Uses of Provocative Play in the Creative Process

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"When we were children we had toys that would make us weep with pity and anger today. One day, perhaps, we shall see the toys of our whole life, like those of our childhood, once more. … We grow up until a certain age, it seems, and our playthings grow up with us."André Breton (Harrison & Wood, 2002, p. 461).

INTRODUCTION
Imaginary Friends and Monsters: How Play Energizes the Creative Process

Artistic creativity can be taught (Barry, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gude, 2010; Pitri, 2009, Rogers, 1961; Sternberg 2003; Weininger, 1992). It is not a matter of divine inspiration. The Zeus of mount "creativity" does not hurl lightning bolts of inspiration to his subjects willy-nilly. An electrical charge flows within us all and there are conduits to channel this innate creative energy. As is the nature of electricity, so is the nature of the creative process: A positive and negative dialectic, and the conduit for this creative process is, simply put, *play* (Barry, 2008; Carse, 1986; Duncum, 2009; Gude, 2010; Hicks, 2004; Lowenfeld, 1991; McClure, 2011; Piaget, 1962, Ulkuniemi, 2008). Tension must be counter balanced by the malaise of ennui, imagination cannot exist without restrictive boundaries, and balance itself must be interrupted by chaos (Barry, 2008; Carter, 2008; Seo, 2009).

The aforementioned dialetics are not novel concepts, they serve as the foundation for philosophical and theological investigation in the history of all of our cultures. These concepts categorically fall under the umbrella of "Good vs. Evil", which humanity has grappled with since the dawn of time. In his book Beyond Good and Evil", Nietzsche makes this statement, "A man's maturity: that is to have rediscovered the seriousness he possessed as a child at play". Futhermore, the concept of playing serves as a unifier, of sorts, between these dialectic paradigms. Play does not pick sides. Play is a *charismatic mutineer*, and it does not take a lightning strike to recognize that playing can unlock a dimension of consciousness that accesses the richest areas of creativity (Jolande, 1971).

ART EDUCATOR AS CHARISTMATIC MUTINEER:

Promoting a Playful Pedagogy within the Sanctimonious Curriculum

Play is, by its very definition, an act of creativity and complex ingenuity, a way to solve problems. But we must also take the "bad" with the "good". There can be no separation or divorce of these elements that make educators wary and uncomfortable when the boundaries of the *sanctimonious curriculum* are transgressed with playful, provoking investigation.

The sanctimonious curriculum represses anything that appears unjustifiable, disorderly, lazy, or confrontational. The practitioner within the sanctimonious curriculum must be able to rationalize unit plans, maintain order in the classroom, appear busy at all costs, and be able to provide an assessment and written report on any situation that transgresses its boundaries. It is an unforgiving and unholy agenda, begrudgingly adopted by our educational system and forced upon student and teacher alike. Educationalist Nel Noddings attacks the foundation of just such a curriculum and states "it is more important than ever to consider why we are promoting certain goals in schooling and why we continue to neglect education of personal life and for happiness in our occupations" (p. 437). The sanctimonious curriculum represses our joy of teaching and learning, and it rattles our very faith in the educational system. As art teachers, we are at times forced to play both sides of the curriculum coin.

How does one do this? Well, play has the unique ability to play both sides of the coin and permeate the societal boundaries of our comfort zones. Play may very well be a viable loophole within the sanctimonious curriculum, and one we would be wise to explore. All people, old and young, in every culture play. Lynda Barry, author, cartoonist, artist and educator surmises that, "play is to children what creative concentration is to

adults" (image index #11), a theory that aligns nicely with Csikszentmihalyi's theory of *flow* and five stages of the creative process (image index # 2 & #6). Sternberg also mentions using play to "decide for creativity" (Sternberg, 2003). Barry also suggests blurring the boundaries between adult and child lives and devotes considerable effort in exploring the process of creativity and how memory and reflection inform its development in her book What It Is (pp. 23 & 33).

My interest lay in exploring the uncomfortable, squirmy aspects of the creative process, which may evoke negative associations, and how play can be used to explore and navigate the outer reaches of our comfort zones. The creative process does, indeed, squirm. It can be elusive, uncomfortable, jarring, and it sometimes makes us cringe with its boundless clichés and over-the-top, moralistic and self-aggrandizing agenda. It is folly to believe that play is innocent and that artists possess some kind of unfathomable morality that protects and enshrouds their practice. Robert Hughes (1993) writes,

> "We know, in our heart of hearts, that the idea that people are morally ennobled by contact with works of art is a pious fiction...There is just no generalizing about the moral effects of art, because it just doesn't seem to have any. If it did, people who are constantly exposed to it, including all curators and criitcs, would be saints, and we are not."

A similar argument can be made about the supposed virtuosity of playing.

And yet, play seems to keep these aspects of the creative process, the boundless clichés and the cringe worthy aggrandizement, in check. The boundaries of our comfort zones become permeable while engrossed in the process of playing, thus enabling alternative imaginative possibilities and giving physical life to ideas. Dreams come alive, and ideas become physical when manifested by the creative arts (Barry, 2008; Johnson & Lakoff, 1980). Not only do they become physical, but they become active playmates,

capable of participating in a narrative, hence the phrase, "playing with the idea." Barry

asks the question, "Is playing bringing something alive?" and goes further to muse,

"Interaction and reciprocity require at least two parties. You play with something and

something plays with you (image index #20)."

Barry may very well be reiterating Jung, in who states, "The creation of

something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from

inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves." (Jolande, 1971). In

other words, like a moth drawn to light, we are attracted to that which fascinates us, no

matter, or perhaps because of, its danger. In as much, play is not always pleasurable,

often playing can be transgressive, summon monsters, be violent, and even evoke

nightmares (image index #14). This is a very rich area indeed to explore with our

students, if we as teachers of art are brave and have created, with our students, an

environment and context conducive to such explorations.

PRESENTATION/CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE
Play Defined: Cognitive Developmental Benchmarks

The use of play has been described as an intrinsic form of problem solving and

communication by psychologists, educators, artists, and philosophers alike (Vygotsky,

1933; Lowenfeld, 1991; Piaget, 1962; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Carse, 1986; Bruner,

Jolly, & Sylva, 1976). Art education researchers have contributed valuable insights

regarding how we understand play, its relationship to the creative process, and how play

relates to children's cognitive development. A myriad of definitions and theories abound

as to what constitutes as play, from shared expression (Ulkuniemi, 2008) to acts of

transgression (Duncum, 2009). Accordingly, educational attitudes toward the curricular

use and value of play in fostering the creative classroom range from skepticism and rejection, to acceptance and advocacy (Gude, 2010; Hicks, 2004).

Play can thrive in ones pedagogy so long as it is either communally nurtured in the educational setting or covertly skirted under the radar. The playful art teacher, the charismatic mutineer, is either considered a visionary (genius), a loose cannon (renegade), or at worst, incompetent (fool). And yet, the playful teacher must be all of these, and so too their students. If a student or teacher cannot play with these roles and take necessary risks in the art classroom, then where on earth can they? We did not sign up as art teachers to shelter our students under a false shroud of protection.

If we are to consider the act of playing in a Deleuzian (2003) way, then playing can be considered a form of collaborative, and *rhizomatic,* improvisational inquiry. In this way, playing, inventing games, and creating new knowledge can be used to support a more flexible "non-hierarchical and non-foundational form of pedagogy." (Wallin, 2011, p. 5). In other words, one plays to continue playing, a concept articulated by philosopher James Carse (1986). According to Carse "there are at least two kinds of games. … A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play" (p. 3). Artist Robert Rauschemberg has himself stated, "I think I can keep on playing this game indefinitely, and it is a game, everything I do seems to have some of that in it." (Tomkins, 1964, p. 52).

The creative process has the characteristics of being an infinite game, not by choice, because it can be grueling as much as it can be rewarding, but because it is cyclically spiraling in nature (Gude, 2010). As such, Barry also illustrates qualities of

play that provoke the creative process (image index 10 – 20). The art teacher is

commissioned to develop a playful collaborative curriculum, which is no small task.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS:
Forgetting to Remember: A Playful Problem

As mentioned, the creative process is cyclical and spiraling in nature. Imaginative

play, akin to the creative process, often revisits familiar topics and themes, however, both

play and the creative process have the ability to seamlessly cross over into uncharted

territory under the guise of exploring alternate options and scenarios. Sternberg calls this

synthetic thinking (2003), which is, "the ability to think divergently and combine

disparate elements in insightful ways." We know we, as students and teachers, have

entered uncharted territory when we begin to realize that there are multiple outcomes for

any given assignment. Rules, guidelines and parameters become malleable. We discover

loopholes and think to ourselves, "Aha! I have found another solution to this problem."

Play motivates us to exploring this territory because it is a satisfying and rewarding

experience.

Weininger & Daniel state, "Imagination is to children what problem solving is to

adults. (1992). Barry (2008) calls this process "creative concentration" (image index #11)

and equates it to play. Futhermore, Barry details her own personal experiences battling

the demons of doubt, insecurity and false satisfaction, which invariably arise as a

sometime paralyzing, but nevertheless important product of the creative process (p. 123 –

135). She theorizes that the only way to get out of this crippling cycle is to "forget to

remember" and to admit, "I don't know", whereby the cycle of imaginative and playful

inquiry begins anew. This correlates to Csikzentmihalyi's second stage, 'incubation', to

the creative process. Only by loosing the stranglehold we have on a seemingly

overwhelming conundrum can we ever hope to tempt the elusive "Eureka!" moment. Echoing this, Noddings refers to Orwell in restating, "happiness cannot be achieved by aiming at it directly" (p. 425).

In her section on understanding the creative process, Gude states, "It's important for the field of art education to develop goals, specific objectives, and curricula that foster these core characteristics: (1) the ability to play, (2) openness to experience, and (3) an inner locus of evaluation." (2010, p. 36). In a similar vein, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) lists five steps to the creative process: (1) Preparation: where one becomes immersed in problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity, (2) Incubation: where ideas churn below the threshold of consciousness, (3) Insight: The "Aha!" moment when the puzzle starts to fall together, (4) Evaluation: where one decides if their insight is valuable and worth pursing, and (5) Elaboration: where one translates the insight into the final work. (image index #1 - 5).

Rauschemberg summarily states, "Process is more interesting than completing the stuff" (Coulter, 2008). Playing and the creative process are also quite squirmy. They seem indefinable, immeasurable, and therefore, unimportant in the parameters of the sanctimonious curriculum that focuses on assessment and outcome. Where does art education live in the cathedral of the sanctimonious curriculum? In the stained glass windows, or in the light that illuminates them?

THE LANGUAGE OF THE IMAGINATION
Play, Redefined

Lowenfeld stresses that, "play is the child's natural idiom" (Schubach De Domenico,1999) and Piaget also focuses on children's use of language and 'pretend-play' and its role in intellectual and social development and self-teaching. Vygotskian

constructivism (Richardson, 1997), elaborates on the use of play as a tool for communicating ideas socially, as it "reflects a theory of human development that situates an individual within a social context and derives from social interactions within which cultural meanings are shared by a group and eventually internalized by the individual." (Pitri, 2009).

The imagination conjures images to the mind, and these images knit together and form ideas that have the potential of becoming reality (Barry, 2008). Alan Watts defined images in this way, "We seldom realize, for example that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society" (1951). We, as humans, invent complex metaphors loaded with action and imagery to explain abstract concepts such as 'love' and 'faith'. The only way we can begin to understand these complex concepts are by categorically relating them to other more tangible/physical concepts and through our shared experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In other words, one *must* make mountains out of molehills. Simply put, "A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral." (Saint-Exupéry, 1942). We, as educators, are tasked with teaching art, and conversely, assessing and grading the outcomes and products as an experience. Can we categorize "art" by definitions? No, in fact, art like "games", is recognized not within specific categories, but in relation to shared "family resemblances" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Wittgenstein, 1953).

It interests me that *play*, so intensely researched of late (meaning, the past 50 years or so), has been compartmentalized into specific categories pertaining to the child's

cognitive developmental stages. As if this area of rich investigation should be used only as bench marks to measure and assess the progress and potential that children have, as they grow. This way of defining play ultimately fails to recognize the cyclical nature of the creative process, and, furthermore, relegates 'play' to the realm and age of 'childhood', where we, as adults are invariably outsiders looking in. I do not choose to define play within these categorical terms, nor separate a child's playful explorations from what Barry calls 'creative concentration'.

Children do not live in castles of their own invention. It seems redundant to state this, but children are a part of the human race. A child's way of playing may be different than an adult's but that does not make it innocent, or any different than my way of playing versus yours. Children play, and so do adults. We need not be analytical outsiders in this realm, in fact, we as educators must consider joining in. Of course, I realize I am not alone in this sentiment. Einstein calls play the "highest form of research", and closer to home perhaps, Fred Rogers states, "Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."

ZONES OF COMFORT:
How Transgressive Play Empowers Us to Expand Our Horizons

Playing is not always pleasurable. Often it is a response to anxiety, fear, and pain (Barry, 2008; Weida, 2011), or used as a form of escapism or brutal, 'crass' satire (Duncum, 2009; Grace & Tobin, 1998; McClure, 2011). Sometimes, we find that we are not in the mood to play (Barry, p. 23). This is a boredom like death. A boredom that descends upon us like a malady. Barry equates boredom with being turned to stone, and theologian Paul Tillich chillingly states that "Boredom is rage spread thin" (1957). The

fear of being struck paralyzes us, we become depressed, stuck in a rut, and yet, when we are receptive, and able to play, we become veritable lightning rods, and all matter of positive and negative imaginings rain down upon (and within us). We must be willing and able to go to those dark and foreboding clouds in order to draw out the charge.

Management theorist AlasdairWhite defines the comfort zone as, "a behavioural state within which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral condition, using a limited set of behaviours to deliver a steady level of performance, usually without a sense of risk (2009)". Comfort zones are different for different people and encompass the things that we are taught are safe. Ones comfort zone is ideologically shaped by societal, familial, cultural, educational and religious values. Ones comfort zone may be defined emotionally, as well as rationally, because our comfort zones pertain to our individual personality and taste as well as our level of exposure to various experiences throughout life. Our comfort zones also directly relate to our self image in regard to how we see ourselves and what our self-expectations are in relation to how others see us and what their expectations of us are, or what we perceive them to be (image index #21).

Playing gives us the platform, space, and cushion to make the conceptual jumps that expand our comfort zones and spark the creative process. Playing allows us, and our students the headspace to explore previously undiscovered loopholes and make imaginative connections between the images of our memories and experiences.

There is a theory of chaos represented by the Zen Buddhist symbol of a broken circle, 'Enso', that is representative of 'transgressive' types of play and the creative process. "E n so   symbolizes   a   m o m e n t   w h e n
  t h e   mind   is   free   t o   simply   l e t   the   b o d y /spirit

c r e a t e .   T h e   principal   o f   controlling   t h e   b a l a n c e   o f   composition   t h r o u g h   asymmetry   a n d   irregularity is   a n   important   a s p e c t   o f   t h e   J a p a n e s e   aesthetic :   Fukinsei ,   t h e   denial   o f   perfection (Seo, 2009)." When you are playing, you become vividly alive (Barry. 2008) and may at times be filled with hope, and at other times filled with a feeling of dread and obsessive anxiety.

The creative process can unleash these opposites, this denial of perfection; this breaking of the circle, and who are we as art teachers to provoke and incite this? Play is, by its very definition, an act of creativity and complex ingenuity, a way to solve problems. And so, we must also take the "bad" with the "good". A playful pedagogy can, and must, live within the sanctimonious curriculum and may even serve to be the catalyst that ultimately helps transform it from within.

A VIGNETTE:
A. Ignorance, B. Transgression, C. Button Pushing, D. Playful Creativity

Again, I must emphasize that play is not innocent. Play can be dark, predators after all play with their catches. Case in point, I had a photography student once who produced a very strange and uncomfortable book in response to an assignment I gave requiring my students to produce a sequence of photographs with text (ala Duane Michaels). This student, I'll call him Jack, always went above and beyond the requirements of my assignments, and he professed to take photography and its craft very seriously as a creative art form. In this piece, he illustrated (complete with facsimile images of guns, gore, and pills) the story of a homicidal psychopath, who after a killing-spree, ends his own life.

This response to my assignment was both disturbing and trite at the same time. I was shocked, I was provoked, I was concerned; I admit I was even annoyed. It was disturbing to me in that this student had inserted himself in the role of the psychopath, and seemed to, a.) either lack the judgment of knowing what boundaries he was transgressing or, b.) lack the ability to care that other adults and classmates might consider him deranged and either scrutinize him or distance themselves from him, or c.) maybe he was just trying to push my buttons and self-consciously transgressed. Of course, there is option d.) that he may be imitating or even satirizing complicit art and visual culture, but I wasn't sure I could give him that much credit for what I saw in front of me.

The artwork that Jack produced, in a school context, is abhorrent and brings to mind all kinds of tragic events: Columbine, VA Tech, the Batman killing spree in Denver, CO. Was Jack homicidal? Suicidal? Was I going to have to get the school counselor, administration, his parents and police involved? Would he have produced this work in any other context but my photography class? I even thought, I'm embarrassed to admit, "Why me? What have I done to deserve to be in *this* situation? Is he trying to get me fired?" Or was he *trying* to be inflammatory, be shocking and edgy, create a 'persona' and try on an alternative identity. In a nutshell: role-play. This experience forced me to reflect on the boundaries of my own comfort zone as an art educator.

CONCLUSION:
Forgetting to Remember

I am not suggesting that we, as art teachers, should encourage our students to reunite with their 'inner psychopaths'. What I propose is that, we as art teachers must create the mental and physical zones where this type of exploration can take place by

literally letting our students *play out* their ideas and fantasies. Our role as art teachers is not merely to teach students about art, but to help them understand, as Lynda Barry puts it, "WHAT IT IS", the *feelings* and intuitions we have that drive us. We are not present as teachers to chaperone this experience, but participate in it as well along with our students, which certainly is an idea that makes some people nervous.

Having a collaboratively open classroom such as this is challenging, the social dynamics of your students can seem to drive the bus. Some boundaries must be established and kept, however, I firmly believe that expanding one's comfort zone to include the unfamiliar, the strange, the new, and the challenging is a crucial element of creating an atmosphere of trust and respect. A classroom where a little chaos, a little "incubation", playing, yes, this includes high school students, is to be supported and encouraged. A class where failure is a springboard, and a class where it is good to forget and let go (Barry, 2008, pp. 123 – 135).

Play can be provocative. Play is not innocent just as art is not moral. It can be transgressive and squirmy. Yet, play expands our comfort zones by enabling us to think divergently, thus jumpstarting the creative process. Play need not be categorically defined, nor relegated in psychological or educational terms to the cognitive development of children. No. Play, as the charismatic mutineer, can live within the sanctimonious curriculum, however it may not be understood or valued. We, as art educators, must realize that play is just as important for us as our students, no matter the grade level or ability. In today's high stakes accountability environment, it seems that we have forgotten to remember what core values and aims education must have.
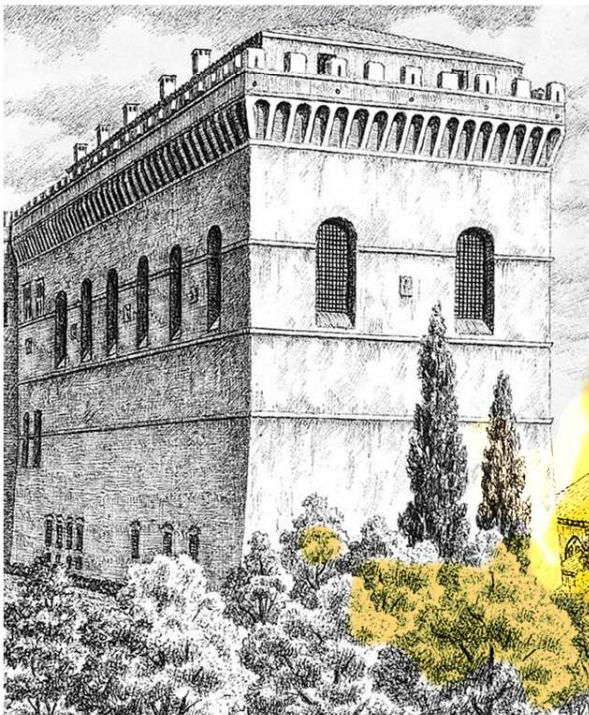
Image Index:

#1

1CREATIVE PROCESS
PREPARATION

Preparation

Becoming immersed in problematic issues that are INTERESTING and arouse

CURIOSITY

This is the outside of the Sistine Chapel . . .

Do you think Michelangelo was excited about his commission to paint it's ceiling?

Do you think he was daunted?

Overwhelmed?

Intrigued?

I bet he had a lot of problems to solve . . .

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

#2

CREATIVE PROCESS
2. INCUBATION
Incubation

Ideas churn around below the
threshold of consciousness . . .

This is the ceiling plan
of the Sistine Chapel.

Do you think Michelangelo
had dreams about it?

Do you think they were
good dreams or bad dreams
. . . . ?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

#3

3. CREATIVE PROCESS
INSIGHT

Insïght

The "Aha!" moment when the puzzle starts to fall together.

ZAP! When do you think Michelangelo got really INSPIRED?

STOKED?

MOTIVATED?

PUMPED?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

#4

4. CREATIVE PROCESS –EVALUATION

Evaluation

Decide if your insight is valubable and worth pursuing.

How many sketches do
you think Michelangelo
made?

Did he talk to his
art friends about how
he was going to DO this?

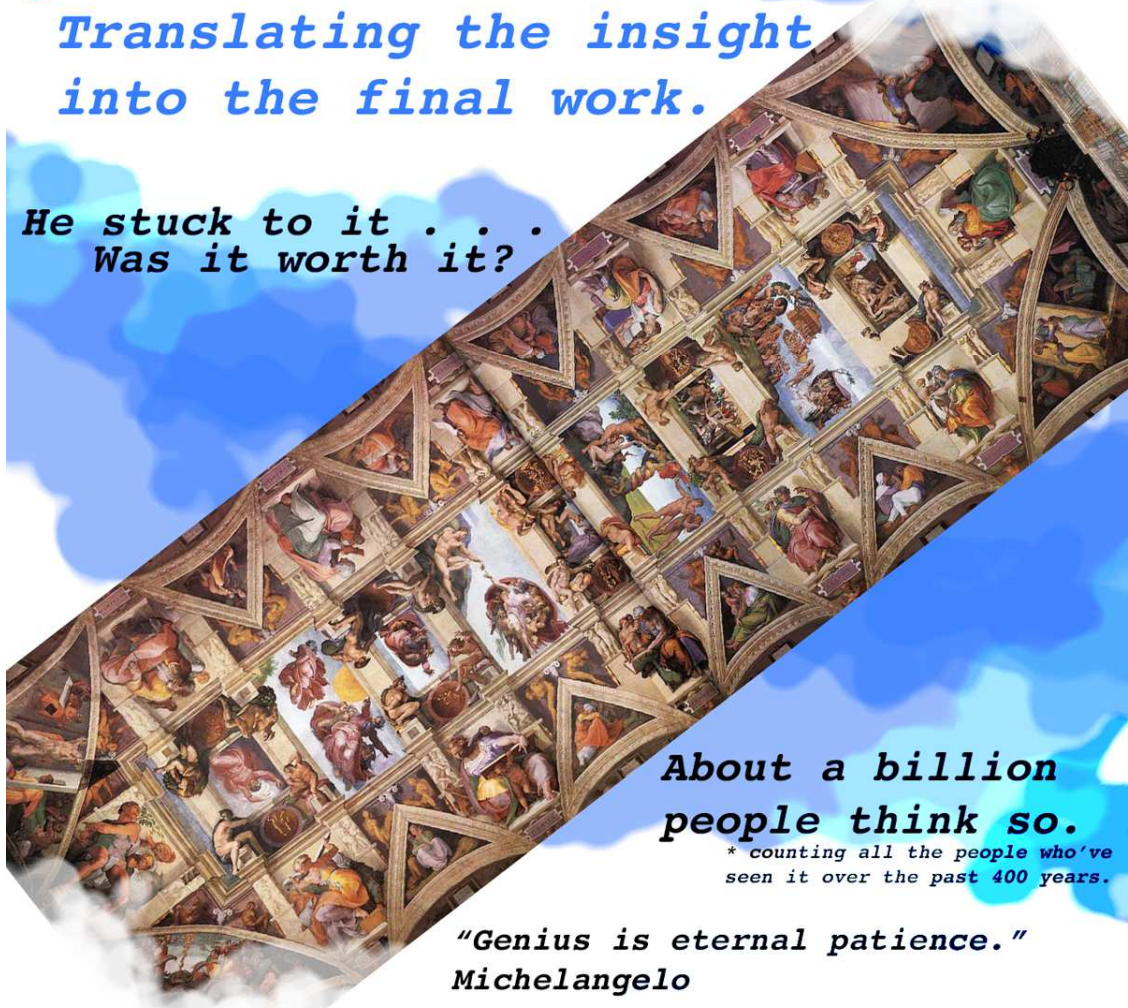Did he wonder how long
it would take?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

#5

5 CREATIVE PROCESS ELABORATION

Elaboration

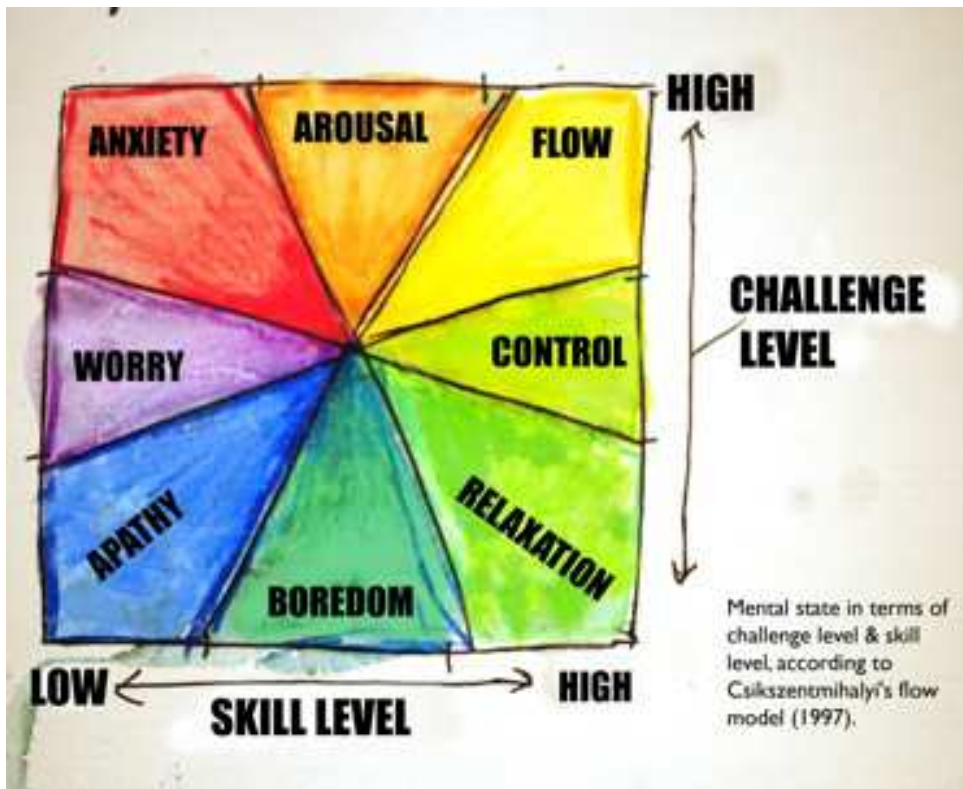Translating the insight into the final work.

He stuck to it . . .
Was it worth it?

About a billion people think so.
* counting all the people who've seen it over the past 400 years.
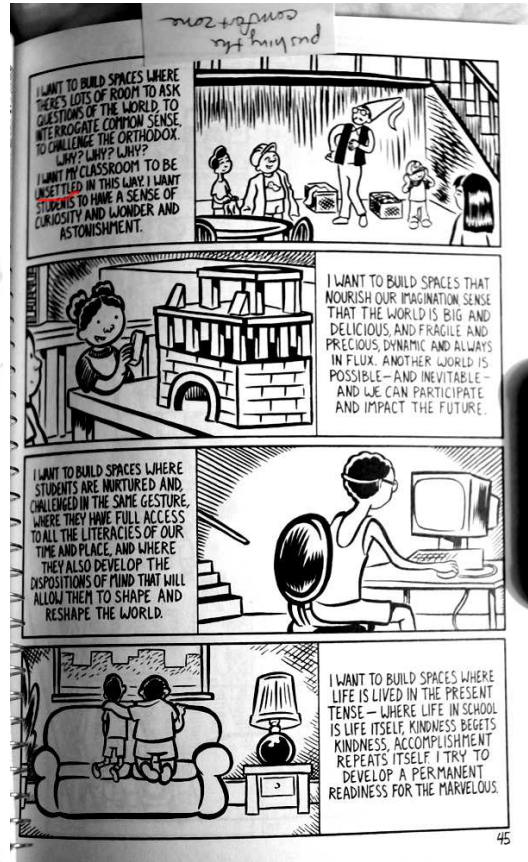
"Genius is eternal patience."
Michelangelo

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Mental state in terms of challenge level & skill level, according to Csikszentmihalyi's flow model (1997).

 # 6

(Seo, 2009)
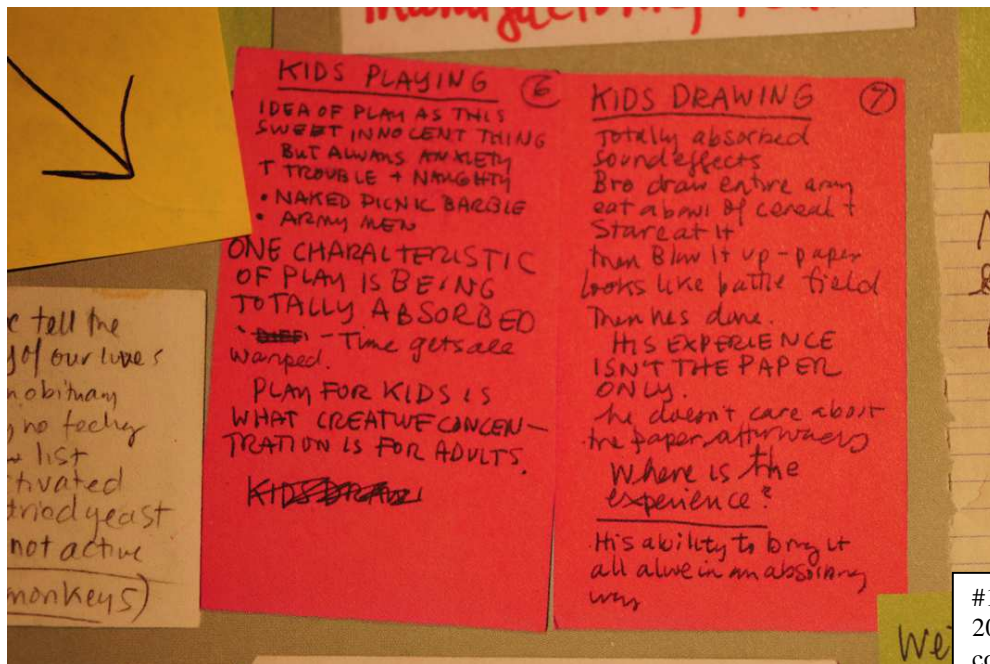
enso

#7

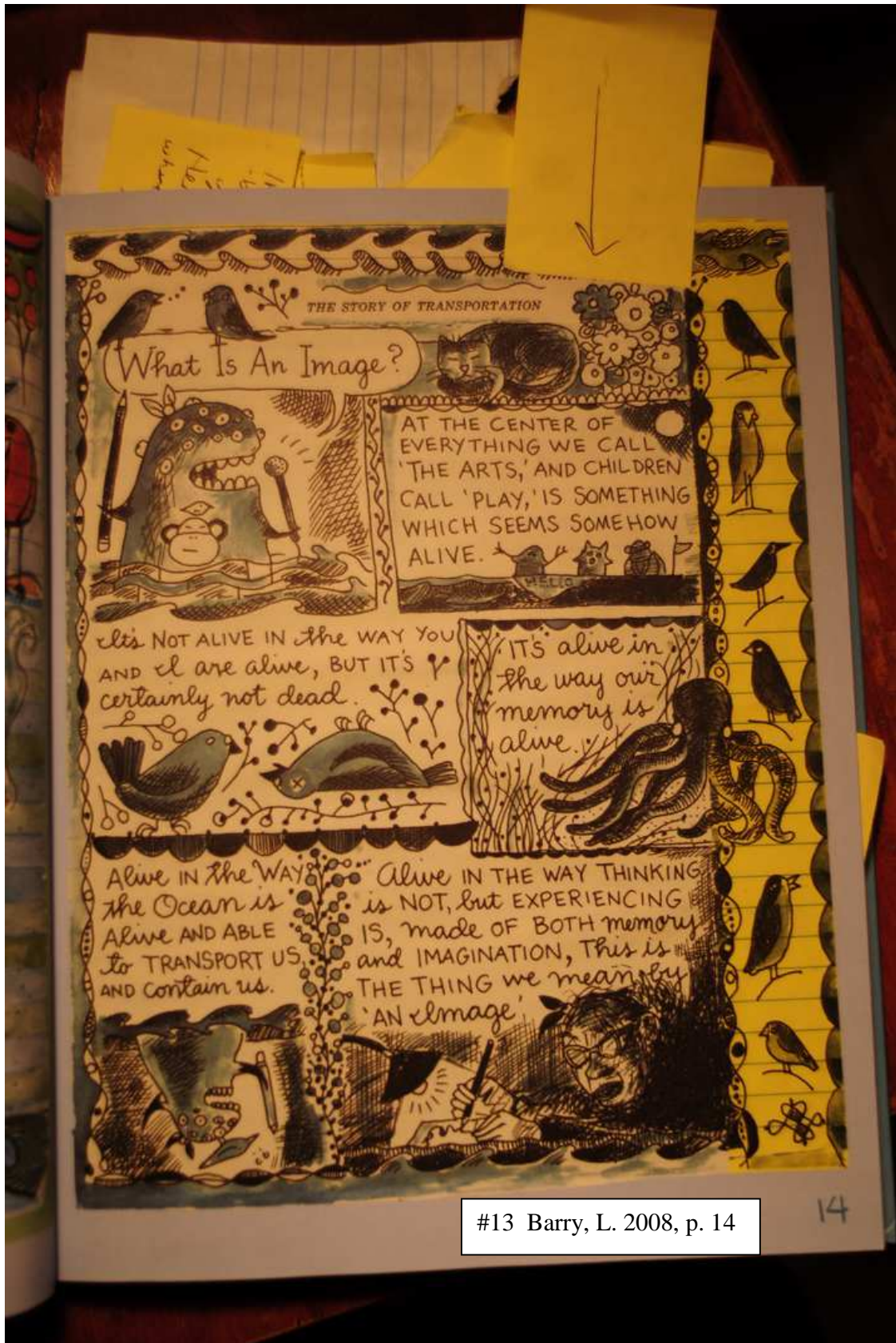# 8   Ayers, W. 2010, p. 35   #9   Ayers, W. 2010, p. 45

#10 Barry, L. 2008, inner cover

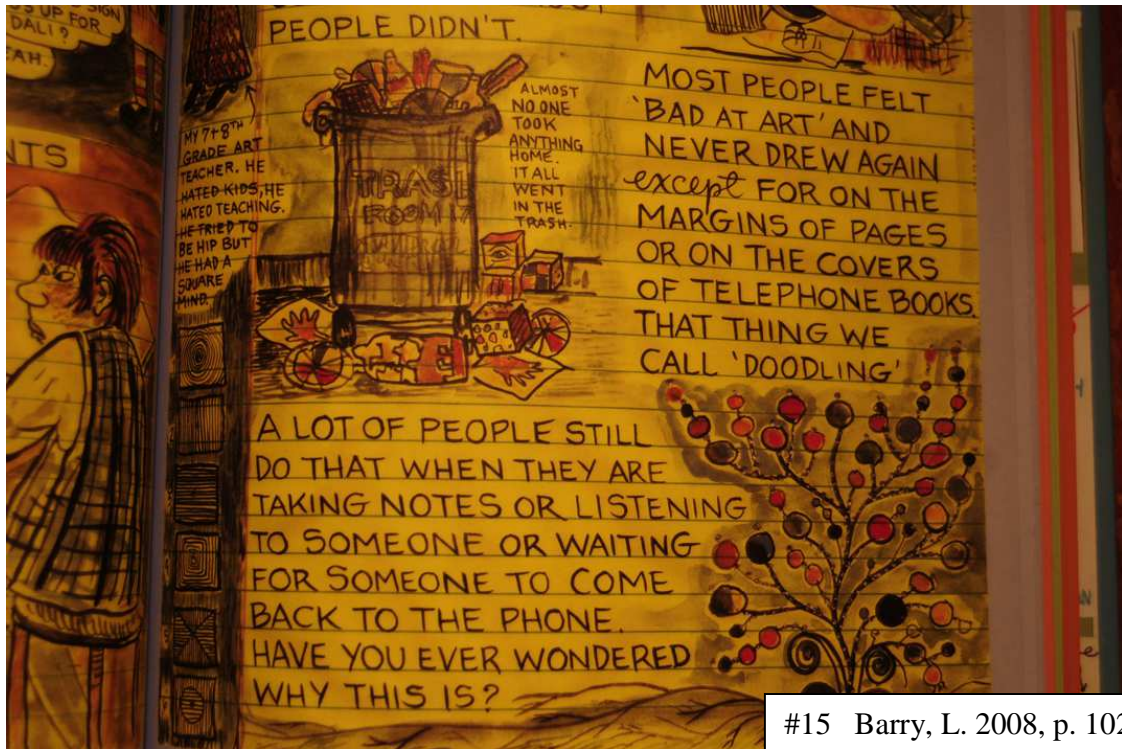#11 Barry, L. 2008, end inner covers
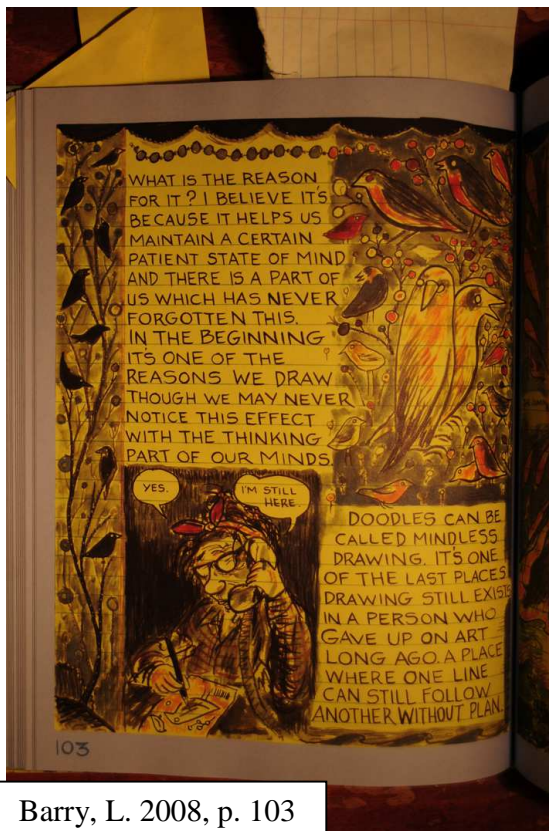

#12 Barry, L. 2008, pp. 53 - 54
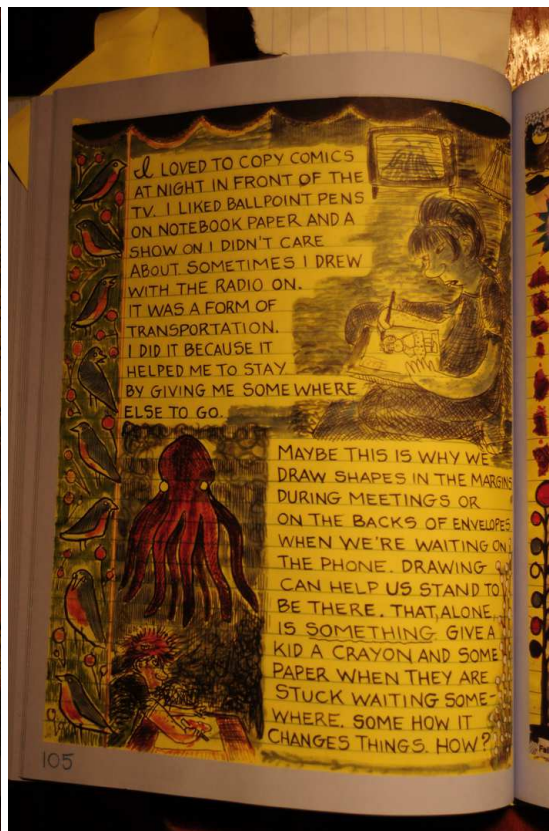
#13 Barry, L. 2008, p. 14
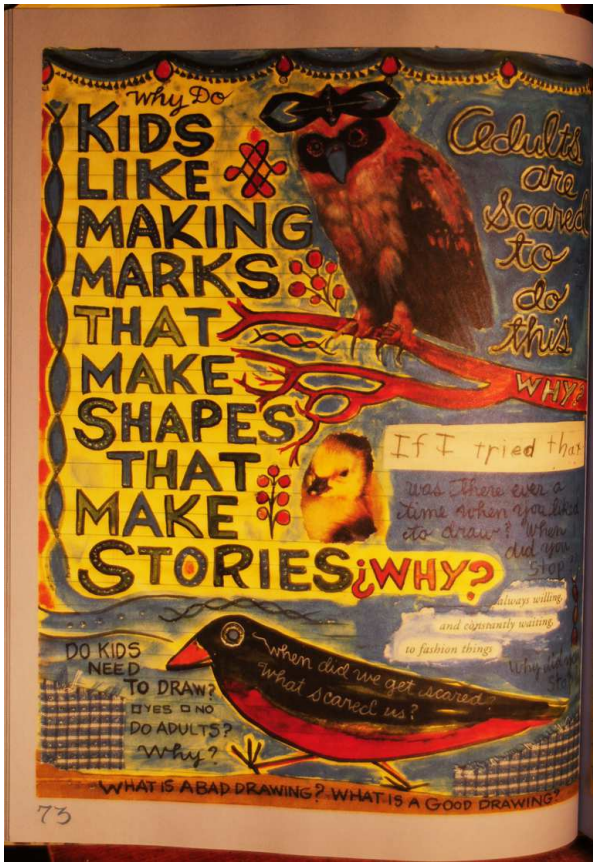
#14 Barry, L. 2008, p. 45

#15 Barry, L. 2008, p. 102

#16 Barry, L. 2008, p. 103

#17 Barry, L. 2008, p. 105
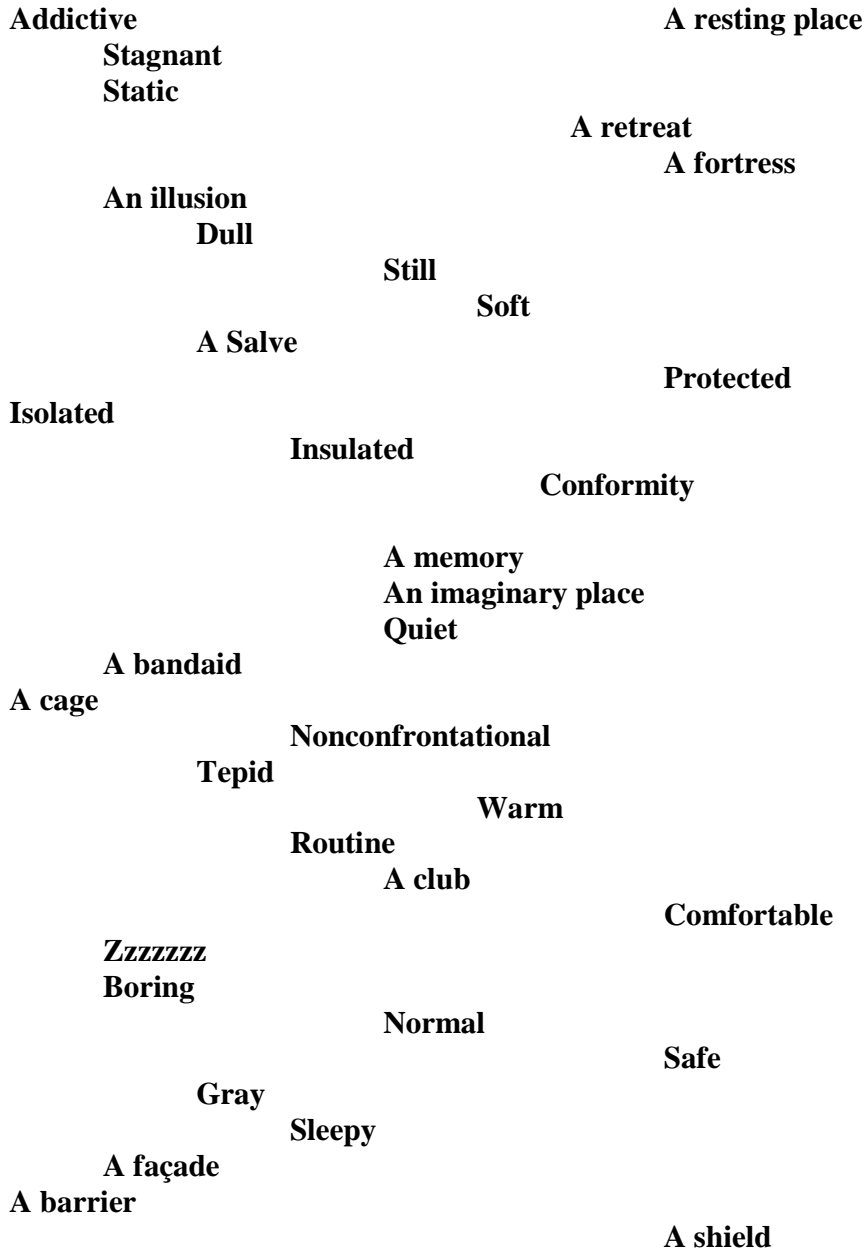
#18   Barry, L. 2008, p. 73

#19   Barry, L. 2008, p. 46

#20   Barry, L. 2008, p. 208

#21   Comfort Zone Chart

NEGATIVE --→ POSITIVE

Addictive   **A resting place**
        Stagnant
        Static
                                                A retreat
                                                        A fortress
        An illusion
                Dull
                        Still
                                Soft
                A Salve
                                                        Protected
Isolated
                        Insulated
                                        Conformity

                        A memory
                        An imaginary place
                        Quiet
        A bandaid
A cage
                        Nonconfrontational
                Tepid
                                Warm
                        Routine
                        A club
                                                        Comfortable

        Zzzzzzz
        Boring
                        Normal
                                                Safe

                Gray
                        Sleepy
        A façade
A barrier
                                                A shield

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