

# *Emanations from the Dendron Series*

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## **Abstract**

This visual essay weaves together images and text to create a polyphonous telling and offer a glimpse into an artful contemplative practice that is, for me, both holistic and soulful in nature. Here, I, a learner, teacher, and scholar, engage in acts of *wandering* (through wonder(ing) and wa(l)king), *noticing/gazing* (in wonderment), *attending* (as a caring response and also as an act of listening and attunement), *being/becoming/living* (in the present moment), and *trusting* (in artistic and co-creative processes). This peripatetic aesthetic praxis—a way of working on and wa(l)king to my inner life and moving toward wholeness (an ongoing process)—is informed by a larger in-progress and site-specific photographic exploration entitled, *Dendron Series: On Roots, Rhizomes, Barks and Burls*. My hope is that this contribution will serve both as an encounter and a provocation.

**Keywords:** *art, nature, poetry, contemplative practices, photography, mindfulness*

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## **Opening**

*In holistic education the teacher sees.themself] as a learner.Learning does not end with an academic degree but continues through life; the teacher, then, is a lifelong learner.*

(Miller, p. 20, 1993)

*We need whole teachers to teach  
the whole child...*

*The whole teacher. . .realize[s]  
that the journey of being a whole teacher  
never ends.*

(Miller, p. 96, 2010)

## **Suspend what you are doing**

I sit in my studio/study and sip on a second cup of warm green tea while I gaze out the window. From this open space on the second floor, I can see the clear-blue sky above, the rippling waters in the middle ground, rolling hills in the background, and tree branches swaying gently in the foreground.

*The wisdom of nature and its connection to spirit  
is something that we all can engage through  
communing with and working with images of  
nature in the artistic process. Some of my more  
spirit-filled. . .[artwalks] have come as a result of  
encounters with. . .the trees. . .*

*in my own backyard.*  
(Malchiodi, 2002. p. 119)

I can smell subtle traces of the still-thawing earth and woody scents (a nearby neighbour is burning dry leaves, twigs, branches, bark — remnants from last autumn) on this sunny but somewhat cool mid-spring day. These fragrances, warm and heartening, drift towards me on a gentle breeze through the slightly open screen door that leads to the deck and bid me to ruminate on my earlier walk en route to/through /in the woods near my home in northern Ontario, where I have been living since the summer of 2007.

### ***Pause***

*Living artfully...  
might require something  
as simple as pausing.*  
(Moore, 1992/94, p. 287)

Earlier in the day, I remember feeling stuck, like stagnant water, in my writing. I decide to take a break by going on a walk with our family dog. Ironically enough, it was not my intention to engage in a contemplative artwalk at this particular moment in time.

### ***Saunter***

*When you allude to wandering toward  
spiritual lushness,  
I think of sauntering because it allows us to pause  
and, in that pause,  
we are cracked open to grace.*  
(Lyle & Snowber, 2021, p.16)

Nor did I expect to receive a message.



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #1*. Digital photograph.

If I was driving, and not wa(l)king with my dog, I know that I would have missed this gentle reminder.

### ***Linger***

*I imagine soul as kinesis, process, creation,  
interplay...continuous motion [and wa(l)king].*  
(McNiff, 1992, p. 54)

This request is written with an elusive child-like font using chalk — an impermanent medium (as it can be washed away by rain and/or wiped away by foot travellers and cars when they drive over it).



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #2*. Digital photograph.

I remember resting for some time in front of this hand printed road sign. I come to appreciate in the process that this is, in essence, an invitation, and a real gift.

*Instead, consider this as an invitation to  
ponder gratitude  
as the most radical attitude to life.  
It is an attitude that dissolves  
the easy distinction between  
what is called “spiritual”  
and the world of “material” concerns. ...  
Gratitude arises in the in-between space  
where the inner and outer worlds meet  
and touch and encompass each other.  
(Leddy, 2002, p. 4)*

I am provoked.

**SLOW DOWN**

**Look DOWN**

**look(s)LOW DOWN**

**and**

**look DOWN (s)LOW**

**look DOWN (s)LOW**

As I **SLOW DOWN** and **look DOWN (s)LOW**, I notice reflections of trees in little stream-like puddles of water beside the road. I don't know why, but I have never really looked, with an artful attention, at trees as reflected on/in/through the water before. I am absorbed in the moment.



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #3*. Digital photograph.

I continue to **SLOW DOWN** while I **look DOWN (s)LOW**. And **look DOWN (s)LOW** again.

**Linger longer**



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #4*. Digital photograph.

I notice the cast shadows of tree trunks and their branches—they reveal themselves, in all their splendour, through the light.



*In such a world the very rocks have souls;  
flowers and trees have spirit-selves;  
the events of daily life are filled with  
symbols and signs.  
The whole of experience is  
pregnant with portent and meaning,  
and the knower is interwoven with it all.*  
(Palmer, 1983/93, p. 25)



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #5*. Digital photograph.

I muse over trees and their intricacies. I recall that I have always been drawn to trees. Perhaps, it is because when I am in harmony with them, they speak to me about the present, future imaginings and remembering the past (Mantas, 2022).

*Holistic education, then, includes a sense of  
the whole person [body, mind, soul],  
connected to community,  
the earth, and the cosmos.*  
(Miller et al., p.3, 2014)

**look DOWN (s)LOW**



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #5: The Present*.  
Digital photograph.



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #7: Future Imaginings*.  
Digital photograph.



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #8: Remembering the Past*.  
Digital photograph.



As we approach, *SLOW*(ly), the path that leads to the woods, I ponder on the ability of trees to send up suckers (tiny shoots that grow at the bottom/foot of trees) and create burls, for example, as a way of responding to internal and external tensions and stresses.



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #9: HeARTful*.  
Digital photograph.

I wonder also about other reasons I resonate with trees. Maybe it is, in part, because they incite me to (be)hold, in a more nuanced way, experiences and notions of (dis)location, (dis)place(ment), (dis)connection, (be)longing, and home(less)(ness) (Mantas, 2022; see also, Mantas, 2021; Mantas & Roy, 2020).

*Trees provide a rudimentary lesson in  
enchantment:  
We need not cling anxiously  
to our own subjectivity, . . .  
instead we can place trust in the beings around us  
who demonstrate many alternative ways to be. . .*

*A tree tells us what gives it pleasure,  
and it is so good at offering us benefits  
beyond measure  
that we have no reason  
not to surrender ourselves to it. . . .  
Lessons we can learn from a tree are infinite,  
and its pleasures indescribable.  
(Moore, 1996, p. 23)*

***SLOW DOWN***

As well, they prompt me to walk/move more  
sole-fully/soulfully—an approach and perspective  
that is both life-affirming and  
heARTening—through the woods/world.

*The collective task of “reenchanting”  
our whole culture is,  
as I see it, one of the crucial tasks of our time,  
and I should like to offer what I have written  
as one more contribution to a collective . . . vision  
that I perceive is shared with many others.*  
(Gablik, 1991, p. 11)



Kathy Mantas. (2023). *Emanation #10*.  
Digital photograph.

## Opening once again

When I leave the woods that afternoon, I feel enlivened, deeply connected to everything, and I am filled with gratitude for this interruption and encounter (an opening into a deeply connected realm that is at once sensual, sacred, and full of wonder).

*However we define "soul,"  
we know when we encounter it.  
We don't have to ask. We are suffused with it.  
Unless we invite soul into our lived experience,  
we can miss its gifts to us in daily life...  
Here we are reminded to listen closely,  
for the soul often speaks in a whisper,  
easily drowned out in the busyness of daily life.  
(Woodman & Mellick, 2000, p. 282)*

It whispers to me, SLOW DOWN. And, in the process, reminds me to reconsider "what way. . . I behold the world" (O'Donohue, 1997. p. 89).

## SLOW DOWN

### Look DOWN

### look(s)LOW DOWN

and

### look DOWN (s)LOW

### look DOWN (s)LOW

*Perhaps the most "spiritual" thing any of us can do  
is simply to . . . see with the eyes of wholeness,  
and act with integrity and kindness.  
(Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 270)*

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#### Author Bio

**Kathy Mantas** is a scholarist and professor of art education and graduate studies at Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario. She taught in diverse public schools and alternative settings for almost two decades before moving to North Bay to teach at Nipissing University in 2007. Kathy's research interests include: arts education; artful/creative forms of inquiry; co-creative/collaborative and spontaneous artmaking processes; creativity in teaching--learning contexts; creativity and wellness; life-long learning; women's studies; maternal studies; and exploring nature's artistry (roots, rhizomes, barks and burls) through more spontaneous artful contemplative processes.