is incomprehensible to many for whom culture and religion are experienced as intricately entwined and for whom ethno-cultural identity is also and always religious/spiritual identity.

The research component of La Présence has three goals:

- To discover practices to foster dialogue, connection, and mutual understanding across diversity, especially religious/cultural diversity.
- To understand how people within this diverse fabric of Québec society express and experience spirituality.
- To understand how religion and spirituality can contribute to community vitality and well-being within the context of community redevelopment, entrepreneurial experimentation, and rapid social change.

This research paper addresses the first goal. We share preliminary findings from the first two years of research. We describe how our process has created a space for dialogue and mutual understanding across diversity. We describe the process of shared meaning co-creation of new understanding. And we identify challenges, limitations, and next steps for the research.

Part 1: Creating Dialogical Space Across Diversity

The key focus of our research so far has been developing practices that support dialogue and mutual understanding across diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs, traditions, and practices. Our research design is centred around a participatory (workshop-style) process that we have called "circle conversations." The process, building on the work of Luce-Kapler[5] and Baker[6], uses narrative along with other artistic practices to help participants share and find meaning within their experiences of faith, spirituality, and religion. Participants engage creatively with one another and with the researchers, who are participants are not merely objective observers.

[5] Luce-Kapler, R. (1999). As If Women Writing. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *31*, 267-291.

[6] Baker, D. G. (2005). *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-talk with Young Women.* Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

Personal narrative: the arts, imagination, empathy and meaning-making
A central feature of the circle conversations is personal narrative. We guide participants to write narratives that are literary creations, by using writing prompts, examples, carefully crafted instructions, and art prompts. Thus, the narratives have qualities similar to literary fiction (thick description, strong characterization, emotive connection, and metaphor).

The decision to use personal narrative as the central feature of the process was based on three interrelated aspects of educational and narrative theory. First, our understanding of the power of art and artistic practice to develop human capacity for imagination, which in turn fosters empathy. Second, our recognition of the power of narrative to invite the listener into the worldview of the storyteller, that is to create hermeneutical bridging across different worldviews, creating a sense of commonality and connection. And third, our experience of the capacity of narrative to generate, shape, and share meaning.

The arts, imagination and empathy
Educational theorists describe a profound connection between imagination, the arts, and empathy. If empathy is understood as with Rogers, as a process by which we "enter the world of the other and [become] thoroughly at home in it,"[7] then artistic practice can be a powerful medium for empathetic connection.

Greene describes the way in which artistic practices and aesthetic engagement enlarge our imaginative capabilities, allowing us to see the world and the other "as if things could be otherwise."[8] That is, that the givens of our own worldview are called into question. She argues that imagination enables us to encounter different points of view, even those with values or perspectives that seem to conflict with our own.[9] Imagination, Greene says, helps us to envision other possibilities and experiences. It allows us to consider and open ourselves new viewpoints, experiences, and worldviews. As we imaginatively encounter and envision other realities and perspectives we can also imagine, and begin to understand what another person might experience, feel, or value.

Narrative and engagement
All artistic practices have power to open imagination and foster empathy; however, the power of narrative to transport the listener into the world of the other is what Zunshine calls an invitation to the backstage of consciousness[10]. Personal narrative, if it is infused with thick description and metaphor, can function in the same way that the way that literary fiction to invites the reader into the consciousness of the characters in a novel.

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[7] Rogers, C. (1975). Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being. *The Counseling Psychologist, 2*(4).
[8] Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,195.
[9] Greene, M. (1995).
[10] Zunshine, L. (2006). *Why We read fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

According to Luce-Kapler, narrative creates subjunctive spaces within which selves (and hence worldviews) can be revised.[11] Luce-Kapler says that those who create narrative and those who read or hear them can experiencing alternate consciousnesses and different subjectivities as though they were their own. Stories invite participation in the world of the storyteller; they create a kind of engagement that is a fusion of horizons in a hermeneutical sense. Stories have a particular power to transform the listeners, which is to say, to bring them closer to the consciousness of another.

Human beings have a learned capacity to create and sustain relationships with one another through language. The power in storytelling is its relational power, hence its building of empathy, but also a sense of community and commonality.

Meaning-making

Kerby says that life is inherently of a narrative structure. We make that structure overt when we reflect upon our past and imagine possible futures. We come to know ourselves through the stories we tell; it is as a character in our own or other people's narratives that we achieve an identity.[12] A life led is inseparable from a life as told. In other words, life is not how it was but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.

According to Bruner, narrative is how people explain and cope with life events, which they do they not sentence by sentence, but in narrative wholes.[13] Narrative, Bruner says, "ascends to the particular"[14] in order to form larger patterns of meaning and coherence. Narrative demands the detail. It works out its patterns amid the intricate and intimate particulars, but it is the narrative as a whole that conveys the meaning.

Bruner shows that that narrative is not merely a way of telling; it is a way of thinking, thinking that draws us away from empirical science, with its goals of explanation, reductionism, and prediction into the world of deeper meaning, intention, and value and belief. [15] According to Bruner, people use narrative to make sense of life events. Human beings naturally tend to organize meaning in the form of narrative. As the philosopher Charles Taylor states, the fact that "we grasp our lives in a narrative" is " not an optional extra".[16] Human beings, according to Taylor, are defined as a species by their innate drive to make meaning of their experiences in the world. Narrative is a direct product of this drive; he writes, "we cannot but strive to give our lives meaning or substance, and this means that we understand ourselves inescapably in

[11] Luce-Kapler, R. (1999). As If Women Writing. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *31*, 267-291.
[12] Kerby, A. P. (1991). *Narrative and the Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
[13] Bruner, J. (2004). Life as Narrative. *Social Research*, *71*, 691-710.
[14] Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 64.
[15] Bruner, J. (1990).
[16] Taylor, C. (1989) Sources of the Self, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 47.

narrative"[17]. Ultimately, it is through narrative that we come to express the deeper truth and meaning of our lives.

Narrative creates bonds between the ordinary and the exceptional; it helps to establish meaning and understanding in the face of extraordinary or incomprehensible experiences. It addresses dissonances between culturally normative worlds and the more idiosyncratic worlds of human belief, desire, and emotion. Self- narrative is not merely a passive recounting of past events but a generative activity – the generation of meaning. Self-narrative articulates what is important to us and it acts as a moralizing force.[18]

According to educational theorists such as Luce-Kapler[19] and Sumara,[20] when we engage deeply with the narrative of others, we enter into their systems of meaning and value. Meanings emerge out of a complicated negotiation, an ongoing conversation between the creator and the receiver of the texts. However, this conversation is not static. The act of interpretation and engagement between meaning systems generates new meanings, new meaning frames, and new knowledge.

When we used narratives in the circle conversations, we engaged the listeners in a literary response process, based on the work of Luce-Kapler[21] to listen deeply, including engaging with the imagery and metaphors within the narratives, and to draw out themes and deeper meaning from the narratives.

Part 2: Methodology

2.1 Description of the circle conversation process

Over a period of one year, La Presence-Qi researchers held six circle conversations[22] involving 5-10 participants each. The goal of these sessions was to create a space and opportunity for respectful and honest dialogue about spirituality and religion to occur in a quasi-public setting—that is, the conversation circles were in a closed room so that participants could speak freely and in confidence, but those rooms were within a public building or community space.

Role of researchers

For each circle conversation, researchers were present as participant-facilitators. That is, they guided the process and helped moderate conversations, ensuring that the processes were

[17] Taylor 1989, 51.
[18] Kerby, A. P. (1991). *Narrative and the Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
[19] Luce-Kapler, R. (2004). Writing with, Through, and Beyond the Text: An Ecology of Language. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[20] Sumara, D. (2002). *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight.* Mahwah, Nuria: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[21] Luce-Kapler, R. (2004). Writing with, Through, and Beyond the Text: An Ecology of Language. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[22] The third circle conversation was interrupted due to noise and other environmental issues in the building and the data from this session as not included in our analysis.

introduced consistently, that introductions and group norms followed similar patterns, and that all participants were given opportunities both to listen and to share. Our research acknowledges that the researcher is not a neutral observer but an active participant. Researchers were present and engaged in the process itself, giving activity instructions, inserting guiding questions, and at times even sharing observations or personal experiences. This participatory, workshop-based methodology has been used and developed by the primary researcher over many years[23] to bring people together in a facilitated event to share personal narratives and co-create knowledge.

The location

We deliberately choose to move the conversations outside of private or specifically religious spaces into common or public space. For the first round of conversations, La Présence joined a local co-working space, which, as members, gave us access to meeting rooms which we could use for our Circle conversations. In the second phase, we partnered with a local community association which provided space in their community centre.

Recruitment

For the first phase of our research we chose to work with only female participants, who were recruited from the area by invitation, word of mouth, and social media. Invitations were sent out through La Presence's listserv and flyers were posted on the project's Facebook page and website in both English and French. In the first phase, flyers were posted in the co-working space and in local community organizations. Women of all faith backgrounds (including none) and diverse contexts were expressly invited to participate.

The process for the circle conversations

We used two different workshop processes. Both began with personal introductions and a brief centering activity. Both involved the sharing of personal narrative. The first process was employed four times and the second process was employed twice.

In the first process, participants chose from a collection of artworks an image that reflected their values or deeply held commitments. They spent some time with the art, looking more deeply and noticing/observing (modelled as an aesthetic practice). Then they were asked to share with the group the reason they chose the image and also what they had noticed when they examined it more closely. Participants were encouraged to respond to one another by sharing their thoughts or reactions. Following this introductory exercise, participants were led in a brainstorming activity. The group was asked to say what ideas came to mind when they thought of the words *spirituality* and *religion*, and their responses were written down in two columns on a board in front of the group. Participants were then introduced to writing personal narrative, in which they were given paper and pen and asked to write about a moment or event in their life that had personal or spiritual significance. They were asked to use thick description in their stories and to include sensory details. The introduction included writing prompts and a reminder to choose a

[23] Huntly, A. (2000). *Naomi's Daughters: Bridging the Generations.* Toronto: United Church Publishing House; Huntly (1998). *Daring to Be United.* Toronto: United Church Publishing House.

particular and specific moment that they were able to recall in some detail and that they were willing to share with the group.

Participants were invited to read their stories out loud to the group. After each story was shared, the other participants were asked to respond with affirmations, connections, or things they noticed in the story that stood out (for example, something they enjoyed or found meaningful). This response process was not a discussion of the stories but a chance for narrators to hear how others in the group had experienced their narrative. The final exercise was a collective process in which the group members identified common themes, images, or parallels between the stories and also differences or contrasts. This led into less structured discussion. Finally, participants were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about the circle conversation itself and what, if anything, they had learned or appreciated about the event.

The second process was designed for use with a group of participants who had already attended one circle conversation and were therefore familiar with the process. This process differed from the first in that it followed a less structured format, encouraged more guided conversation and active listening, and did not employ the image or brainstorming activities. Following a meditative centering activity, participants were led in guided conversation with one another. They were asked to share a high (a gratitude, blessing or moment of joy) and a low (a concern, trouble, or low point) from their previous week. This activity was followed by more descriptive storytelling, either in the form of guided conversation or in the form of a writing exercise such as the one used in the first process. Finally, participants were asked to share something they found meaningful about the circle conversation.

All participants who completed the circle conversations were contacted for an individual, follow-up interview. We conducted 15 individual interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of the participant's personal background, their spiritual or religious life, and their vision for community change and innovation. Participants were therefore asked a mixture of personalized and general questions.

2.2 Participants

In total, 19 women participated in these sessions, ranging in age from 25 to 60 years old. As is characteristic of the neighbourhood, very few of the participants were born in Montreal or Quebec; most identified as having emigrated to Canada or having moved to Quebec from another province. Also reflective of the neighbourhood, the majority of participants were racialized or ethnic minorities. Most participants either lived or worked in the Petit-Bourgogne, or had a personal connection to someone who did. Many were involved in paid or volunteer community work. A large percentage of participants were multilingual; and many were either fluent or proficient in both English and French. Overall, more participants chose to communicate in English rather than French; a few switched back and forth between the two.

Almost half the participants self-identified as having a Muslim background, while the other half were raised in a Christian culture or had an affiliation with various Christian denominations. Some participants had a history of involvement in multiple denominations. A minority of participants were reticent to discuss certain aspects of their religious affiliation or background in front of the group, though they were forthcoming in personal interviews. Levels of religious observance varied greatly between participants; while some were actively involved in a faith or traditional religious community and had a high degree of religious observance, others described having only minimal involvement with a religious community (they occasionally attending a celebration and worshiped or practiced largely in private), and others still described no involvement at all. Several participants who were not religiously observant were active in New Age spiritual communities and described regularly practicing yoga or meditation.

2.3 Non-narrative methods for creating meaningful dialogue and connection

In addition to the story-telling and narrative exercises employed in the circle, two other strategies were used to create space for meaningful dialogue about spirituality and religion. First, we introduced and maintained behavioural norms for the circle to ensure careful listening and respectful interaction. Second, we engaged participants in a brainstorming activity on religion and spirituality. The impact of these two aspects of the process is discussed below.

Establishing norms of behaviour

A general code of conduct, stressing mutual respect and non-judgment, was presented to all participants at the beginning of each session as part of a non-disclosure agreement. These expectations were reinforced at different points throughout the session when needed. For instance, participants were told that they could share as much or as little personal information with the group as they felt comfortable, thereby establishing that all interactions within the group should be consensual. This meant that participants were not pressured to provide additional details or to participate in activities that made them uncomfortable. It was also explained that participants should use non-judgmental, first-person language such as “I feel…, I wondered…, or I noticed...” when responding to the narratives of others.

Several members of La Presence’s team, who helped to organize and recruit participants, also attended the circle conversations as participants. On occasion, theological students and faculty also participated in the conversations. In addition to facilitating with logistics, they contributed to the creation of respectful and open space by modeling the norms of behaviour for all participants. These norms can be characterized as:

1. **Participating actively in each stage of the circle conversation**. When introductions were made or a new activity was introduced, team members sometimes volunteered to speak first, providing an opportunity for others to become comfortable with the conversation and to enter at their own pace.
2. **Affirming all experiences of religion, both good and bad, as valid and legitimate, and encouraging critical perspectives of religion or spirituality to be voiced without reproach**. Should a participant express hesitancy to share their personal opinion of

religion, team members responded with encouragement and reassurance that all perspectives are welcome, and that there would be no judgement of others.

3. **Listening attentively and compassionately to the testimony of others.** Team members modelled active listening. They did not interrupt and allowed other participants to speak for as long as they needed. They listened to others with body language that indicated their engagement and interest. They responded with comments and questions that highlighted the positive qualities of the—such as, bravery, resilience, strength—and extended sympathy and empathy for other's personal challenges.
4. **Expressing emotions, both positive and negative, and embracing vulnerability.** Team members were apt to name their emotions and spoke openly of their current challenges and difficulties in their personal life. They did not hold back their own tears, laughter, surprise, or joy. They repeatedly reaffirmed that it was "ok" for others to do the same and were empathic and reactive to the emotions of others.
5. **Creating hospitable space and encouraging the same.** Team members came early to help set up the room for the event. They also stayed late to help clean up. Throughout the event they refilled tea kettles, offered food and drinks to one another, and showed the participants around the building, if needed. They actively welcomed arriving participants and interacted warmly.

Brainstorming

Another strategy we employed for creating space for a meaningful discussion about religion and spirituality was to use a brainstorming activity. This activity served several purposes: (1) it enabled us to see how participants conceived of these two terms—the exercise elicited multiple and often conflicting interpretations of religion and spirituality; (2) it created an opportunity for participants to help one another express their ideas and work together as a group—for instance, if someone struggled to find the right word, another participant might suggest a term; (3) it illustrated that all views and perspectives of religion and spirituality were tolerated and respected within the space of the circle, including negative or critical appraisals—within the diverse space of the circle, participants were able to say things about religion that might be considered taboo in their own communities. (4) it was an enjoyable activity for participants and helped to create a lighthearted atmosphere—participants laughed and affirmed one another's suggestions, because they were allowed and encouraged to provide as many terms as possible, there was no disagreement between participants and all their ideas were held up as equally valid by the group.

2.4 Data analysis

Data was analyzed using narrative analysis methodology drawn from Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr , and Oliver and Gee's work in discourse analysis. We began with a close reading of the transcripts and written artefacts. In this initial phase, paid attention to the details— the particularity of words, sensory description, images, and metaphors. Mirroring what we had asked participants to do in their narrative creation (thick description), we employed the aesthetic

practice of narrative inquiry that "requires a particular kind of watchfulness."[24] Close reading served help us "notice what is there to be noticed."[25] Such perceiving, says Greene, demands an energy and commitment on the part of the listener, who must move out to meet the work, rather than passively waiting to receive.

In our initial reading, we were interested in questions such as

- How was diversity manifested?
- How did participants respond to the narratives of others?
- How did participants feel about the experience?
- Did participants feel a sense of connection, commonality or mutual understanding, and if so, how did they describe that?

Following Gee (1999, 93), we used discourse analysis to pose critical questions about the narratives, conversations, and interview transcripts. In particular we were interested in how discourses of secularism in Quebec manifested in or influenced the group conversations. Our main interest in this paper is on how the process facilitated interpersonal connection and understanding across diversity. We will discuss other findings from our discourse analysis in future papers.

Part 3: Findings: The creation of Space for Dialogue

As we noted earlier, there was a high degree of ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious diversity among participants. Nevertheless, they were able to sustain deep and meaningful conversations about topics usually considered taboo or relegated to the private realm. Indeed, some participants noted their surprise that such conversations were able to take place and that they were able to establish deep and meaningful encounters with people who were so different from themselves.

In this section, we will discuss some of what we were able to achieve by applying our methodology, using examples from the transcripts to illustrate: (1) how qualities such as empathy, connection, and diversity manifested through the process; (2) how participants created meaning from their own narratives, their experience of the process, and the narratives of others. Before embarking on this discussion, we will first address some of the challenges and difficulties we encountered and how they relate to the broader social context.

3.1 Challenges due to the Quebec context

This unrecognized cultural Christianity and overt secularity creates a taboo about expression of or conversation about religion and spirituality in the public sphere. While there is freedom in the private sphere to join a faith community and practice one's religion, faith communities are largely isolated from one another. There is no consistent place of overlap in the public sphere to

[24] Clandinin, D. J., Pushor, D., & Orr, A. M. (2007), 21.

[25] Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 125.

share across traditions. For those for whom culture and religion is intertwined—as it is for many immigrant women who participated in our research—their *whole* identity is unwelcome in the public sphere, which creates feelings of isolation and, for some, a longing to connect to others across diversity.

The deep suspicion about, and sometimes overt hostility to religion and spirituality created particular challenges for hosting circle conversations. In particular, we experienced challenges building trust with local community organizations, finding physical space for the conversations, and recruitment of participants.

As a community project that depended on the participation of people from the neighbourhood, we needed to form relationships with secular community organizations. We needed to mitigate suggestions or appearance of proselytism; we needed to explain and re-explain our purpose, including what we are and what we are not. Our affiliation with McGill, a secular university, helped because people understood the concept of community-based research. Our identity as a confessional institution, a theological college, was more challenging and sometimes blocked potential partnerships.

Neighborhood demographics—predominantly poor/working class; francophone/anglophone mix; diverse racial/ethnic background; and a variety of religious affiliations—added another layer of challenge because suspicion worked both ways. For example, Muslim women were hesitant to participate because of prior experiences of encountering hostility toward them as visibly religious minorities. We developed a practice of using trusted insiders to help explain who we were and to help us recruit from within particular communities.

We had difficulty securing space to hold our conversations. We did not want to use confessional such as churches, which would have situated us within a particular religious tradition. Most public and community spaces have explicit or implicit policies that prohibit use of space for religious purposes. We were, over time, able to build relationships of sufficient trust with two organizations—a co-working space and a community association—to be able to access space there but this took considerable time and effort. We needed to appeal to those who had a more open/receptive attitude to both religious and cultural diversity and were not always successful in building relationships. Over time, however, we see signs that we are building a deeper relationship. For example, the community association with whom we are currently partnering has recently begun to recognize the value of our work. In a recent conversation the organization observed that we are able to forge deeper connections than they are able to do when they host events to celebrate community diversity. As one person observed, “You have real conversations. We hold events and learn about each other’s food or costumes. We might learn a dance. But in the end, we haven’t learned anything because what do we really know about each other?”

3.2 Making connections - commonality across difference

3.2.1 Empathy

The circle conversation process elicited narrative from participants in both formal - written stories - and informal - guided conversation - ways, both of which had the effect of generating expressions and discussions of empathy in multiple ways. In this section, we highlight three ways in which empathy manifested in the circle conversations: (1) as the understanding and sympathy for the suffering of others; (2) as a form of mutual recognition; (3) as a quality or experience associated with spirituality or religion.

Empathy as understanding the suffering of others

Participants were highly reactive to stories or testimonials about suffering or hardship. For instance, in response to Kajal's story of forced exile, Danielle responded:

> I just want to say how sorry I am for what's going on in your country and you have to be here and yet I am I'm glad you are here with us. (LC#2).

Samara, an observant Muslim, gave a tearful confession of marital problems and her reliance on prayer for comfort and hope. Pearl, a devout Christian, reaffirmed Samara's faith and empathized with her situation:

> They say praying is healing. Praying is healing. I've been down that road and I can tell you, praying is healing. Keep on praying. It's not when you want it, it's when he's ready to do his work. You'll be ok. (LC #5).

Empathy as mutual recognition

Empathy also manifested within the group as a form of mutual recognition. Participants shared stories of mutual recognition, which they interpreted as meaningful or having spiritual significance. For example, Renata shared a story of having a brief, yet deep and meaningful encounter with a stranger who was often begging for money outside of the metro. She describes looking into his eyes as he addressed her personally one day, as

> an endless gift. The time stopped. It was three years ago, but every time I share it, I feel full of the same emotion. It was like, if he told me, I feel that I'm seen. … it was spiritual because it was something deep. (LC#6)

For Renata, this encounter was spiritually significant because it had an otherworldly quality; it was an instance of deep connection that was unlike all previous interactions she had experienced with this stranger.

This story resonated with Cynthia, who interpreted the spiritual significance of the narrative in another way. She said:

> It was deep also because you said good morning to him every day. It wasn't that it was just on a whim, he had recognized that you had seen him day-in day-out, every day, right there, same place, same mantra, and so then, he saw you back on that one day. (LC#6)

It is worth highlighting the differences in their interpretation. For Cynthia, the cumulative effect of Renata's small acts and repeated acts of recognition built up a relationship of empathy between the two strangers. This particular interaction of Renata was significant, in Cynthia's view, not because it differed from those that preceded it but because it was the product of empathy.

During the circle conversations, we also witnessed instances of recognition between participants. For example, Pearl recounted telling a friend about having met Nuria at a previous session: "I said, this one lady in the crowd, I like her spirit. She's like someone who's up, outgoing. [I] could see [her] bouncing all over the place. That's how see her, just free. You understand?" She said, speaking to Nuria, "your spirit, it is so free." Holding her hand to her heart, with tears in her eyes, Nuria responded, " oh that's nice to know. That's really nice! Learning about myself through someone else's lens." (LC#5)

Empathy as spiritual/religious

Participants also discussed the relationship between empathy and spirituality/religion in highly nuanced ways. Nuria, for instance, described an encounter with a person very different from herself, highlighting moment when she recognized herself in their experience.

> So, I met this transwoman, because I never understood… you know it wasn't part of my culture, knowing all this. These people, they most probably they… what people would say is that it's all in the head. But then, I remember her talking and the struggle that she has to prove to others that she's a woman and being accepted. And that was my struggle as a Muslim woman, that I exist as I am, and this is my call. So, this is what I felt. That- oh my god, this is a connection that I would never think of having! And I had more deeper connection with her of understanding than anyone else. And that's when I felt that I need to explore. This is connecting. You know? I said to myself, for me, God has given all kind of things in this world, and it cannot be that it's from the devil or something else. No, this person is exactly like me but in another from. You know, she has a struggle and that's what our connection and that's how I think that the more you connect people that have struggled, the more you connect with God. (LC#6)

This experience challenged her faith as it called her to question the beliefs she was raised with, yet also deepened her sense of connection with God and confirmed her decision to embrace her identity as a woman and a Muslim in a context where religious expressions of femininity in public are highly discouraged and, in some cases, illegal.

3.2.2 Connection

The term "connection" was mentioned frequently by participants in each circle conversations. Like empathy, this notion was discussed in different ways and had multiple meanings. In this section, we will explore how participants understood the relationship between connection and spirituality or religion, and provide examples of how the circle conversations themselves created opportunities for connection.

Connection as a theme associated with spirituality and religion

During the brainstorming activities, both religious and secular participants associated this the concept of connection with both religion and spirituality. Multiple meanings of connectivity were given, such as the notion of either spiritual experience or religious practice as a form of connection to one's inner self, a community, a tradition or a higher power/being/energy.

Connection was also an important theme in many participants' narratives. Sometimes the term was mentioned only briefly and left unexplored, other times, it occupied a central place within their story. Anya, describing her journey from isolated immigrant to successful entrepreneur and business owner, used the term to describe her central purpose in life:

> I feel whatever happened so far in my life. Good and bad. I was the reason I was happy, I was proud, I was energetic, motivated. Made a change, I did all. I did it. I was the reason. I trusted myself, I believe in the process, and I put my effort and then it happened. I think of the dreams of mine came to reality. I think, I learn, I get more connected. I remember I was and I am the reason to connect others. (LC #4)

During the narrative exercise, Nuria shared a story about a religious event in her community. Afterwards she offered an interpretation of her experience, stating:

> That's what spiritually means to me, a connection of people and with all kind of divine connect, togetherness, or non-diviness, if I could use that word. I don't know, but you know, that's humanity, just humanity serving humanity. That's what I fell in that gathering. (LC#4)

Interpersonal connection as a result of the circle conversations

As discussed earlier, one of the principal goals of this project is to create a process through which people of diverse backgrounds could connect with others and exchange their experiences of spirituality, faith, and religion. We therefore designed these circle conversations with the intention of generating connection between participants. Nevertheless, we were struck by how profoundly participants experienced a sense of connection to one another, and how grateful they were for this encounter. For example, Marika said:

> I am so grateful to have been here, in this room, this beautiful room with these beautiful [women]. I just want to thank you for listening and sharing without any judgement. I felt so free and so connected. I feel so connected! (LC#2)

Similarly, Danielle stated:

> Yeah, I am really grateful and appreciate the kind of willingness to show up for this with a kind of 'I'm not sure what I'm getting into' kind of attitude and all of a sudden we were going so quickly and finding things that are so genuine about each of us, so deep. (LC#2)

Pearl explains how she noticed this sense of connection even before the circle conversation started, a sense of connection she differentiates from the secular marketplace.

> When I came in here the first thing I see was a gathering and I'm like see, this is a connection, if you notice, if you go around Montreal, in every community there is gathering. That is a connection, that is where people meet, that's where there's food; that's where everything from the ground, from Mother Earth, everything is just created… because if you just go on St. Catherine [Street] all you see is the stores." (LC#4)

Cynthia goes further in her interpretation, making an explicit connection to a Christian text:

> I was definitely thinking that it's pretty amazing that that can be created in any given space. And I know that when two or three are gathered that kind of, here it is, here God is.[26] But like I've been here [...] I've been here for the lunch last week. I've been here for passing out flyers for programming I'm trying to get people involved. You know, like, in all sorts of different feelings and sensations, and, um, kind of mood states. But it was kind of neat to be like, Oh, and we can transform this space into another this kind of open and sharing in a different kind of moods space. And that's possible, too. (LC#5)

Here, Cynthia makes explicit connection not just to one another but also to the divine. The group's understanding of spirituality, as described above, includes a strong theme of connection. Cynthia's comment, which is received positively by the group, suggests that the group is also experiencing their connection to one another as, in itself, a spiritual experience.

3.2.3 Valuing diversity

We should note that while diversity was recognized as a potential challenge for creating space, La Presence Qi approached diversity as a common good or value. This was implicit in the process itself, which did not push the group to arrive at singular interpretations or conclusions, but rather encouraged each participant to share multiple interpretations and to use the language and terms of their choosing to express themselves. In this section, we discuss some of the ways

[26] Matthew 18:20. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

participants expressed their appreciation for diversity, its relationship to spirituality, and potential for bringing people together.

The desire to meet people of different backgrounds, to be able to have conversations about spirituality and religion with people of different faiths, who would understand their personal experience of religion without imposing or prescribing their own opinions of how they should practice, came up several times in personal interviews and during the circle conversations. This sentiment can be seen in the following quote from Cynthia:

> I think the experience of growing up, you know, in a faith community and having those connections with people who are different from me. But we're all part of this community. Gave me a longing to have that kind of experience across lines of difference, whether it's across lines of religion or culture or sexual identity or orientation. And beyond some kind of surface multiculturalism or interfaith dialogue. But to actually have some kind like community and connection with people and for it to be ok that you're different and that you believe different things, that you're coming from a very different direction or perspective. (LC#6)

The ability to recognize, empathize, and value one another in their difference was held in such high esteem by some participants that it was described as a spiritual quality or activity. For instance, talking about her experience of living in the neighbourhood, Pearl said:

> I see new people are coming in and people who have been here before me, I see the struggles, I see and I try to understand. Because we have mental illness, we have unemployment, we have single-mothers, alcoholic, everything. So, I see so much and spiritually to me is knowledge with understanding. So, if you have the knowledge of what is going on, you have to have the understanding. If you don't understand, take the time out to understand people, then you judge. I see many times I have passed judgment. Just the outer appearance, but when they start speaking to me, I'm like: 'Oh, I'm looking at you this way but that is not the problem.' So, to me spirituality in the community is knowledge with the understanding. So, here I am. I'm before you for the first time, you walk in here, your appearance is [gestures towards the hijab of another participant] and then it's another story. Same thing with each and every one of us. You know? (LC #4)

At one point, several participants discussed how the sharing of one's challenges and difficulties was itself a spiritual activity that transcended cultural boundaries. "This is spirituality to me, by the way," Emily stated, "it's opening up." To this, Nuria responded:

> It's a healing process and it shows that it's beyond culture, and it's the same thing. Because we tend to stay in the same [groups] and think that, okay, it's just a brown thing to be having these kind of issues. And then you meet others, other than brown, and it's like, oh, you too? And you connect on that level, saying it's beyond [culture].

> Pearl —It's human, it's a human thing. (LC#5)

She then narrated her personal experience of discovering commonality across socio-economic and cultural differences.

Finally, we see in the following example, an understanding of diversity as having the potential to bring people together. Renata, describing the image she selected to illustrate her deeply held values, stated

> I took this picture because, at first, I saw [...] a lot of people together, you know, so my value is gathering people. And after that, I said, oh it's the last supper. Yes, because anyway it's so colourful and so different, the people are so different. And that's why it inspire[d] me. (LC#6)

It is interesting to note that Renata's interpretation of the image occurred in successive moments, such that "togetherness," "religion," and "diversity" were revealed in layers.

3.3 Meaning making within the circle

3.3.1 Finding meanings in one's own experiences

After describing their stories, participants sometimes offered spontaneous interpretations of their narratives, filling in important details. For instance, Anya, speaking of her experience and thoughts while she was writing her story, says:

> … and it was like[...] I went deep into myself and it was first my feeling as a new immigrant. Like, I came here alone. no family, no friends. And there are some moments that you feel [...] like I wish there was someone that I can just share this idea with or [...] I could sit right now to share just a cup of coffee. I had those moments much more, of course, in the beginning. (LC #4)

Meaning making was also a dialogical process. Participants used one another's accounts to derive meaning from their own experiences. Sometimes the recognition of commonalities provided new ways for participants to understand their experiences. For example, Danielle, talking about her experience of connecting in a surprising way with a stranger on the street describes her sense of spirituality as being led out of herself.

> Danielle —It's like I was guided by something else, something that is like, bigger than you are. Led by something other than you. So now I am there and I have to reach out and make a connection that I have been afraid of.
>
> Alicia —Does spirituality draw us into the places that we wouldn't otherwise go?

> Danielle —Yes! It is right there in your own story. You say the wind blew you there, right? You didn't want to go but the wind blew you.
>
> Alicia —Yes. I never saw that before. I never thought of it that way. (LC#2)

Other times, it was the recognition of difference that provoked profound reflections. For example, speaking of her story in comparison with those of other group members, Rubia said, "I think mine was more cultural, restriction, boundaries. I think it's more cultural things. Because I didn't grow up in this kind of free environment, like here. Back home there's more restriction." This interpretation prompts Cynthia to consider her own narrative. "Yeah," she says, acknowledging the deep differences between their lived experiences "mine is definitely more to do with the privilege of choices, but the confusion that can come with that, stumbling on yourself that can come with that." (LC#6)

3.3.2 Finding meaning through dialogue in the circle conversations

Participants also found spiritual meaning in their experience of circle conversations. For instance, four participants discussed their experience of the centering activity that took place earlier in the evening and its significance.

> Pearl —That's what I was seeing for the three minutes that we just sat here. And I could actually hear, because the hearing gets clearer and you hear an echo when you speak, and you know, there is… that the spirit is here, and it's listening to us, and it's clean and clear. [...] that is what I was experiencing today. I could hear and I felt.
>
> Emily —I felt […]well, it was different, but I felt us go *woosh* right in. I was like, oh. It was a strong, strong force.
>
> Cynthia —Yeah, I did that thing where I felt my body going back and down. Where I think I often go up and frazzled a lot. And I was like oh, right. I can land here, and I can move forward from here. But that just kind of settling back into myself. But also kind of solid again your feelings.
>
> Nuria —These are weird feelings, huh? Because for the three minute [...] I could say that I slept in the sense that...you know the deep sleep that you go into? I cannot even have that in my house, in my bed. But here, it's like, I didn't see anything, but I saw this … just, it's not peace but it's a void. But it's a nice void. (LC#5)

All four participants affirmed that the activity was meaningful for them, however, they each interpreted its significance differently, in ways that reflected their own religious or spiritual

identity. Whereas, Pearl interpreted her experience of the activity through her Christian faith as the presence of the spirit, Emily and Cynthia used descriptors for their experience—such as "force" and "settling"—that reflected their spiritual-but-not-religious outlook. It is interesting to note that Nuria, a committed Muslim, described her experience in opposing terms to those used by Pearl—she spoke of absence rather than presence. This further demonstrates the extent to which participants were able to come together, share the same experience, discuss it, and still remain fully differentiated from one another.

3.3.3 Finding shared patterns of meaning or commonalities

The group listened actively to the stories, what Greene would describe as going out to meet them, not just passively receiving them. There was evidence of deep respect and valuing, as when Alicia commented:

> I noticed that between and within the stories we were just breathing, and it felt as though we were continuing to listen in the silence. It was like those little silences show that we have a capacity for deep, deep listening. And I think that was a tribute to the power of our stories and I want to honour that because it felt so profound for me. And I really want to honour our stories too. (LC #2)

There was also a sense of recognition or familiarity, which could be interpreted as encountering a higher level of meaning that transcended the differences between individual participants and the particularities of their experiences. Danielle said,

> I really appreciated everybody's sharing because there were little parts in every story that somehow seemed so familiar, you know. Which is interesting, I think. (LC#2)

A number of participants remarked on the potential of the process to produce or generate a diversity of meanings and produce solidarity, including Nuria who said,

> Can we say that the circle could bring [out] a lot of the diverse experiences? You have women, you know? It is so amazing because I didn't think of it that way. Now I see, I …what she just said. It's like, we become sisters without even knowing. So, thank you. (LC#5)

3.4 Developing new ideas of spirituality through the dialogical process

As the group continued to talk about the stories, their own in relation to the stories of others, they continued to refine and develop their ideas about spirituality. This was an emergent process of shared meaning-making through the dialogue. At no point did take the form of a debate or contestation of ideas. Rather, we observed a sense of building up layers of meaning, as participants drew from each other's sense of meaning and supported one another to articulate their developing understandings. As, for example in the following exchange between Nuria and Cynthia:

> Nuria —Yeah, so in the beginning it's still in the process. For me, spirituality and religion had no difference. But more and more, spirituality is understanding a path; and religion is like following to the line. Spirituality is more, you have an understanding of the [direction].
>
> Cynthia —Finding your way.
>
> Nuria —Yes. Yes. I think that this is my understanding. If there are many ways, you know, the expression that all paths lead to Rome, then for me, it's like the same thing.
>
> Cynthia —I like the differentiation between finding your way and following the way. That's a really interesting way to differentiate religion and spirituality. (LC#4)

Nuria, who participated in all six circle conversations, suggested that her interpretations of meaning were changing as a result of participating in these groups. Others descriptions of their own spiritual experiences were leading her to question the worldview she was raised within.

> Nuria—I liked what Anya said last Tuesday. You know, it's like you attract what you want. [...but] that's so hard, like, in my case, to come to accept it. Because it's like, it's preordained, pre-done for you. [...] It seems often, in my household that I grew up with, [there is a reason why everything is the way it is], [it's] because you have sinned. (LC#5)

Nuria admitted that "even getting out of it" was difficult even though she understood that "it is true that God belongs to everybody. Not just one person who said that, okay, if your ankles are showing [you're going to hell]." Through this process of changing perspectives, she found encouragement and support in other circle conversation participants:

> Nuria—[Emily] often says to me, you're evolving. And, oh, it's so hard.
>
> Emily —She says, ah, it's so painful, but I'm like oh you're evolving. You're going to be fine.
>
> Nuria —It's terrible.*laughing* (LC#5)

Part 4: Conclusions, Limitations and Next Steps

Conclusions

Our analysis of the results of our research so far demonstrates the efficacy of the circle conversations to create a space for connection and deep dialogue across difference, including differences of religion, culture, ethnicity and life experience. Within a context of overt hostility to public expression of faith or religion, and within a community of high diversity, we have

succeeded in creating an experience of commonality and mutual understanding, where shared meaning making was evident. We are doing something that may well be unique within this community—that is, our project may create deeper and more mutual encounters than previous attempts to build cross cultural understanding through broader public events. That we are working in both French and English (and with participants for whom neither English nor French is a first language) is a further demonstration that the methodology effectively transcends a high degree of participant diversity.

We have built a base of trust, including credibility in the larger community, as well as with trusted insiders, that will allow us to continue this work. We are starting to see the beginnings of a snowball effect, where others are hearing about the process and are expressing an interest in participating or in supporting our work.

Limitations of the research

While we have able to build connections with those who are already somewhat open to and interested in connecting across diversity. Most of our participants were already interested in this before their participation even if they had not yet found ways to do so. For obvious reasons we are not reaching those who are less open to such dialogue, for example those who may be deeply religious, but lack trust that they will be valued or respected, or those most opposed to people who are most opposed to religion/spirituality from a secular Quebec frame. In fact, this latter is perhaps the hardest are not easy to include. We know who they are but have not yet overcome the reluctance to join.

For this initial phase we have only with women because it has been easier to build trust and maintain the norms of conduct of the group. We did have one male participant who joined a circle conversation for the first two activities (the image exercise and brainstorming sessions). We found the presence of a man moved the conversation more quickly moved to ideological stances and that there was less openness to personal storytelling. It is also worth noting that the male participant did not fully respect the group norm that all interactions between group members should be consensual—he attempted to persuade one participant to sit closer to him, however she refused and indicated she was comfortable with the distance between them.

In the conversations themselves, we found that there was greater space for sharing when we used language of spirituality to talk of personal experience. The limitation of this is that we avoided explicit conversation about particular religious traditions, and their practices or doctrines. Participants themselves sometimes hesitated to name their specific faith tradition or denomination, especially those who were most currently highly involved within a particular confession. Thus, they shared in private interviews what they did not name in the group.

Next steps

We plan to continue regular circle conversations, expanding to include others from a wider range of diversity including Quebecers who describe themselves as secular/atheist. We will also begin to hold some conversations either with men only or in mixed gender groups, adapting the process

as necessary but continuing to hold narrative, personal sharing, and artistic practices as central. We will also be using data from the research conducted so far to develop more insight into how the participants in our project understand, describe and live their religion and spirituality. Finally, we are planning to use the ongoing research to gain more insight into how connection and encounter across the diversity spirituality, faith, and religious expression contribute meaningfully to the health, wellbeing, and sustainability of the wider community in this part of Southwest Montreal.

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