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Artist Statement

By Shayleigh Sihlis

We are continually touched by events and emotions, including joy, grief, apathy, pride, and heartbreak. Art is an outlet for processing the inevitable waves of life to live, discover, and understand why we are who we are. It taps into isolated experiences to make them communal and new. This can be life-altering for the artist or the witness of art.

At 13-years-old, I latched onto a certain set of words and melody with conviction. “*This is the sound of one voice... one people, one voice*” rang out from my choirmates’ harmonies. The Wailin’ Jennys’ hopeful anthem “One Voice” set me on a personal mission to find harmony and hope, both one-on-one and on the larger stage.

Part 1: Honesty

As an introvert, I struggle with one necessary aspect of growth: including others in my journey. This discourse can be hard, especially when underlying doubt or pain is involved. Though not always without friction – if honest – art holds space, just like a good conversation, seeking to understand. It allows us to be with others, *really* with others, and share the unspeakable. This act of sharing heals emotional and mental wounds, combatting shame once nailed down. It takes courage and pushes a heart closer to its limits of care. But it is worth it.

My participation in *New Blood*, a show about the story of a Blackfoot Chief’s experience in residential school, showed me this immediately. It was developed by a drama and dance instructor’s high school class to respond to the call to learn more and share stories about First Nations peoples, and used mediums including dance, music, spoken poetry, traditional Blackfoot drumming, face painting, and projected art. Indigenous and white students helped to create and perform it, and it has been a powerful tool for creating awareness and conversation since.

Part 2: Connection

Theatre practices collaboration, soapboxing united purpose using many voices. Each individual role is guided by a vision, on and off the stage. This consideration of the whole heats the brewing pot of empathy.

When I was in *The Laramie Project*—a collective creation centred on Laramie, Wyoming in the aftermath of the murder of a young gay man—I witnessed a privileged amount of support for the production in what was expected to be a challenging setting. Our cast bonded by having difficult words to speak, learning more about our craft and ourselves. We had to be a unit fueled by respect and trust for each other because of the polarizing water we were treading, joined in speaking against hate. It was humbling to be involved in. The audience tied the work together by giving us the chance to be brave, strengthened to share by each body in the room willing to listen.

Part 3: Mystery

The mystery of God's presence is a humbling reminder to let go of my own rightness and simply offer what I have. It causes me to marvel at the vastness and intricacy of all creation.

A painting or orchestral suite becomes something bigger than each individual brushstroke or note. When I create, I want to explore and reflect on the wonder of not knowing how. I want to slow down and question. Curiosity is richness that lets an audience, or friend in conversation, engage wholeheartedly.

Part 4: Healing

How can we see the heart of another before exploring our own broken vessel? How can we do any of it alone? Humans can be messy, selfish, and cruel. Still, art is brave to take us on the journey of "what if?", no matter the darkness hidden in disappointment or hurt.

It gives me courage to express feelings before I understand them, to unload the barrels of anger or sadness or fear and discover that I can trust my ocean of instincts. I believe that experiences translated into our own art "language" give opportunity for owning how we see and use them.

Art patiently examines disjointed bones buried in dismissal. It shines rejuvenating light on collective, relational, and personal brokenness. It stays with us in our downfalls and turns ugliness on its head.

Honest art broadens understanding by bridging inner islands to an outer, relational interface. It is a form of love.

My goal as an artist is to create lasting connection and beauty. By telling stories and helping others embody their own, I want to help traumatized people recover. I want to engage in imagination that heals pain. Ultimately, I want to see Jesus' love and redemption on earth, as it is in heaven.