MOMENTS OF BEAUTY: AN INQUIRY INTO AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT

by

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Abstract

Aesthetic engagement occurs in moments of deep connection between self and other than self. It is generated by a human intrinsic orientation towards beauty and it develops over time along with sensory, relational and spiritual capacities. When we allow space for deep relational connection between ourself and our context, we cultivate personal moments of aesthetic engagement. In this thesis I explore the notion of aesthetic engagement and the role it plays in my life and the lives of a select group of study participants.

My research draws on pertinent literature from the work of leading academics and visionary thinkers in the areas of learning, spirituality, and philosophy. Specifically in this thesis, I point to the work of Brent Cameron, David Orrell, Jean Vanier, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Karen Meyer, Michael Schneider, River Meyer, Stephen Buhner, and Tobin Hart, all of whom have inspired my inquiry into aesthetic engagement. In addition, I present research survey results to examine and illustrate my findings on individual experience of aesthetic engagement from a select group of adult study participants.

Aesthetics is an area of philosophical inquiry that is integral to deepening our understanding of the nature of being and the nature of the universe. Aesthetic engagement in the individual takes place in moments of connection and, therefore, understanding between self and other, or self and context. It enhances awareness of who we are and how we are related to the whole. By focusing on personal moments of aesthetic engagement I draw conclusions about their significance to the human condition. My process in this inquiry steps away from mainstream academic conventions, using methods foundational to SelfDesign processes and principles.
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To the members of my family, I express my love and acknowledge the moments of beauty that you have inspired in me.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my daughter Robin and my husband Michael whose love and presence bring moments of beauty and wisdom more sacred and profound than I have means to express.
Chapter 1. Introduction

Notions of beauty have pulled the keen attention of some of the greatest thinkers, poets, scientists and artists through the ages, and as a result, a great deal has been written on the subject of beauty. Historically beauty, as an organizing principle, has been understood through relational concepts such as harmony and symmetry, and contrasted with ugliness, dissonance and imbalance. Like the will of the wisp, beauty has an amorphous aspect that darts just beyond our grasp and leads us further down a mysterious path that sparks interest, excites and, sometimes, provokes. In fact, on-going obsession with beauty has no seeming end, the scope of which is wide ranging. Scientists, mathematicians, poets, spiritual leaders, artists, musicians, and philosophers have all relied upon an orientation toward beauty, or Aesthetics as it came to be known in the Eighteenth Century, to guide them in their work. Human beings are fascinated as they strive to achieve the state of grace that beauty promises.

The aesthetic is accessed through sensory experience, emotional states, imaginative journeys, thoughtful processes, and creative actions. We express and share our aesthetic experience and perception in language, emotion, relational connection, creative gesture and spiritual communion. Beauty, it would seem, is something that touches each one of us at the core of our human nature and is thus a key component of who we are.

Engagement is the way in which we focus and hold in awareness our immediate experience and context. It is, in a sense, a form of physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual communion. When we are engaged, we might say that we are occupied with some object of focus. Yet it is more than just an occupation. Rather, engagement is an immersion at a deep level
of our being. The term aesthetic loosely means that which relates to art or beauty. Therefore, by definition, aesthetic engagement is an immersion at a deep level of our being in that which relates to beauty. I would go further to state that aesthetic engagement occurs when we are fully connected to our context and the resulting experience is perceived as aesthetic, or as a ‘moment of beauty’. Also, I believe that aesthetic engagement can lead to personal spiritual transformation through deepening awareness of one’s connection to the whole.

This brings me back to the concept of beauty. What is beauty and why has it engaged the attention of the greatest thinkers in human history? Perhaps it is because beauty is a universal concept integral to being human. Perhaps it is because beauty has the capacity to transform our experience and sense of self. Perhaps it is simply because it is revealed in profound moments that lead to a sense of well being. I think beauty is more significant than simply a concept relevant to art, a human cultural value or virtue, or a personalized experience based on taste. In my research I explore this significance in the context of my own aesthetic engagement and that of a select group of other adults.

Aesthetic engagement takes place when an individual experiences connection between self and other, or self and context. It is engendered in humans through an intrinsic orientation towards that which is perceived as beautiful and it develops over time along with sensory, relational and spiritual capacity. Through bringing focus to and allowing space for aesthetic engagement, and by honouring those moments of beauty, we make meaning of our lives. Aesthetic engagement deepens our connection to ourselves, others, our environment and the universe.
In this thesis I begin in Chapter 2 by explaining and outlining my process of using the SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy. Chapter 3 is dedicated to my research and contains detailed descriptions of two aesthetic surveys that I released to separate groups of adult study subjects, and a shorter description of a SelfDesign LifeSpiral activity that I hosted in the summer of 2014. All the research in these studies was focused on personal moments of beauty. The two surveys and the LifeSpiral activity documents can be found in the appendices at the end of this thesis. Chapter 4 includes my own personal expression of aesthetic engagement using a process developed by Karen Meyer called Living Inquiry (2006). The Living Inquiry process will be further described at the beginning of Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapter 5, I conclude with reflections on my findings from the surveys and my Living Inquiry process, and touch on future directions for my research.

Aesthetic engagement in human beings has wide implications for learning and education. The personal aesthetic of a human being is influenced by the cultural norms and environment in which that person is nested and develops. As an intrinsic capacity, it emerges through self-direction or self-authoring of one’s life. SelfDesign philosophy is built on a number of foundational principles, a key one of which is the intrinsic motivation of children to direct and author their own learning paths (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). The way in which children experience beauty has significant influence on their emerging sense of self, on their developing capacity to make choices and their ability to act upon motivation. Choice and motivation, directly linked to the optimizing principle of volition in learning, are directed by personal qualities and drives (Maser, 2011), one of which is the aesthetic, or orientation towards beauty. My inquiry into aesthetic engagement in individual cases will form the cornerstone of future research into the
role of aesthetic engagement in learning through SelfDesigning (Cameron, Meyer, 2012; Maser, 2011).

As I began this inquiry I took some time to explore the meaning of the word “aesthetic” to determine how I understand it as a concept and how Aesthetics relates to my inquiry. In order to do this I looked back on the history of Aesthetics from a Western perspective to track how beauty was perceived and explored in the past and how Aesthetics has evolved up to present times.

The Oxford Dictionary definition of Aesthetics is “A set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty” (OED, 2014), and the term ‘aesthetic’ refers to that which is “Concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty” (OED, 2014). The history of Aesthetics has its roots in classical Western philosophical perceptions and understandings of beauty which have evolved through the ages. Classical philosophers understood beauty as a value closely connected to the values of truth and goodness. They examined the world through a focus on pure forms of harmony and order believed to be the foundation upon which the universe was built. Art and artefacts were considered to be representations of those pure forms (Townsend, 2001).

Fast forwarding through cultural and historical shifts in how beauty has been conceived and understood is a rollercoaster ride through human evolutionary consciousness. In the early Middle Ages, for example, art was an enterprise exclusive to the institutions of church and court. Medieval concepts of beauty were built on the classical notions of harmony, proportion, colour, form and symbolic meaning that pertained to the, then current, understanding of theology and mysticism. Objects of art were believed to project their meaning beyond their physical existence and appearance (Townsend, 2001), and gained mythical stature.
During the Renaissance a deepening focus on individual’s personal experiences of beauty was reflected in a shift in consciousness. Feeling and emotional connection to beauty came into vogue and artists became known and appreciated for their individual experience of beauty through artistic expression (Townsend, 2001). Emerging amidst breakthroughs in science and art around the late 17th and early 18th Century Europe, the new phase of consciousness known as modernism emerged, influencing cultural and philosophical thought. With that came a new aesthetic. Sense and the newly coined concept of ‘taste’ formed the basis of aesthetic understanding, experience and appreciation. Beauty, experienced through personal emotions and sensory engagement with nature and art, became the domain of those people considered to have ‘taste’. There was a pervading sense of growth, progress and optimism at this time in the history of Aesthetics (Townsend, 2001).

Industrialization shifted modern aesthetic understanding further through a focus on the philosophical concepts driving contrasting notions of beauty, experience and knowledge. Rationalists vied with empiricists for domination of the argument. Tension between scientific proofs and aesthetic experience as ‘taste’ permeated the debate. Science and art began to drift apart into discrete disciplines. Social and political movement in this period brought a sense of instability and notions of beauty, truth and goodness were transformed along with this destabilization. A diversity of movements in aesthetic understanding and artistic style developed in this period and continued well after the devastation of the Great War, along with the emergence of a new brand of science, psychology. The science of the mind was gaining currency and reductionist notions of form and function in art were showing up in the literature (Townsend, 2001), and were especially mirrored in design and architecture.
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The 20th and 21st Century have brought cultural, political and philosophical shifts too complex to be done justice in this thesis. Suffice it to say that Aesthetics is still evolving, as is human consciousness. At present our understanding of beauty is, in my estimation, teetering on the brink of the next shift of our evolutionary path. Postmodernism has begun to lose its appeal in favour of an Integral worldview in which all phases or levels of consciousness are seen for their positive value (McIntosh, 2007). In this regard, Aesthetics is undergoing a transformation and is likewise effecting a transformation on humanity.

The key focus of this study is to explore aesthetic engagement as a phenomenon and examine its relevance to me and my study subjects. Building upon a long history of inquiry into the nature of beauty, this research will bring a fresh new layer to the body of knowledge we collectively refer to as Aesthetics. Finally, I hope that after reading this thesis, people will be inspired to bring awareness to their own moments of beauty through aesthetic engagement.

**Literature Review**

Aesthetic engagement is an area of academic study that has not been widely explored. It is not readily searchable and, therefore, I have pulled my sources from a range of disciplines including education, psychology, philosophy, spirituality and science. What follows is a brief introduction to a sample of the literature that has inspired my own inquiry into aesthetic engagement.

In order to address my hypothesis and ground my research in SelfDesign principles, I looked primarily to the writings and models developed by Brent Cameron and River Meyer. In their book, *SelfDesign: Unfolding the Infinite Wisdom Within* (2012), Cameron and Meyer...
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systematically outline the theoretical background to support SelfDesign as a new paradigm of education. The SelfDesign Paragon of Learning illustrates the various kinds of learning modalities common to human beings that each involve a level of engagement (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). SelfDesign models are built on the premise that individual children are central to their own development and that each child brings unique being qualities, sensibilities and orientations to the world. When children are supported in self-authoring their growth and learning, they draw on innate genius and capacities to explore, discover, test, question, and select, along with a range of actions and relational gestures to which they have access both by design and through nurturing (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). The aesthetic of the child is just one of those innate aspects of the human makeup that allows a child to be selective in a unique and appropriate manner. As the child grows we can observe tandem growth of the aesthetic to include new layers of what that child perceives as beautiful and worthy of pursuit. Each of the learning modalities of the SelfDesign Paragon of Learning implies a personal buy in from the child, who is guided by her or his own aesthetic orientation. Even rote learning on the Paragon holds potential for aesthetic engagement to occur, perhaps through the rhythmic back and forth of ‘listen and repeat after me’ exercises, or recitation of the catechism in religious devotional prayer.

Another key model developed by Cameron and Meyer, the SelfDesign Mandala, maps out twelve aspects of human learning embedded in the four quadrants of the living spectrum: body, heart, mind and spirit (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). Each point on the SelfDesign Mandala addresses learning opportunities rather than subject areas. For example, Languaging is one of the points on the mandala that encompasses learning through communication, intrapersonal engagement, media and so forth. It is more than Language Arts. At the center of the twelve point
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Mandala is the zero point that holds the space of being present, in full awareness. It is the place from which each human being initiates the learning journey, orienting through various dimensions including space, time, self and other, and in which body, heart, mind and spirit overlap. It is also the point to which we return to find meaning and relevance, and where we discover our own quality of being (Cameron, Meyer, 2012).

It is in that zero point where I feel that aesthetic engagement takes place. In presence, in that space where the body, heart, mind, and spirit conjoin in full awareness, a human being can experience beauty as well as engage with it. When a person fully engages in a moment of beauty, initially as an experience or perception, that person then steps fully into the moment through all four quadrants, becoming both the expression and the experience. These are the moments of beauty I am curious about.

Krishnamurti wrote and lectured extensively on the subject of the search for meaning and consciousness. In his book, *Freedom from the Known* (1969), he discusses with clear and profound simplicity the concept and experience of beauty as being present and free in a state of complete awareness. Particularly in chapter 11, Krishnamurti (1969) explains how having the freedom to look and to listen is the key to beauty and that beauty is only truly achieved when one becomes aware of the fact that the observer and the observed are connected, that they are one and the same.

… to look is one of the most difficult things in life – or to listen – to look and to listen are the same. If your eyes are blinded with worries, you cannot see the beauty of the sunset.

(Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 88)
He also points out that, as a species we have lost our connection to nature and thus separated ourselves to the extent that we no longer consider ourselves to be a part of the natural world. He writes, “Most of us have lost touch with nature … and therefore we are losing touch with a great deal of beauty” (p. 89). He questions, when we look or listen, if are we deeply looking and listening, or just merely taking in the image that words and thinking evoke (Krishnamurti, 1969). He fully understood the reality of living in language and allowing it to deepen the separation between the self and the environment. Krishnamurti (1969) asks, “when we say we see a tree or a flower or a person, do we actually see them? Or do we merely see the image that the word has created?” (p. 89).

Krishnamurti (1969) challenges the reader, or ‘seeker’, to look at something with “all your being” (p. 90). He says that, “in that intensity you will find that there is no observer at all; there is only attention” (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 90), and, “It is only a mind that looks at a tree or the stars or the sparkling waters of a river with complete self-abandonment that knows what beauty is” (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 90).

In some ways the zero point on the SelfDesign Mandala and Krishnamurti’s notion of beauty as the moment of awareness that we are both the observer and the observed could be perceived as similar. Both notions point to a state of full awareness and of holistic experience and expression. However, Krishnamurti (1969) addresses the idea that full awareness is purely an aesthetic experience, and that it is the only way to achieve beauty (p. 90). The SelfDesign Mandala makes no such claim. Rather, it points to the space where each human being finds full awareness of self, the point from which self-authoring a life through personal growth unfolds.
Tobin Hart (2003) explored the inner world of the child in his book, *The Secret Spiritual Lives of Children*. His work centers on spirituality and human potential and in this book he shares the stories of children and examines the meaning behind these stories. His premise is that spirituality is a developmental process (Hart, 2003). He also illustrates how a child’s worldview can be fully built through spiritual experience.

For a child, a worldview does not have to be carefully crafted in logic and language. It can be built from direct spiritual experience and housed in a feeling, an image, or a sense of belonging or truth. (Hart, 2003, p. 9)

My understanding and personal experience of the kinds of phenomena he describes in his book inspired me to consider what is happening in those moments when children (and adults too) have an experience that is ‘other worldly’. These are moments in which the individual is engaged in a way that no other person is engaged, by the very nature of this being a spiritual and deeply personal journey. Some of the research Hart has conducted explores what might be referred to as ‘the paranormal’. As I read his book I began to wonder if it is only a few chosen people who have these experiences or moments of profound connection, and are able to see, hear or feel what others cannot. The experiences that Hart describes seem to extend beyond the state of being fully present in awareness of self. They are moments when the individual appears to have crossed a boundary into a realm that exists in an altered dimension beyond what is considered ‘real’. Yet to the person experiencing them, these moments are very real. I began to question that if these deep spiritual experiences are unique to the individual, what is it that drives or generates this capacity? And this led me to consider other innate capacities with which each child is born, such as the
aesthetic, that develop in uniquely personal directions. Hart (2003) defines what he means by spiritual in the following way:

Spiritual refers to an intimate and direct influence of the divine in our lives. Spiritual moments are direct, personal, and often have the effect, if only for a moment, of waking us up and expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe.” (p. 8)

Hart (2003) points to the essence of the spiritual as “mysterious”, infused with “wonder”, and says that we can come close to our spiritual essence “through service and devotion”, or “oneness with nature” (p. 8). He also says that we “find the spiritual in small everyday moments”, pointing out that, “whether it is recognized or not, the spiritual is always present” (Hart, 2003, p. 8). He goes further to suggest that the spiritual inspires deepening of the experience through a strong emotional response, as follows:

By wonder I mean a constellation of experiences that can involve feelings of awe, connection, joy, insight, and a deep sense of reverence and love. For children (and adults) sometimes these moments open so far and so deep that we find unity and ecstasy. (Hart, 2003, p. 48)

Hart’s work centering around the importance of nurturing the spiritual capacities of children inspired me to further explore the innate capacity of humans to seek out and experience the intangible nature and essence of beauty.

In his CBC Radio Massey Lecture series, Becoming Human, Jean Vanier (1998) illuminated the paradox of being human as the sense of being torn between the drive to belong and the desire to express our individuality and uniqueness (p. 18). He states that we satisfy our
drive to find common ground in the group and to find God alone (p. 18). These two drives, as I see them, are not mutually exclusive. They are two aspects of our human condition that guide us towards growth that ultimately achieve the same end, which is to find our humanity in relationship with self and other. Ultimately, if self and other are one and the same, then both drives lead us along different paths that eventually converge. Vanier (1998) describes this paradox as follows:

So here is the paradox: as humans we are caught between competing drives, the drive to belong, to fit in and be part of something bigger than ourselves, and the drive to let our deepest selves rise up, to walk alone, to refuse the accepted and the comfortable, and this can mean, at least for a time, the acceptance of anguish. It is in the group that we discover what we have in common. It is as individuals that we discover a personal relationship with God. (p. 18)

Perhaps what we have in common - fitting in and being part of something larger than ourselves - is closely connected to our personal relationship with God, which also involves being part of something larger than ourselves. What we have in common is our innate human qualities and capacities, including our capacity to experience and engage with beauty as members of a group and as individuals.

Vanier (1998) writes that the expression of love is a process in which value and beauty is revealed, and that “the inner beauty of each and every human being is at the heart of ... being human” (p. 23). He also shows the significance of our capacity to “give life and receive it from others” as “our fundamental beauty” (Vanier, 1998, p. 23). This is what he calls the “beauty of belonging”, when people are able to open up, bringing forth that which is most beautiful in each
other (Vanier, 1998, p. 40). He uses the example of the conception and birth of a child to parents who, in response, grow in love and openness, and through relational connection satisfy a basic human need for belonging (Vanier, 1998, p. 95). He writes, “Our basic needs are the same as all human beings. We need other people who will call forth what is most beautiful in us, just as we need to call forth what is most beautiful in others” (Vanier, 1998, p. 95).

In section 0.3 of her online course, *A SelfDesigning Path*, River Meyer (2010) discusses the notion of perfection as it relates to peak experiences and asks readers to reflect on their own experience of these moments that might occur suddenly and unexpectedly (Path section 0.3). Meyer (2010) describes these moments of perfection or peak experiences as follows:

Most of us have had what we might call a 'peak moment'. It might occur when we're sitting at our kitchen table with a cup of coffee, and a shaft of light suddenly crosses the table's surface. We are overtaken with emotion in that moment. It might happen as we gaze at the face of our sleeping child, or at a brilliant sunset. It is a moment of perfection, and often a peak experience stirs us on a deep, almost spiritual level. We see the great beauty of our world, and we are suffused with gratitude, with a sense of connection to everything. This sense of true connection returns us to the infant state of presence... we are fully in this moment. (Path section 0.3)

The peak moments that Meyer described might be the essence of the moments of beauty, as I understand them, that people experience and then subsequently attempt to describe in words or recreate through art. The point that Meyer (2010) makes is that the moment brings us to “the infant state of presence” (Path section 0.3), and characterizes it as perfection. As I read through
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this section of the course, I reflected on my experiences of perfection and beauty, and asked myself what meaning I or other people might harvest from them.

Stephen Buhner (2004), an expert in sacred herbal medicine and the intelligence of nature, has written and lectured extensively on these subjects. In his book, *The Secret Teachings of Plants: The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature*, he says that our human senses are developed with and from the world (Buhner, 2004, p. 138) and suggests that trusting the senses is an act of courage (Buhner, 2004, p. 141). He points to the importance of replacing linear thinking with sensing or feeling (Buhner, 2004, p. 142), in order to gain access to the deep wisdom and intelligence of the natural world. His writing is poetic, evocative and infused with symbolic meaning. Like nature, he draws his readers into his world and his story, using language as a vehicle to transmit a deeper understanding of their connection to the living earth. He writes, “Through these channels, the green paws of Nature enter into us, climb over us, search within us, find all our hiding places, burst us open and blind the intellectual eye with hanging tendrils of green” (Buhner, 2004, p. 145-146). In this manner Buhner (2004) illustrates how, through stepping into an associated state with our own nature as human beings we can shed linear thinking and replace it with feeling and sensation. The process Buhner (2014) describes during his *The Living Touch of Wild Earth* lecture delivered at Schumacher College in 2014 is that of reorienting ourselves and becoming attuned with nature, returning back to the state in which we can be open to a deeper soul level connection to our true natures and to other living things (video lecture). Buhner (2014) points out that humans are capable of this level of openness and attunement to self and nature, that we have “deep soul connections all the time” (video lecture). What is lacking is our capacity to identify those experiences and name them. He says
that we are missing the words to describe what we are and how we are connected (Buhner, 2014, video lecture). In addition, he says that the ancient Athenians documented and described moments when the human soul leaves the body and enters into another living being, and at the same time the soul of the other living being leaves its body and enters the human. According to the Athenians, this soul exchange, known as Aesthesis, was followed immediately with a sudden intake of breath, an inspiration (Buhner, 2014, video lecture). Buhner (2014) says, “in this moment we feel the touch of the world upon us and we touch the world in turn” (video lecture).

Buhner (2004, 2014) feels strongly that conventional scientific methods and linear thinking are contributing to the downfall of the earth, nature and the human species (video lecture). I understand that in replacing thinking or cognition with feeling or instinct as our primary mode of knowing, we are able to tap into the wisdom that has been conserved through natural evolutionary processes. It is the wisdom of the heart through which we gain access to our deeper natures, and, in my estimation, we gain access to the beauty surrounding and within us. I am not yet ready to reject science and linear thinking, as I feel they have a role to play in our capacity to understand and use the knowledge we harvest through heart and soul connections. Buhner works with people and plants. He observes the interactions that take place between human and plant and, through observing the results of that interaction, he can make statements about the efficacy of his non-linear methods. However, his approach to accessing the initial knowledge and wisdom is what is most inspiring to me as a researcher, and a great deal of my inquiry into aesthetic engagement has been approached in a similar manner, through heart and soul, through feeling and intuition.
By contrast, some of the authors I have read that inspired my research came at a similar understanding from the opposite approach. Science and math are disciplines that have focussed heavily on the role of Aesthetics in understanding how the universe is structured and how it functions. In fact, science and math are on-going heroic quests for truth and beauty, two concepts traditionally connected to each other. David Orrell (2012) explored this very topic in his recent book, *Truth or Beauty: Science and the Quest for Order*. His work centers on tracing the history of science and how each historical paradigm shift can be matched with a shift in aesthetic orientation. In his book Orrell (2012) shows how science has been guided by Aesthetics and that human beings, in their search for truth, are driven by their orientation to beauty.

Orrell explores territory that some scientists would steer clear to fully avoid. His overall thesis is that the human quest for truth is driven exclusively by Aesthetics (Orrell, 2012). He says that human beings seek beauty and will compromise the truth to accommodate a beautiful formula or theory, and might even interchange the concepts of truth and beauty without being fully aware that they are doing it (Orrell, 2012). The questions and insights that emerged from his work led me to ponder the notion that, if science is guided by Aesthetics and our orientation towards beauty, then how do we determine what beauty is and how do we experience it?

In, *A Beginner’s Guide to Constructing the Universe: The Mathematical Archetypes of Nature, Art, and Science*, Michael Schneider (1995) systematically guides the reader through the numbers 1 - 10 in a practical exploration of the building blocks of the natural world. He illustrates how Art and Science have drawn on the archetypal geometry that is present in the universe, manifest in the smallest particles to the most expansive systems known to man. He calls his book a “voyage from one to ten” and delivers a lively ride through the pure forms of
sacred geometry showing how beauty is present throughout the universe and found within these sacred structures and relationships (Schneider, 1995).

Mathematics as a discipline is built on our understanding of numeric relationships and pure forms. In many regards maths is an art, requiring creative exploration and thinking to resolve problems both practical and theoretical in nature. The more abstract the problem, the deeper one must draw on creativity and the ability to capture and hold the layers of complex patterns in one’s awareness. No wonder, according to Schneider (1995), mathematicians rely on Aesthetics to guide their processes and understandings. Beauty is at the core of our being and it informs how we perceive and think about things. My harvesting from Schneider’s work led to an understanding that in every liminal moment of creative discovery in science, there must be a moment of beauty for the scientist. That moment when a discovery is made, perhaps unanticipated, perhaps fully anticipated, is a true moment of beauty, and I began to wonder what that moment feels like and means to that scientist.

From the extreme perspectives of science and spirituality, the sources that inspired my inquiry were numerous and eclectic. Beauty has a way of working itself into deep thinking that is a part of our human quest for understanding. I have listed the sources that were most relevant and inspirational in my inquiry into aesthetic engagement in the bibliography at the end of this thesis. The few that I have chosen to describe above represent the range of perspectives I have drawn upon to formulate my own understanding and build a case for the significance of my topic, to show how aesthetic engagement is a phenomenon that is innate and relevant to human being.

In the following chapter I elaborate on SelfDesign as a new paradigm based upon pedagogical principles, pointing to specific SelfDesign models used to guide my process in this
inquiry into aesthetic engagement. I then outline the steps I used in the development of my thesis and research method using the SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy.
Chapter 2. Process

SelfDesign & the Wisdom Strategy

SelfDesign can be described as a paradigm distinct from mainstream approaches and beliefs about human development and learning. SelfDesign is a holistic perspective on human potential, in that it is based on and supports the assumption that every human being develops from a place of deep personal wisdom, and that a growing human being can be supported and trusted to author her or his own growth and learning processes on multiple levels (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). The key models developed by Brent Cameron that I have taken into consideration for this thesis are as follows: the SelfDesign Paragon of Learning that highlights eight learning modalities; the twelve point SelfDesign Mandala that highlights the subject areas layered over the four quadrants of body, heart, mind and spirit; and the SelfDesign LifeSpiral of human growth. All these models point to the unique ways in which human beings grow, develop and learn, and they represent a shift in thinking about how these natural processes are viewed. For example, according to mainstream thinking, a person learns by being taught, instructed or filled with knowledge. In SelfDesign it is understood that people learn through a wide range of intrinsic and inherent strategies including curiosity, self-discovery, exploration, experimentation, meaning making, creating a personal connection to and understanding of the content, and building their own knowledge architecture. The SelfDesign Paragon of Learning points to rote learning and direct instruction as two of the many ways that humans learn. Seen from the perspective of SelfDesign, learning is natural, holistic and intrinsically generated. When SelfDesigning is supported in the learning environment, the learning experience and chances of
success and fulfillment are optimized (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). My whole process in this thesis stems from these basic principles and, as a researcher, I have devised a means by which I deepen into my inquiry from a place of curiosity, self-discovery, exploration and personal connection to the content. My process has been influenced and informed by SelfDesign models and, more specifically, using the SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy.

The SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy, founded on the principles of SelfDesign Praxis, is a tool that was developed by Brent Cameron and River Meyer for use as a means of accessing wisdom. In the rest of this chapter, I describe the steps of the Wisdom Strategy and how I used it as a SelfDesigning process throughout my thesis.

**The Wisdom Strategy**

The SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy developed by Brent Cameron and River Meyer is a step-by-step systematic approach to addressing questions, working through problems or resolving conflicts. This strategy involves looking at the relevant perspectives, qualities and frames of an issue to explore and develop a working process for problem solving and discovery. Because of its versatility as an applicable method to explore complex topics and ideas, I employed the SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy at each stage of my inquiry into aesthetic engagement and used it to formulate and narrow my focus. It is, in effect, a foundational method in my research and process and, as such, I feel it is important for the reader to understand it. Here is how it works and why it proved to be instrumental in the process of formulating my thesis and deepening my understanding of aesthetic engagement.
Step One - What am I seeking?

At the beginning of any work involving a problem or study I begin with a focus on the available information and turn my attention to what I am seeking to understand or learn. More specifically, I ask myself what wisdom can be found in addressing the particular problem, challenge or study. In any inquiry, there is potential to discover and expand wisdom. Through following the Wisdom Strategy methodology, I am more likely to formulate relevant questions that will lead to that level of discovery or expansion. Some of the ideas I came up with through journaling included the following initial notes.

- How can wisdom manifest through engagement with the concept of beauty or, through aesthetic engagement?
- Human beings develop, grow and learn through an orientation toward that which is most nurturing. Babies thrive when they are loved, held, spoken to, fed and treated with gentle care. Human beings lean towards that which feels right and good, and towards that which is aesthetically and emotionally satisfying. Selection and choice are factors in building identity, and they are influenced by a child’s (or adult’s) personal aesthetic orientation. What is aesthetically pleasing (right, good, and beautiful) for one child is not necessarily so for another. Each person grows into and according to an aesthetic that is uniquely personal and inherent.
- The aesthetic is not a superficial appreciation of the world as it is experienced through the sensory systems of the body. Rather, it is more deeply accessed as an
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essence of being that touches all aspects and layers of the individual person. It has spiritual implications that separate it from basic sensory experience and expression. Beauty is experienced and expressed through the senses, the emotions, and in relational interactions. Ultimately, however, it engages us at a spiritual level.

- When something is valued its potential for beauty is discovered. A child’s aesthetic is built over time upon the seminal events and relationships that the child fully experiences and comes to value. The child’s aesthetic develops as the child learns through a valuation process.

Some of the guiding questions that were beginning to formulate in my mind and appeared early on in my notes were concerning aesthetics and learning such as the following progression of inquiry:

- Is aesthetics at the root of an individual’s preferences in a learning context?
- Do people make choices about what they pursue and explore based upon aesthetic sensibilities?
- Why do people show a preference for specific subjects and learning modalities?
- Why do children have favourite colours, animals, shapes, stories, songs and subjects in school?
- Is this preference driven by innate aesthetic understanding or engagement?
- Why do some children excel in specific skills or capacities? Is it because there is some underlying quality in the child, the subject, or the activity that is
aesthetically appealing that draws the child’s focus? Are children aesthetically
engaged in learning?

● Is motivation correlated with individual taste, preference, and orientation to
beauty?

● Are some people guided by aesthetics in decision or choice making while others
are not?

This is how my thesis began to form. Through the initial stages of the Wisdom Strategy I
explored the notion of aesthetics as it related to learning, formulating emergent questions to
establish the parameters of the wisdom I was seeking.

**Step Two - What does wisdom mean to me in this context?**

The next step of the SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy includes considering what wisdom
means to the inquirer in the context of the subject area. This question can be addressed through a
variety of reflective and inquiry based processes including brainstorming, reading, conversations,
and expressive practices such as journaling, mind mapping or drawing. It is important to note
that this stage employs an informal and unstructured exploration of wisdom in order to lay the
foundation for a more formal approach to come.

The wisdom I was seeking was connected to vast subject areas including Aesthetics,
philosophy, psychology and learning. I pursued these topics through reading, reflection, taking
notes, drawing mind maps and engaging others in informal discussions on the topics of beauty
and learning. In the end, I turned my focus to classical notions of beauty to find clarity and focus.
In Classical Aesthetics beauty was considered the highest form of being. It existed as a value and was associated with harmony and order. Art was seen as the representation of pure forms upon which beauty rested, and it was the pure form or beauty that inspired artistic expression. I began to consider the idea that, like Aristotle’s notion of poetic imitation, human beings engage in their world and make meaning of it through the aesthetic - we engage aesthetically. And it was then that I began to wonder what aesthetic engagement could be. This question seemed to me to be the closest I could come to establishing a path of inquiry leading to the wisdom I sought in this context.

Furthermore, I was intrigued by the notion that David Orrell (2012) proposes in his book, *Truth or Beauty*, that all scientific inquiry is generated and guided by Aesthetics. Additionally, the model outlined in McIntosh’s (2007) book, *Spiral Dynamics*, speaks to the idea that man’s search for truth and meaning has been partly guided by an aesthetic orientation according to existing and evolving levels of consciousness. These ideas, amongst others compelled me to see the aesthetic as an inherent quality, or, according to Ba Luvmour (2010), a ‘being quality’.

**Step Three - What perspectives are needed?**

The next three steps along the Wisdom Strategy are the main aspects of formalizing and defining the problem, and determining the approach that will be taken to address and resolve it. Step three involves considering the various points of view or perspectives that can be taken into consideration in the given subject, inquiry or problem. At this stage it is helpful to make a list of all the relevant stakeholders before narrowing the list to the essential perspectives that will help
the inquiry move forward. Returning to the key question of my thesis, and with the help of my thesis committee members, I trimmed my initial list of perspectives down, and what remained on that list were my perspective as researcher and those of my survey participants. These perspectives are the ones that allowed me to both narrow my focus and deepen the inquiry into my key question, ‘what is aesthetic engagement’.

**Step Four - What qualities are desired?**

In this step I determine what qualities I value as important, relevant, useful, essential, and desirable to bring to the problem, process or inquiry. I also consider what qualities may be lacking and need to be included. This step was the easiest step in this particular application of the Wisdom Strategy. The overriding quality I was tracking was beauty, followed by clarity. All other qualities would spring from that fountain. I did not belabour my consideration of qualities in this stage of the Wisdom Strategy, and inspired by my Faculty mentor River Meyer, focused on qualities that would bring a lightness to both the process and the subject.

**Step Five - What frames are relevant?**

The framing of a topic is a means of exploring a whole problem or question from different domains. It can also be a challenging part of the Wisdom Strategy process as frames can often be confused with perspectives and vice versa. What is most helpful at this stage is to explore and mark out all the pre-existing conditions, conventions and attitudes connected to the subject, problem or inquiry. It is also helpful to consider what conditions, conventions and attitudes are not present or in existence, that they might be cultivated to enhance the framework
that is already in place. Re-framing as a practice and process can be very helpful to pull in new understanding of the existing structures of the problem or inquiry.

In my thesis process the academic framework that was in place had been established through the SelfDesign Graduate Institute policies and procedures, and the flexibility built into the thesis process provided me with both a challenge and a blessing. The challenge was working without stringent external pressures and the blessing was the freedom to co-create the requirements and set personal precedents. As always, when there is an apparent gap in the natural or expected order of processes, this can create a vacuum. However, the framework came together with the guiding support of my thesis committee through considering how the material could best be presented as a final product. The content of my thesis would be studied and addressed through whatever framework I felt was most aligned with my own style of learning and expression.

Initially the models of SelfDesign (Cameron, Meyer, 2012) have served to provide the structure for my research as the existing frames of reference. They are the context in which I am currently engaged in academic study and the attitudes and conventions of the SelfDesign paradigm (Cameron, Meyer, 2012) can be seen as an overall structure from which my personal methods have emerged.

**Step Six - Developing a process**

Step six is a natural progression that flows out of the previous three steps. Using the points of view, qualities and frames that I determine as relevant and desirable, I develop focusing questions that help me to establish a working process. From these foundational questions I
progressed to the final step of creating a model that guided me in the rest of my thesis. Here are the category headings and key questions that I established to guide me through the thesis process.

**Perspectives:**

- How do I, as a researcher, understand and experience aesthetic engagement?
- How is aesthetic engagement understood and experienced by others?

The perspectives I choose to focus on are those of the researcher and of the study subjects.

**Qualities:**

- What qualities am I striving for in this thesis?
- What qualities does aesthetic engagement inspire in me?
- What qualities does aesthetic engagement inspire in others?

The qualities I strive for are beautiful, clear, positive, self-authored, and grounded.

**Frames:**

- What frames are relevant and worthy of conserving in the research and in the final thesis?
- What specific frames and orientations influence and support aesthetic engagement in me and other people?

The relevant frames that I take into consideration in my research and writing include SelfDesign Praxis, Self (personal frame), research methodology, and SDGI thesis requirements.

**Process:**

- What perspectives, qualities and frames do I wish to conserve or alter as I move deeper into the research?
What methods of inquiry and research would allow me to better understand my own moments of beauty and those of other people?

Holding the three key aspects (perspectives, qualities and frames) in mind, I developed a process for studying, understanding, expressing and documenting my findings on the subject of aesthetic engagement. The SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy has been conserved as a foundational process throughout the research, analysis, and writing. Three methods of inquiry and research that are aligned with the relevant perspectives, qualities and frames have been chosen and used to explore aesthetic engagement in myself and my study subjects. They include Living Inquiry (Meyer, 2006, 2010), two electronically delivered aesthetic surveys (see Appendices A and B), and a SelfDesign LifeSpiral (Cameron, Meyer, 2012) activity (see Appendix C) hosted at the SDGI residency in the summer of 2014. These methods are described and my findings detailed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Step Seven - Create a map or working model

Finally, I draw or map the strategy in a flowchart, mind map or some other creative model that represents the process. Really, there are no limitations on how I can represent any process I have created. This stage often allows me to re-work and fine-tune the qualities, frames and perspectives. The key is to remain open to making changes as I develop my strategy until it feels right. Ultimately this map or model, in whatever form it takes (graphic, text, sculpture and so forth), will be a representation of my focused wisdom strategy.
Here is the representative model I created for my Aesthetic Engagement Wisdom Strategy.

![Aesthetic Engagement Wisdom Strategy model](image)

**Figure 1 - Aesthetic Engagement Wisdom Strategy model**

In the following chapter on Process I outline and describe my research, and analyse my findings based upon two surveys and a LifeSpiral activity that I conducted to gather data on aesthetic engagement from other people.
Chapter 3. Research

What follows is a description of the research projects I designed and implemented for gathering self-reported data on aesthetic engagement from voluntary study participants to support my thesis. I make general comments about the results of each survey and the reflections I gathered from LifeSpiral activity participants. Finally, I focus in greater detail on the data collected from the two surveys to illustrate what I have gleaned through these research projects.

A LifeSpiral Experience

The SelfDesign LifeSpiral is a tool developed by Brent Cameron and River Meyer (2012) as a conceptual and physical timeline of human development and life passages. According to Meyer (2012), it is used for personal exploration and reflection and is experienced as a guided
walking meditation. The spiral itself is logarithmic, formed by a geometrically-progressive number sequence on marker points that represent human maturation from conception to death.

The SelfDesign LifePhases model, based on the LifeSpiral, is a spiraling view of development in the areas of body, heart, mind and spirit as humans journey through the various phases of life (Cameron, Meyer, 2012). The phases are sequenced naturally through progressive sections of the logarithmic spiral as follows: ages 0-5, 5-8, 8-13, 13-21, 21-34, 34-55, 55-89, 89-144. They provide a framework for LifeSpiral activities, which can be customized to the focus of a participating group.

LifeSpiral installations have been built in various locations, including the permanent SelfDesign LifeSpiral at the Jericho Center in Vancouver, Canada. These installations (both permanent and temporary) can be used by individuals and groups to explore personal life phases and experiences. People participating in a LifeSpiral process are invited to step on and off the age marker points as they reflect on their own life and experiences from both dissociated and associated states. Although LifeSpiral sessions are often conducted in groups of varying numbers, they are considered personal reflective processes, can be therapeutic in nature and are led, as such, by qualified guides.

Initially I hoped to build my research through inviting people to participate in a SelfDesign LifeSpiral activity designed specifically around my thesis questions. With this in mind and before my thesis proposal had been approved, I gained permission to design and conduct a LifeSpiral activity entitled ‘Moments of Beauty: A LifeSpiral Experience’ under the guidance of my thesis faculty mentor, River Meyer. I led the session at the SelfDesign Graduate Institute residency at Western Washington University in August of 2014 with 22 participants.
Exactly 50% of these participants opted to share written follow up reflections on their experience.

The follow up discussion and the written reflections were revealing and provided me with some insight into how to deepen my inquiry into aesthetic engagement. One important revelation was that not everyone understood the distinction between aesthetic experience and aesthetic engagement that I held in my own understanding. The importance of choosing the words to communicate this distinction was made clear to me in this process.

Through comparing the follow up reflections from the LifeSpiral activity to the survey responses I noticed a greater level of intimacy and a flowing quality of language in the LifeSpiral reflections. Guiding people through a reflective process seemed to inspire a greater depth of reflective expression of the beauty they were reporting. I suspect that the difference lies in the fact that engaging in a collective workshop and shared experience, along with listening to the experiences of other people in a follow up discussion, led to a very different form of reflective process than that which the survey participants engaged in to answer questions sitting, perhaps alone, at a computer or desk. Additionally, the LifeSpiral invites people to engage in a reflective process that requires stepping into an ‘associated state’ in which the memory of a past event or imagining of a future event is retrieved, re-experienced or imagined in an ‘embodied’ state through guided suggestion.

The LifeSpiral activity took some coordination and required a great deal of extra planning and guidance to use in my research, and I decided, for logistical reasons, not to host a second LifeSpiral activity in the Fall of 2014 as originally planned, nor use the data I had already gathered in this thesis. Nonetheless, I felt it was important to describe the process of this activity.
as it did influence my second survey questions and added a very rich layer to my thesis proposal process. Perhaps this LifeSpiral activity will form a foundation of a new study in the future. The description and basic framework of ‘Moments of Beauty: A LifeSpiral Experience’ can be found at the end of this document in Appendix C.

**Aesthetic Engagement Surveys 1 & 2**

In the spring of 2013 I released a survey on the topic of beauty to the general population of the SelfDesign Learning Community (SDLC). SDLC is an on-line Kindergarten to grade twelve distributed learning (DL) class 1 Independent School in British Columbia, Canada. Learning Consultants in this program are all BC certified teachers who work with families to support their children enrolled in the school as home based learners. This initial survey was designed to collect self-reported data from a handful of survey participants in the SDLC program on their experience of beauty as individuals, in the context of their family, and as compared to a close friend. In this survey I posed six questions, two of which (the questions concerning comparison with a close friend) were optional.

My motivation for releasing this survey was a growing curiosity about how other people experience beauty in their lives, if their experience was similar to the experience of members of their families, and what mode of expression they might choose to represent the notion of beauty. The context for the release of the survey was a directed study in which I was engaged under the mentorship of Mali Burgess. I was at the beginning stages of exploring beauty and personal aesthetic as being relevant to learning and wellness.
Initially, I thought I would extend the survey to the family members of the survey participants who identified themselves, if those family members were willing to participate. In the long run, however, this would have been a more complicated and more extensive research project than I was willing to undertake at the time, and I was satisfied when I attracted a small survey sample of 10 people. At that point I took the survey down and held on to the data for a year before looking at it again.

In the Fall of 2014, as a part of my thesis research, I released a second survey with a series of differently worded questions. This new survey included questions about what beauty is to the survey participants, how their understanding of beauty compares to their family’s understanding, and what their most profound moment of beauty was. I also asked survey participants to identify their age range, and the level of importance that beauty plays in their lives. The last question I asked concerned the role that beauty plays, if any, in their spiritual life.

The second survey inquires into different layers of the question “what is beauty to you” and gathers data (such as age frames) that I felt may reveal some pattern in aesthetic development. The questions were designed to inquire into the way in which people engage in moments of beauty in their lives, and how aesthetic engagement influences them or is linked to deepening self-awareness. My intention was to collect the data for subsequent analysis and interpretation, uncover findings about the conditions under which aesthetic engagement occurs, and discover if aesthetic grounding in the family influences a person as they mature.

I had hoped, when releasing the second survey, to gather data from 15-20 people. When I had eleven responses in the data sheet I felt satisfied with the amount of data, and took the survey down.
The survey questions from 2013 (Survey #1) and 2014 (Survey #2) are included at the end of this document in Appendices A and B respectively.

Methodological Approach

For both surveys I created simple electronic forms in the SelfDesign Google site. I released Survey #1 through a shared electronic conference and, from a population of around 130 people, I received ten responses to this initial survey. For Survey #2, I engaged in face to face conversations with individual people to determine their level of interest in the subject and willingness to participate in my survey. I also offered Survey #2 to those people who had responded to Survey #1 a year and a half earlier to see if they might be interested in exploring the same topic through a different line of questioning. After screening potential study subjects I established agreements with twelve people who expressed a willingness to complete the survey, two of whom had also participated in Survey #1. I released the electronic form to nine people and paper copies of the questions to three people. The total response to Survey #2 was eleven people out of the twelve who had received the survey questions.

My decision to gather the data electronically stemmed from the fact that it all lands neatly in a data sheet making it a lot easier to create a coding system and generate clear graphs and charts. Other reasons for choosing an electronic format included retaining the option to make this survey anonymous and keeping it secure within the domain of the SelfDesign Google systems.

My plan for developing a data coding system was to wait until I had finished collecting survey responses and taken a look at what came in. In this way I have taken an inductive approach in order to remain open to the patterns and details that emerged through the qualitative
self-reported data from study participants, and optimized my chances of making interesting discoveries. Because I relied upon self-reported reflections from individuals and my own personal reflective process through Living Inquiry, the data I collected is subjective. My reading and analysis of the data is likewise subjective, filtered through my own various lenses as an individual and a researcher. The study participants were drawn from a very small population and, as such, fall well outside of what could be considered an objective grouping of people.

**Findings from the surveys**

Before I begin, I wish to state first and foremost that the responses I received from all of the people who participated in both surveys were particularly rich in detail and scope. The survey participants shared their general thoughts and ideas as well as intimate, personal experiences. I was touched and humbled by the wisdom that emerged through the data and I acknowledge that my appreciation and understanding of aesthetic engagement has expanded through the openness and generosity of my survey participants.

To pull meaningful patterns from the survey data I used a chart system for tracking common themes in the responses, looking for perspectives, qualities and frames that participants expressed through the language they used to describe their experience and understandings of beauty - in effect, what beauty means to them and how it manifests in their lives. The headings I selected were formulated using questions from both surveys, and they constitute the frames that I consider most illuminating in the survey results. I also used the chart method to identify unique and anomalous details in the data. The following section is a description of my findings from this data.
Survey #1

At the time I conducted the first survey I had only a broad concept of what I was looking for and, as a result, little idea what kind of responses I would receive to the questions I was asking. I worded the questions in an open manner and provided an expanding text box for participants to type in their answers. What I received back ranged from short lists of words and phrases to longer journal style reflections. I anticipated correctly that people would include both external and internal perspectives in their answers and that they would describe beauty in general terms using body, heart, mind and spirit frames such as physical sensations, feelings, thought processes, and relational connection to the whole. In addition, I anticipated correctly that some people would identify specific emotional and relational qualities that beauty inspired in their experience. What I did not anticipate were some of the descriptions of profound moments of beauty that emerged at points in the survey data. It was these descriptions of moments of beauty that later inspired me to deepen my inquiry into beauty and were foundational to my processing and developing the notion of aesthetic engagement. In this way Survey #1 laid the groundwork for my thesis and helped shape my line of inquiry in Survey #2.

Examples of aesthetic engagement from Survey #1

Here are a sampling of the survey responses that pointed me towards expanding my inquiry in the direction of aesthetic engagement. They are descriptions of communion between self and other than self, moments in which the individual is “seeing through the other’s eyes” or is aware of the other “seeing through his or her eyes”. This empathic connection constitutes, in
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my opinion, a strong argument for aesthetic engagement as a moment of profound relational connection between oneself and one’s context.

“Synchronicity as I move along my path”

“… having a hummingbird hover at my face, looking at me in curiosity”

“Deep connections and intimate moments which can only be captured with the heart”

“… things that reach me at the very center of my core …”

“birth and death of all creatures”

“moments of deep ‘seeing’ of another person, when someone is heard or is hearing someone else on a core, resonant level”

“Moments of deep connection with nature, such as in seeing the miraculous in a grain of sand or feeling how I AM another creature”

“… that trust and deep intimacy involved in spontaneous creation”

"While cross-country skiing alone this winter, I found a birch and maple forest I was passing through so beautiful it almost felt like a mystical experience-- I felt like a part of the forest for just a brief moment."

**Aesthetic appreciation in families**

In general most people responded affirmatively to the question of whether or not their appreciation of beauty matched that of their family. However, the majority of these positive
responses indicated that there were differences in the intensity or quality of any shared aesthetic appreciation within families. Noteworthy were two respondents who reported a sense of full acceptance of their family’s perspective with regard to aesthetic appreciation, and the ability to experience beauty through and because of their family’s experience.

“What my parents find beautiful brings me into the field of beauty (like the domain of love). So it is not the object […] it is the energy of beauty I am drawn to.”

“… anything my family perceives as beautiful I would agree is beautiful too.”

*Beauty connected to places*

One particular response that stood out from the rest centered on the respondent’s experience of beauty connected to places as having a significant level of intensity and power.

“… I sometimes wonder if my sense of connection and appreciation for wild, peaceful places runs on a different level than theirs… I have strong cravings towards being in those places I feel are beautiful … that sometimes cause me to be overcome with emotion …”

The depth with which the survey participants responded and the clear expression of specific moments of beauty influenced the whole direction of my inquiry into the personal aesthetic of individuals. Through reading their reflections I began to sense that many people engage in aesthetic moments in their lives, that these moments are strong, memorable and, therefore, must be significant indicators of something profoundly important in human experience.
Survey #2

By the time I was crafting the second survey I had already formed the initial notion of aesthetic engagement, and, through reading, reflecting, conversing, conducting a LifeSpiral activity (described in the next section) and engaging in Living Inquiry practice, I had begun to further define and document moments of beauty as aesthetic engagement. The questions I developed for the second survey followed along the lines of those I had posed in the first survey with some distinctions. I included guiding suggestions in a lighter font following each question, further clarifying what I was looking for and the terms I was using. All initial questions led up to a key question asking survey participants to describe a specific moment of beauty in their experience. I let go of the optional questions about the concept of beauty of a close friend, included a question about what age these significant moments of beauty occurred and required that survey participants identify their current life phase or age category. Additionally, I asked if their concept of beauty had changed over time and if beauty was in any way connected to their spiritual life. Finally, I made sure to engage in face to face or email conversations on my thesis topic before inviting people to participate in this second survey.

The second survey is far more complex in scope than the first, as I was seeking to gather enough detail that would allow me to layer, compare, correlate, and generally explore the data in creative ways. This survey established the potential for additional paths to follow and explore at a later date, and, as a result, I have collected a rich and detailed body of information that has revealed some surprising insights and patterns. Through compiling the data into categories I teased out the following results.
“What is beautiful to you?”
(in order of prevalence)

#1 with 12 instances the 5 senses

#2 with 10 instances each people
nature & natural processes

#3 with 9 instances art & representation

#4 with 8 instances each processes & events
cognitive and mental processes

#5 with 7 instances each relationships & context
feelings & emotions

#6 with 6 instances each values & qualities
places

#7 with 3 instances language

#8 with 2 instances activities & actions

#9 with 1 instance spirituality

Some of the more interesting details that stood out for me in this collection of data includes a mention of beauty associated with the dimension of time (the aging process), contextual relational events (coincidences) and natural phenomena associated with higher level abstract thinking (quantum physics).

What is beautiful to your family as a whole?
(in order of prevalence)

#1 with 6 instances nature

#2 with 4 instances each art & representations
activities & actions

#3 with 3 instances each processes & events
objects
In the responses to this question, what stood out for me was the fact that the details were comparatively minimal. Also, there was mention of relational activities such as meals and parenting that were not present in the responses to question #1 regarding what is beautiful to the individual. Perhaps the frame of family brings in a new layer - that of a collective context for beauty. Additionally, there was the mention of material objects (cars) and the physical beauty of people (beautiful women), neither of which were present in responses to question #1. In one response, the mention of beauty as connected to a particular season (winter) brought in a temporal dimension again.

**Does your concept of beauty match that of your family?**

Six participants reported ‘in most ways’, four reported ‘in some ways’ and one did not select from the drop down categories offered, providing instead an explanation that I interpreted as ‘not at all’. This indicates that there may be some influence or cultural norm that exists in the majority of these survey participants’ families with regard to aesthetic experience and understanding. Also, in survey #2 the drop down options may have influenced the way participants answered this question compared to the way survey participants responded in their own words to the similar question in survey #1.
Has your concept of Beauty changed over time? If so, how?

Results were split with four participants reporting ‘no’, five reporting ‘yes’ and two reporting both ‘no’ and yes’ in their responses. Of the five that reported ‘yes’, the descriptions of how their concept of beauty changed includes the following generalized details:

- expanded from visual to multisensory
- age 35-45, growth from focus on colour, fabric and nature to include spirit and truth
- age 30+, shifted from no awareness to awareness of beauty in nature and objects
- expanded from physical beauty to people, ideas, intelligence and creativity
- expanded from visual to include auditory (music) and semantic/language (poetry)

The two people who responded with both ‘no’ and yes’ reported that their basic concept of beauty has not changed, rather that it has grown stronger and developed into a broader range within the same conceptual framework over time.

What was your most profound moment of beauty? What age were you at the time it occurred?

The data I gathered from this question was detailed, intimate, and expressed using descriptive and evocative language. In many ways the responses were expressions of beauty in and of themselves. The question seemed to generate a deep level of engagement in the subject and some of the responses were poetic in the way that imagery and figurative language was used. This question was successful in inspiring reflection and expression of the actual moments of beauty, the aesthetic engagements of my study participants.

In general, people reported that their most profound moments of beauty occurred in their youth, or younger days. Age ranges reported were: ‘as a young child’; 4-5; 5; 7-8; 10-11; 16; 17;
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19; 21; and 25. The frames for these experiences included visual, tactile, multisensory, emotional, physical, spatial, spiritual, expressive, values based, and relational. The qualities and perspectives were too many to detail in this thesis. A more detailed analysis of several responses to this question is included below, at the end of this chapter.

*How has your experience of beauty influenced your life?*

All the study participants reported that their experience of earlier significant moments of beauty, what I am interpreting as moments of aesthetic engagement, had a profound effect on their lives. Some of the descriptions are summarized as follows:

- I now take care in what I prepare and produce
- Influenced a decision not to move and change life path
- Deepened my connection to friends
- Inspired engagement with nature
- Led me to follow a spiritual path, journey of self-discovery
- Inspired a craving for beauty and music
- I developed a taste for beauty in nature
- I chose a life and career path as an artist
- Led to activism to protect the beauty of the earth and people
- Deepened my capacity to recognize and experience future aesthetic moments
- Inspired me to pursue ballet
- Inspired me to study art
- Helped as a means to cope with intense emotions during crisis
- Inspired curiosity about creativity and art and the choice to retain that curiosity in my career path and throughout life
- Inspired me to marry and raise a family instead of pursuing a vocation
- Inspired a transformation in world view
- Developed a drive to seek out beauty in life and through art
LifePhases and Significance of Beauty in Everyday Life

Using the SelfDesign LifePhase model, I correlated the age ranges of study participants with their responses to the level of significance that beauty plays in their everyday lives. The levels of significance participants were asked to select from included: Very important; Important; Somewhat important; Neutral; Not important; Not on my radar; and Other. There were three 14-21 year olds, three 35-55 year olds and five 56-89 year olds in my survey population. For the question I asked regarding the level of importance that beauty plays in their everyday lives, two reported that beauty is ‘Somewhat important’, five reported ‘Important’ and four ‘Very important’. I then charted the results to see if age had any bearing on the level of importance of beauty in my survey group and didn’t find anything that led me to notice a pattern. The survey population was too small to make any discoveries of this nature in the data. In the 14-21 year olds, two selected ‘Somewhat important’ and one selected ‘Very important’. In the 34-55 year olds all selected ‘Important’. Finally, in the 56-89 year olds two selected ‘Important’ and three selected ‘Very important’. The data shows that beauty is actually important to all the survey participants in varying degrees. This came as no surprise as all my survey participants in both surveys chose to participate, ostensibly out of interest in the focus on beauty.

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The specific moments of beauty as reported by survey participants in the second survey point directly to aspects of aesthetic engagement as I had originally hypothesized they might. These descriptions reveal far more than I had anticipated, and because of this I have selected a sampling of them to explore in greater depth.
Each quoted description is taken directly from the survey responses. They illustrate several aspects of aesthetic engagement as originally hypothesized before the release of the survey. As personal moments of beauty they are unique in that they constitute seminal moments that had, and continue to have, a lasting, memorable impact on the lives of these individual people. They are likewise not so unique in that they demonstrate some of the patterns I noted in my discussions, through the surveys and during the life spiral event (outlined below) regarding aesthetic engagement as a phenomenon in general terms.

These samples were selected because of the succinct manner in which the survey participants described their moments of beauty, and because they represent moments that took place at different ages - from very young to young adult. They were reported by survey participants who are currently in different LifePhases from each other. Some of the moments took place decades earlier in the survey participants’ lives while others took place within a year or so. The respondents who provided these samples have all agreed to be quoted in this thesis and they will remain anonymous.

As my survey sample was limited to so few people, I was not able to harvest a moment of beauty from my survey participants that took place between the ages of 56-89. The two LifePhases of ages 35-55 and ages 56-89 are not represented in this section of my thesis.

**Hypothesis**

To reiterate my hypothesis, aesthetic engagement is an immersion at a deep level of our being in that which relates to beauty. It occurs when individuals are fully connected to their context. In other words, they have a feeling of being integrated into their immediate physical,
emotional or relational environment, and the resulting experience is perceived as aesthetic, or as a ‘moment of beauty’. Aesthetic engagement is generated by a human intrinsic orientation towards beauty and it develops over time along with sensory, relational and spiritual capacities. When we allow space for deep relational, or even spiritual connection between the self and our context, we cultivate personal moments of aesthetic engagement, enhancing our awareness of who we are and how we are related to the whole. In presence, in that space where the four quadrants of body, heart, mind, and spirit conjoin, a human being can both experience beauty as well as engage with it. When a person fully engages in a moment of beauty, initially as an experience or perception, she or he then steps fully into the moment through all four quadrants, becoming both the expression and the experience. These are the moments of beauty I am curious about, and which my survey participants describe in unique detail.

The moments of beauty I have selected to examine follow. I have ordered them according to the LifePhase ages in which the experiences occurred rather than in the order of the current ages of the survey participants.

**LifePhase 0-8**

*age 5 or 6, maybe younger*

“I can recall a number of "oh that is truly beautiful" moments one of which, as a young child, was seeing, during a rainstorm, the water pattern crisscrossing like braided hair on the roadway as the rain came down a steep hill. It was really interesting and I could not turn away from it. I also was fascinated, as a young child, seeing fields of grain blowing in the wind and the patterns that the tops of the "grass" made - which was soft in
texture and visual texture but could be quite harsh with the wind and a lot of it moving at the same time. I remember touching it to see what it felt like as opposed to what it looked like.”

These two events took place at a very young age, possibly even as young as age 4. They have remained significant in the memory of the individual for over five decades. The key characteristics of these moments are connected to movement, texture and patterns. The person describing these two experiences recalls being interested and fascinated. They are both moments rich in visual and/or tactile sensation and they both held the attention of the viewer to the point that she was transfixed and, therefore, engaged fully in the experience.

age 8

“Oddly enough I think it was in this period, bereft of my family, that I had a powerful, always remembered experience. Of lying in the meadow of wildflowers at the back of the house, bees buzzing, blue skies with floating clouds, threading daisies, holding buttercups under my chin to make sure I liked butter. It was not dank and dark Liverpool. The peacefulness of it, the beauty of it, the scent of the earth under my back, not a sound. So that years later when I encountered Wordsworth, I knew him and understood the aesthetics of the world of poetry. More, an experience that launched me into the natural world and my place in it was established.”
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This event happened at the young age of 8 and has remained significant in the memory of the individual for longer than seven decades. The event is characterized by the normal activity of a young child - making daisy chains, holding a buttercup under the chin, lying down on the ground and noticing the bees buzzing. It is rich in visual, tactile, auditory, and olfactory sensations. Overall, the moment as described speaks to a sense of peacefulness and being alone. There is no hint or suggestion that this was a lonely experience, rather it was personal and private. It also suggests a discovery of strong connection to the natural world and comprehension of rightful place in this context. Finally, this engagement with the natural world seeded the capacity for future understanding of beauty through poetry.

LifePhase 9-13

age 11

“Rain, cold water, wind and paddling all set the stage for this trip to be a big bust until, incrementally, my doubts and misgivings were undone by some bigger force. The sun came out, the mountains dazzled, our canoe bobbed on an ocean that came to define itself in different crystalline shades of aquamarine. Seals bobbed around us. I was impressed and started to relax.

“But my impressions turned to being out and out awestruck when we went ashore on Gambier Island. Eager to explore, I hiked into an old-growth forest - the first I’d ever experienced - where I saw massive fir and cedar trees adorned with timeless beards of moss, and I felt tiny and insignificant though also safe and secure as if among friends. Then I remember coming upon a stream flowing down the rocks and I thought it was the
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most beautiful scene I’d ever gazed upon, and the sound of the flowing water I heard as something absolutely perfect. I felt something vibrate throughout my entire body that I’d never felt before. A sensation of being part of something so extraordinary that there were no words for it, only feelings and the feelings were good. Down at the foreshore, where the water ran out of the forest and into the ocean, where it was irrevocably changed, I grasped an understanding of the ephemeral nature of life itself, something I’d not understood before, but here I could see that it, too, was profound and beautiful.”

This event took place during childhood at age 11, remaining significant in the memory of the individual for over four decades. The person reporting this moment of beauty was, at the time, old enough to draw meaning from the experience stating that he ‘grasped an understanding of the ephemeral nature of life itself.’ The event was characterized by layers of transformation, both in the landscape and in the individual’s emotional connection to that landscape. For example, the landscape transformed from ‘rain, cold water, wind’ to ‘the sun came out, the mountains dazzled’. The person felt the trip would be ‘a bust’ and through engaging with the changes unfolding in the landscape, internal emotional transformation was possible. Although there were other people with him, there is a suggestion of solitude in the moments of discovery and transformation. Additionally, physical actions and the relationship to the environment also transformed from active to passive - at first they were ‘paddling’ and then ‘the canoe bobbed on an ocean’. The emotions that characterized the event were sequential and interconnected in a sense. They included feeling impressed, relaxed, awestruck, tiny, insignificant, safe and secure. There is also strong expression of relationality throughout the moment of beauty and the words
used to describe the connection to the trees in the forest were ‘as if among friends’. In that moment the forest generated a feeling of security with the trees providing the security that comes with friendship. The moment of beauty was strongly visual - ‘most beautiful scene I’d ever gazed upon’ - and auditory - ‘sound of the flowing water’ described as ‘absolutely perfect’. The aesthetic engagement was one of an overall connection to nature, the ‘sensation of being part of something so extraordinary’. Finally, this event was transformational and I sense that this individual, as the water flowing from the forest in the ocean, was likewise ‘irrevocably changed’.

**LifePhase 14-21**

**age 19**

“I was 19 camping on the west coast of Vancouver Island and was struck by how fully aware (I was) of the profound beauty of every aspect of the environment. The visual was strong but there were also other factors such as a feeling of freedom, making connections with new friends, clean air, a lack of stress from technology, a feeling of being alone and solely responsible for myself. The closeness to nature gave everything the feeling of being real. I was fully conscious in every moment and undistracted from being able to absorb the magic of everything that was slowly happening.”

This event took place during young adulthood at age 19 and was a recently experienced moment of beauty. The moment was extended over several days and was characterized mainly by a sense of being ‘fully aware of the profound beauty of every aspect of the environment.’ At a sensory level there was engagement through the visual and tactile (clean air). However there was
a strong emotional, relational and synergistic level of deep engagement channeled through a sense of freedom, a growing connection to the other people present, a lifting of stress, a sense of being alone, a feeling of being ‘solely responsible’ for self, and being ‘fully conscious in every moment’ and ‘undistracted’. The engagement with context was described as a sense of closeness to nature that ‘felt real.’ This description of aesthetic engagement takes place in all four quadrants of body, heart, mind and spirit. Finally, there was a rhythmic aspect to this event that was connected to the dimension of time. The moment unfolded gradually and was described as an absorbing of ‘magic’ that was ‘slowly happening’.

**LifePhase 22-34**

*age 25*

“I was riding a bike in France, on my own. I was about 25 years old. It had been a long day of riding and I was nearing the end... I was riding through the countryside and had just come to a high point in the road. No cars, just me and the countryside. I sat up and rode no-hands and felt fully and completely alive and fulfilled. It was awesome.”

This took place in young adulthood at age 25 and has remained significant in the memory of this individual for longer than two decades. The moment was precipitated by a full day of riding a bike in the French countryside, and took place in a moment in which there were no other people or vehicles in the vicinity. The person describes an event that was characterized by a sense of being alone, ‘alive and fulfilled’. Another interesting feature of this description is that the moment seemed to begin at a ‘high point in the road’ and this speaks to a vantage point, or
perhaps the ability to see the landscape in more expansive terms. There is also active physical engagement just preceding the moment in that it may have taken some effort to arrive at that ‘high point in the road’. This may indicate an aesthetic grounding in the body. There is a suggestion of liberation or perhaps releasing of control when the person describes riding no-hands. No-hands is also a celebratory gesture that cyclists make as they go through the finish line of a race. This moment of beauty was transformational in that it generated an overall feeling of ‘awesome’.

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These five moments of beauty were experiences in which survey participants reported a clear and profound connection to context as well as to the natural world. They are also moments that could be interpreted as transformative or at least striking enough to have ‘held’ or ‘transfixed’ the person in that moment. The feelings that are described are both positive and strong, and they have remained with the people who experienced them over time, in some cases what could be considered a lifetime. In some of the moments there is a clear indication that the experience was initially happening outside of the person and that she or he was observing the beauty that generated an internally experienced aesthetic engagement. In other moments the experience was initiated inside the person and, in a sense, that person embodied the moment. In yet others there is no clear distinction between the person and the contextual components surrounding and contributing to the event. Some of the moments describe a process of discovery or expansion of understanding, while others describe the awareness of beauty itself, without meaning or expanded consciousness attached.
Regardless of the details, the most interesting aspect of receiving descriptions of moments of beauty is the realization that each individual had a moment of beauty and knew how to describe it. They all had a unique story to tell on this subject, and because of this, I take it that they all know how to address or fully answer the question of what is beauty.

In terms of the Wisdom Strategy, all survey participants entered the dialogue from their own personal perspective, brought qualities to the expression, and framed their stories in a personally relevant context. The expressions, by the very nature of this being an invitation to share in words, were somewhat constrained. However their process is one to which I am not privy. I wonder now if the people who filled out my survey sat with the questions. Did they meditate, walk, discuss with other people before writing up their responses? Or did they respond spontaneously, in the moment? This dialogue about aesthetic engagement is not finished. I have continued to correspond with many of the people who honoured me with their wisdom in participating, and our conversation around this subject is rich and deeply fascinating to me.

As a logical extension of the expression of moments of beauty from my survey participants, the next chapter, Expression, is devoted to my own moments of beauty, harvested and polished through the Living Inquiry process (Meyer, 2006).
Chapter 4. Expression

Figure 2 - Lichen

Lichen is a unique life form that results from the symbiotic union and expression of differentiated organisms.

Living Inquiry

Living Inquiry (Meyer, 2006, 2008, 2010) is a practice developed by Karen Meyer in which the present experience of living is documented and refined through a field note expression and polishing process. It is a practice of discovery in which the focus is on the everyday human condition of being in the world (Meyer, 2006, 2008, 2010). It was developed by Karen Meyer and is disseminated through a course she currently teaches called “Living Inquiry”, offered through various institutions from elementary schools to university graduate programs. The value of the practice lies in the very fact that it provides a structure and process through which
individual learners can inquire into their own lived experience and, thus, select their own content. Meyer (2008) describes Living Inquiry as follows:

Living Inquiry encompasses how we experience our worldliness in everyday living and what awareness as a clearing brings before prejudiced eyes—those ready-made interpretations that otherwise happen behind our backs. As well it seeks awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty in daily life. (p. 1)

The focus on “awareness as a clearing” and “awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty” (Meyer, 2008, p. 1) that the practice of Living Inquiry brings appealed especially to me as a researcher in my inquiry into aesthetic engagement. For this reason I chose at the start to engage in a Living Inquiry process, with particular focus on the theme of beauty, but also holding the themes that Meyer suggests as a starting points, those of Place, Language, Time, and Self / Other (Meyer, 2006, 2010).

Throughout the planning, research and writing phases of this inquiry I have engaged in Living Inquiry into my own aesthetic engagement through a combination of writing, art and photography. The Wisdom Strategy Perspectives I held in this process were those of Self and Other. The Qualities I strived for included beauty, still presence, and clarity. These qualities were intended to impart a feeling of completeness without judgement in the relational connection between myself and the other, to find my rightful place, to express through clear language, and to harvest the opportunity that time imparts during moments of beauty. The Frames included daily routines and activities, familiar places, established and new relationships, and a variety of modes of expression including language, visual/graphic, sound, and gesture. Finally, the process
involved remaining open to moments of beauty as they occurred, followed by a primary initial
gesture of expression such as jotting down rough notes, taking photos, collecting artifacts, and
retracing the territory of the event. Then, extending the experience through exploration,
reflection, refinement and discovery, the whole process culminated in a final expression through
writing, art, and photography. What follows are a sampling of the polished Living Inquiry field
notes I have selected to include as my final expression of the moments of beauty I experienced
over a period of eight months. They constitute the artifacts of my own aesthetic engagement.

Living Inquiry Field Notes

The following are seven short pieces of writing and twelve individual images of art or
photographs. These are my Living Inquiry Field notes that I created and refined over the course
of eight months from early June 2014 to late January 2015. They document experiences that I
had in that time frame that gave me pause and inspired me to reflect further on everyday
happenings. They constitute a body of expression reflecting my most attuned moments of beauty
through aesthetic engagement, and are presented in the order in which they took place.

Highway Snake

He came into my view as I walked the hard shoulder of the secondary highway heading
north. Snake was resting in the shade of the cedars, on the pavement about two feet out from the
edge of the road. Pointing east, he would have slid right into the traffic in seconds had he
continued in motion following a relatively straight path. I stopped to observe, and noticed the
interruption traffic. My thoughts turned to danger, future casting to dire scenarios, visualizing a graphically tragic outcome, feeling all the while an urgency to take action.

Projecting my view from the drivers’ perspectives, they would see me but not the snake. They see a middle aged woman stopped on the bike lane looking at the ground three feet beyond her feet, glancing up at the traffic, then returning to watch the pavement. Do they see with me, or through me? Snake is still.

I will not step over the snake lest it move with me and slip under my foot. Instead, I pick up a stick to keep my distance and contain my panicked horror of touching another being so different than me. Touching the tip of the stick to the side of the snake’s head, I gently nudge and, together, Snake and I U-turn back to the verges of thick protective grass. Snake slithers out of sight. I continue North. For a brief second, we share a journey that will span the rest of our combined lives.

**Reflections on Highway Snake**

*As living beings we are connected by shared goals.*

*A thoughtful action can trigger an adequate response.*

*The snake contained a wisdom and instinct that I did not fully trust or appreciate until we touched. It was a vibrational connection through the medium of the stick.*

*The drivers and I might have touched through this same vibrational connection if, through action, we had travelled together.*
Small Bird at Quest

It must have hit the window high up. I arrived on the scene to find the bird crouching stunned on the concrete stairway below the spot where it had obviously made unexpected contact with glass. There was a small spot directly above where it was perched on the ground in shock, about four stories up, marking the place. After sitting vigil for near on half an hour, suddenly the bird flew up about two meters. My heart flew up in joy and was instantly crushed with defeat as the bird hit the window again. The recovery from the second hit took ten minutes, perched in the corner of one of the concrete steps facing the exterior wall of the building. Then the bird flew into the trees growing alongside the stairway and disappeared from my sight. The aspens were rattling, the sound of a string of seashells being shaken. There had been one feather on the bird’s head that was out of place.

I had noticed at several points that the bird moved its head slightly, perhaps watching for danger, responding to some vibration I could not feel. At other times it appeared to sink down, as if about to collapse. When it flew up and hit the window again I moved softly towards the place where it had sat stunned and noticed a wet spot. Not blood. Probably urine. I sat vigil over this bird and breathed in rhythm with its pulsating panting.

Reflections on a Small Bird at Quest

The bird is wise, conserves what is important, knows when it is ready for flight, and learned from the mistake of the second hit to fly the other way. The first hit was simply an accident, the window creating an illusion of expansive space.
I observed my own feelings of concern and, by association, my responsibility to this living creature that had been injured because of something man made. I was aware of my biased opinion of the use of so much glass in modern buildings and my understanding of the devastation this type of construction in cities has on wild bird populations.

I drew some poetic significance from the bird’s attempt to fly free of the vulnerable position he was in. This bird changed his flight path on the second attempt and was successful.

The bird’s recovery rate seemed proportional to the level of injury.

Through deep listening and patience I find trust in the power of living things to heal themselves. Allowing the injured bird to rest, pace itself, and draw on its own hidden reserves and resources, I experience the act of taking no action. I stayed to hold a space of safety and calm.

**Encounter with Owls**

*Thursday Oct 23, 2014 - afternoon*

Skipper paused to look up at the powerline, swaying under the weight of an owl that was watching us with his thick dark velvet saucers, eye sockets like pads on the old floor polisher, holding deeper secrets. A moment of beauty so absorbing and ultimately fleeting.

My thought wheels clicked into gear, cogs connected and began a slow grinding rotation. Chili! Look up! He was rattling about sniffing around the ground. Look up! I pointed. He looked about him, as the owl lifted gracelessly off the wire and dipped down and then up, perching on the wire a little higher up, closer to us. Chili caught the movement and his jaw dropped visibly. Birds tend to hold his attention and this one caused him to freeze on the spot.
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My humanity surfaced, care and concern for the owl beating in my neck. The interface between wild and not wild opened up, a growing chasm as I tugged on Skipper’s leash. I let out my quasi bird call to Chili who responded and continued his zigzag, sideways gait down the road towards the trailhead. Skipper wasn’t about to leave and stood stock still, transfixed by the owl. He resisted as I tugged again, and then finally succumbed to my control.

My heart beat light and rapid as Chili bounded ahead, and Skipper kept stopping and looking back, like he was checking to make sure his owl was still there, that it wasn’t just a dream or some kind of error. And I did too until the owl hopped off the wire and swept over the houses, into the wooded copse beyond, wings fully extended. No camera to capture that free fellow.

About a week later, say, Wednesday Oct 29, 2014 - mid-morning

I had worn my work boots so that Chili and I could go through the trails that, in the summer, had been powder dry, and increasingly overgrown - brown-green tangled brush tucked behind our semi-rural neighbourhood of cul-de-sac residential streets. Now the weather had shifted and the rain had arrived turning our once easy romp through the deer and squirrel paths into a muddy ford across rivulets and ditches of rushing water. We skittered across slick rotting planks and corduroy road beds made of dead branches from the trees that had been downed by frequent storms - all this infrastructure provided by other more intrepid trail blazers. A place where only gumboots belong, I sloshed along behind Chili who lead me, bounding, splashing, leaping over the death ditches, rushing storm sewers, then pausing, turning back to check a scent, mark, chew off a blade of softer grass, conceal a small stick in his mouth. Chewing, swallowing chunks of half rotted alder branches, he would plod behind me, pretending I could
not see what he was up to, Eeyore-like. At a point in the trail near where one of the cul-de-sacs meets it, Chili pushed past me onto the small plank bridge that crosses one of the waterways to sniff at the clumps of crabgrass, salal leaves and bare brambles. I slowed and then paused to give him some time to investigate, as this was his walk after all. He took more than the usual amount of time and I became bored, randomly looking up at a small leaning alder tree just off the path to the right. On the lowest branch no more than a meter and a half above my head, an owl was perched softly watching us. The eyes were dark and still, accentuated by perfect circular patterns of brown feathers. A barred owl. I felt he had found me again and I was quite stunned by how he calmly took us in. I stepped closer and he turned his head to keep my in his sights. I stepped away and his gaze remained still. This time I had my phone with me so I took it out of my pocket slowly and snapped four pictures of the owl in quick succession. Chili was still sniffing and eating grass. I called him and pointed towards the owl. He didn’t understand at first and kept munching the grass. Then I called him over the plank bridge towards me, and as he came to my side he lifted up his head to see the owl take flight deeper into the forest and out of sight. I hooted after him but he didn’t return the call. Trust broken, wrong dialect.

Owls are common in our area. We have relatively dense wooded areas with plenty of swampy watery places, rich with hunting opportunity for any bird of prey. They tend to congregate in the Fall. Three years ago, on the eve of my birthday, when Chili was just a pup, we were serenaded by a parliament of barred owls all around our neighbourhood. Michael said there must have been at least four of them.

Symbolically, owls are messengers of change, connected to mystery, secrets, intuition and the spiritual. As they do not readily reveal themselves in broad daylight I therefore accept
my recent owl encounters as auspicious. Rather than taking them in visually, I absorbed their presence and the still, soft energy of their gaze. I believe there is but one owl that comes to me, the same owl soul greeting my soul in the realm of the spirit. This is aesthetic engagement.

Figure 3 - Owl at plank bridge 1

Figure 4 - Owl at plank bridge 2
Third Sighting, sometime later

This time Chili and I were heading back home up Fairview. Two houses up from the first sighting there was a huge ruckus of squawking agitated crows. This was not an unusual occurrence - in this neighbourhood they rule. Then a flutter of silent feathery brown wings pulled my attention and I saw the owl scramble with haste from the middle branch of the far cedar and light on the bare and exposed branch of the chestnut in the yard where Chili and Michael usually play chase. A brace of ravens moved in to join the action and the owl, now fully outnumbered, shifted, making a run for a stand of giant cedars two blocks towards the beach. The gang of screaming crows and aloof ravens pursued. Even a heron glided over, with slow, indifferent strokes of her wings, to see what was happening. Now sheltered in those higher trees beyond my view, this bold owl’s days of hanging out in broad daylight are over.

Figure 5 - Mob of Birds
Empty Nests

In the fall you can see where they had been concealed all through the nesting and fledging season. Now the leaves have all dropped revealing the empty homes, wedged in the branches and stalks of the bushes, throughout the lower canopy, about six or seven feet above the forest floor. Moss drapes, hanging from the outer layers, growing out of the structures of twigs and mud, fresh and alive, bright green in the damp cold weather. These nests retain a soft and spongy quality, still able to absorb shocks or blows to the reinforced structure of blackened twigs and branches. I can see through the gaps in some nests where recent storms have whipped the moss outer layer, and eroded the mud caulking. Wind and rain slowly washing away that life phase. Others are now moving in to finish the cycle.

Reflections on Empty Nests

When can one say that a nest is truly empty. For as long as they are intact they provide a space where one being or another finds temporary refuge and room to grow. The nests left behind serve a future purpose. Once found, they are inhabited again, if only for a moment.

Figure 6 - Empty Nest
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Leaves

We were well into the fall as most of the leaves had dropped, some never having had the chance to change colour due to the lack of sufficient rain and cold. Some leaves turned a middling brown, curled at the edges and floated to the ground, scraping past dormant branches to join the accumulating drifts of forest mulch. Some dropped, green and wilted, as if their branches had let go by mistake.

I took my glasses off as the light was failing, compromising my ability to perceive depth and contrast. It was in this light that I noticed a glow of striking gold-orange leaves under my feet and on the edges of the path. The colour was beautiful, rich and saturated. It pulsed as my eyes adjusted to the dimming light. I put the glasses back on to pull them into a sharper focus and it was as if they shifted closer to to me. Deep breath in and they pulled closer and paused. Slow breath out and they glowed stronger. I continued along the path, looking for more leaves, wondering at how these particular ones had managed to change, revealing their underlying natures. What tree or bush had produced these wonders? My trail went cold and I turned back to the place I had first noticed them. Impulsively, I collected four leaves, stuffing them in my coat pocket. They were supple, not likely to get crushed or ruined.

Reflections on Leaves

Leaves do not change colour. Rather they reveal their underlying colour with the seasonal changes that arrest the process of photosynthesis. Dying light and cooling temperatures trigger the onset of dormancy. The coating of green chlorophyll is shed and the colour that is inherent in the leaf structure emerges.
What does seasonal shift trigger in me and other living beings. What beauty is revealed in this transition?

Figure 7 - Single Leaf

Figure 8 - Leaf in Motion
Figure 9 - Leaf Process 1

Figure 10 - Leaf Process 2

Figure 11 - Leaf Process 3
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Time

She appeared altered. Time had marked us both with delicate, deliberate, facial lines that radiated with each thought, gesture, and emotion. So curious how the process of aging could inspire such fluid choreography through the folds of our skin. Yet when she let out that characteristic growl of appreciation, the rich and unmistakable resonance softened our creases, stilled the ripples and rolled us back to the old kitchen at Lansdowne. We were not so altered and our days of laughing so hard we cried were still there, under the lines, very close to the surface.

Reflections on Time

Time is significant only through conscious investment of attention and deference. It exists if we think about it. If we allow it, time can change who we think we are.

Stolen Nest

It looked so solid with robust sticks and branches providing structural support for the sodden bowl of mud, moss, woven twigs, cedar leaves and cones. A thick layer of well mulched leaves from the surrounding trees filled the cavity of the nest, forming a heavy decaying lining. So when I went to remove it from its perch in the dormant understory of the forest, I was surprised how frail the whole mess was. The main supporting branches formed a sort of loose inverted tripod, a V formation, stuck right into the body of the nest as if they had been lanced there by warriors aiming for prey and missing their marks. I pulled one of the branches out and discarded it. Then, lifting it up and off the remaining two branches, the nest tore in my hands. I cupped the ripped pieces and tried to mold them back together but the damage was not easily
repaired. I had to hold the nest in both hands to preserve it while I bushwhacked my way back to the foot path with legs, feet, elbows and chest. It was an ugly business and I wished at the time that I had left the nest where it was. Too late.

Without judgement the dogs sat obediently on the trail blinking, watching the whole nasty business and my jerking, reeling ungraceful movements. The booty, now a handful of natural materials, had once been built, by a brace of industrious parents. Abandoned, it had endured at least two months of significant weather, wind gusts and rain. It was not so compromised until I stepped in to dismantle its structural integrity, designed and engineered by small birds.

**Reflections on Stolen Nest**

*What beauty is woven into the deep structures that families design and engineer, and what forces conspire to dismantle that infrastructure?*

![Figure 12 - Stolen Nest](image-url)
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Cantilevered Beach Log with bird & no bird

Figure 13 - Cantilevered Beach Log with bird

Figure 14 - Cantilevered Beach Log, no bird
Chapman Creek, watershed

![Chapman Creek, watershed](image)

**Figure 15 - Chapman Creek, watershed**

The images that I have used to illustrate moments of beauty were all taken by me in quiet moments in nature: on the beach, along forest trails and in local footpaths near my home. The final photo in this series of Living Inquiry field notes is, in addition to being a profound moment of personal integration with natural processes, symbolic of how my research has brought together understandings from my own and other people’s perspective. Water has a fluidity that allows for graceful integration with context and response to energy.

This chapter on Expression brings my thesis to a natural ending. What follows is a concluding chapter in which I tie together the progression of my inquiry and leave you with final thoughts on the nature and value of aesthetic engagement.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

This concludes the initial documentation of my inquiry into aesthetic engagement in which I take the reader through the various stages of my thesis process, beginning with some background on Aesthetics, and an introduction to the foundational ideas upon which my hypothesis is built. Included in the introduction is a section devoted to the wisdom I harvested from other authors and researchers that informed my understanding of the notion of aesthetic engagement. In Chapter two I establish and describe my process for developing a research method that was based in SelfDesign principles and praxis, and touch on the specific aspects of SelfDesign that influenced this process, namely the key models of SelfDesign and the SelfDesign Wisdom Strategy. My research method and findings are outlined in Chapter three, including detailed descriptions of the two aesthetic surveys, a description of the SelfDesign LifeSpiral Activity, and an analysis of sample moments of beauty as described by my survey and LifeSpiral participants. Finally, in Chapter four I share my own personal expression of aesthetic engagement through Living Inquiry, documenting moments of beauty that have led to my own deeper appreciation of the significance of aesthetic engagement in personal growth and understanding. Through my research projects and personal Living Inquiry, I have come to some conclusions about aesthetic engagement and share them in my concluding paragraphs below.

Aesthetic engagement is a phenomenon experienced and reported by every one of the people I surveyed, talked with, and guided through the LifeSpiral activity. When probed, everyone I have questioned and shared my thoughts with can understand the idea that humans have the capacity to deepen into an aesthetic experience to the point of being engaged, transformed or moved in some significant way. These people have shared, through their
reflections and stories, moments of beauty in everyday life, in waves of great hardship and in
surges of extreme joy. What they report is palpable and personally significant. The question
‘what is beautiful’ triggered depth of thought and sparked their imaginations. Some people
responded instantly and others paused to reflect before forming their ideas.

The Living Inquiry field notes in Chapter four constitute my own expression and
documentation of aesthetic engagement over the course of eight months. These moments of
beauty still resonate in my heart and soul, and I find myself returning to the places, the emotional
states, dwelling in the insight shared by other living organisms that entered my consciousness, if
only for a brief moment of unity. The snake, the owl, the glowing leaves, the moss covered
empty nests, the relational and physical contexts - I think about them and the expanded meaning
they bring to my quotidian routines. Almost every day, I pass under that branch of the tree where
the owl perched and again, I become aware of my place in the landscape that had welcomed me
into that moment of beauty so many months ago.

Aesthetic engagement is an immersion in beauty at a deep level of our being. It unfolds in
the resonant connection between self and other, be it with another person, another living
organism, a place, a time, or a process. Beauty is revealed in the moment when we fully accept
that there is no barrier between ourselves and our context, and when we allow space for that
relational connection, we deepen in awareness of who we are and how we are related to the
whole. And in doing so, we gain access to the beauty within our own being. For this is where our
beauty is ultimately generated, through aesthetic orientation and capacity.

This is the beginning of a quest to expand my understanding and appreciation of the
significant role that beauty plays in human experience. How we receive, hold and transmit
beauty has important implications for how we relate to our environment and how we interact with people and other living beings with whom we share this planet. Our understanding of beauty affects our cognitive processes and emotional fields, and, ultimately, it informs us about who we are and, more importantly, who we are becoming.

I will be moving forward from this study, using it as a springboard to launch further exploration into the role of aesthetic engagement in learning, with a focus on transformation of human consciousness through rites of passage. I believe the moments of beauty that touch our hearts and souls, stored in the attics of memory, are waiting to be opened, sifted through, and savoured. They also hold the potential to reveal valuable, personally relevant information about our human capacity to access meaning and purpose through beauty. My research, as an initial gesture of opening to moments of beauty, has shown me the profound significance of aesthetic engagement in my life as well as the lives of my study participants. It has initiated meaningful conversations on the subject of beauty, aesthetic experience and aesthetic engagement amongst the friends and family of the people who participated in the research. My hope is that this subject will continue to hold their attention as it does mine, and that my research will inspire others to open in awareness to their own moments of beauty through aesthetic engagement.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A:
Aesthetic Engagement Survey 1

Survey / Interview Questions
1) What things, people, feelings, ideas and experiences are beautiful to you?

2) What is considered beautiful to your family?

3) Do you feel your family’s appreciation of beauty matches your own or not?

4) Optional question - What things, people, feelings, ideas and experiences are beautiful to your closest friend?

5) Optional question - Do you feel your friend’s appreciation of beauty matches your own or not?

6) If you were to express the idea of beauty through an art form of your choice (eg: draw, paint, sculpt, dance, play, sing, make music, write, film, photograph and so on) what form(s) would you choose?

- Optional - you may add your name and email address if you want me to follow up with you on the subject of personal aesthetics.
Appendix B:
Moments of Beauty: Aesthetic Engagement in Learning Survey 2

Survey / Interview Questions

1) What do you consider to be beautiful? For example, you can include ideas, objects, places, people, feelings, experiences, and so on.

2) What things are considered beautiful in your family as a whole? Your immediate family and/or the people who you consider to be family

3) Do you feel your family’s experience of beauty matches your own or not? Select one of the following options. Please provide an explanation if you choose ‘other’.

   Not at all
   In some ways
   In most ways
   In all ways
   Other:

4) Has your concept of beauty changed over time? If so, when and in what ways? Consider your understanding of beauty when you were younger compared to now.

5) What was your most profound aesthetic experience? What was your age and what was the context for this experience? Aesthetic experiences are those in which you have been conscious of beauty.

6) How significant is beauty in your daily life? Select one of the following options. Please provide an explanation if you choose ‘other’.
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Very important
Important
Somewhat important
Neutral
Not important
Not on my radar
Other:

7) Describe how earlier moments of aesthetic engagement may have influenced you in your life. Some examples might include making choices, career paths, creative pursuits, relationships, learning, spiritual paths and so forth.

8) What life phase are you currently in? Life phase categories are based upon the SelfDesign Life Phase Spiral.

0-8
9-13
14-21
22-34
35-55
56-89
89 >

9) What role, if any, does the experience of beauty play in your spiritual life?
Appendix C:

Moments of Beauty - A LifeSpiral Experience

Introduction

Briefly introduce myself and my research.

Introduce the LifeSpiral:

- General LifePhases < 0-8, 9-13, 14-21, 22-34, 35-55, 56-89, 89 >
- Dissociated state (viewing from a third person perspective)
- Associated state (experiencing from a first person perspective)

* note: the LifeSpiral conducted as a group activity and it is a personal journey

1. Centering in the present

Find your current age on the LifeSpiral and stand near it without stepping onto the spiral. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Close your eyes if you wish to. Focus on your breathing, in and out at your own natural pace.

When you are ready, step onto the LifeSpiral. Consider the meaning of beauty in your life and the ways in which you experience or encounter beauty through your:

- Body (sensations, physicality)
- Heart (feelings, emotions)
- Mind (ideas, thoughts, language)
- Spirit (connection to meaning, religious experience, creative forces)

Consider your experience of beauty as it is related to time (over long periods of time, brief moments, the past and the present), as it is connected to specific places (natural, man made, geographic locations), and as it is grounded in relationships (to self, to other people, to other living creatures).
2. A recent moment of beauty

Think about a significant moment of beauty that you have recently experienced. If this took place more than a year ago, step off the LifeSpiral and move to the age you were at that time and step back onto the LifeSpiral.

Experience that moment of beauty again, as you remember it, holding acceptance of your valuing and experience of this moment.

What emotions and sensations are you feeling, where are you, what is happening within you and what is happening around you?

- What are you hearing, seeing, and sensing with your body?
- What thoughts are arising for you?
- How do you feel about yourself in this moment?

3. A moment of beauty from your past

Think about a significant moment of beauty in a previous life phase, when you were quite a bit younger than you are now. Step off the LifeSpiral and move to the age you experienced that earlier significant moment of beauty. Hold acceptance of your valuing and experience of this moment of beauty as a younger you.

Step onto the LifeSpiral at that age and experience that moment of beauty again, as you remember it.

- What are you seeing, hearing and feeling in your body?
- What emotions and sensations are you feeling?
- What thoughts are arising in your mind?
- Where are you, what is happening within you and what is happening around you?
- How do you feel about yourself in this moment?
4. A shared moment of beauty

Think about a different moment of beauty that you may have shared with a person that you know. Where did this moment take place? What was the relational context for this shared moment of beauty? If you need to, step off the LifeSpiral and move to the age or LifePhase when you experienced this shared moment of beauty and step back onto the spiral at that age.

Experience that shared moment of beauty again. What are you feeling? What qualities are present? What events precipitated this experience? What events followed from this experience? Did this experience change you in any way? Did this experience change your relationship to the other person?

- What are you seeing, hearing and feeling in your body?
- What thoughts are arising for you?
- What emotions are you experiencing?

5. Return to center

When you are ready, return to the point on the LifeSpiral of your current age and step onto the spiral. Look at the three points on the LifeSpiral where you visited moments of beauty today; your most recent moment, your moment from the past, your shared moment. Turn your focus back to the present, bringing the emotion and sensation of beauty with you into your present experience.

We end the LifeSpiral session by stepping off the spiral. When you are ready, step off the spiral.

6. Final sharing in the group

If you wish, take a few minutes to share some aspect of your experience with a person near you on the spiral, maybe the person to your left, in pairs or, a group of three if needed. Extend the invitation to share with the whole group.
Follow up journal activity

Participants are asked to take ten to fifteen minutes to write about their Moments of Beauty LifeSpiral experience.

Journal starter questions might be:

What feelings or qualities were evoked for you in this LifeSpiral experience?

What discoveries did you make in the process of this experience? For example: discoveries about yourself, others, places, the past, the present, and the notion of beauty itself.

In what age or SelfDesign LifePhase did you have your most striking experience of beauty?

Where were you? What was the context for this experience? What was significant for you in this experience?