Explorations in Mental Health

EXPLORING CREATIVE WELLBEING FRAMEWORKS IN CONTEXT

NATURE, CULTURE, AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

Edited by
Wenche Torrissen and Helga Synnevåg Løvoll

Exploring Creative Wellbeing Frameworks in Context

This timely edited monograph develops conceptual frameworks for creative wellbeing, exploring the impact on people's lives and its contribution to a sustainable future, by examining case studies of how creative wellbeing is practised in a variety of contexts.

Using sociocultural perspectives of creativity, the authors call to attention everyday wellbeing and the possibilities for a rich life using creative wellbeing as an action competence. Chapters use a diverse range of epistemological positions, embracing quantitative, qualitative, and posthumanist methodologies to explore how integrated nature-culture perspectives can enhance the understanding of creative wellbeing when informed not only by engagement in natural contexts, but also by the deep connection between nature and culture in creating meaning.

Ultimately furthering research into creative wellbeing, improving practice, and inspiring nature and culture practices for all, this book will be of benefit to researchers, postgraduate students, and scholars interested in creative approaches to mental health, positive psychology, and environmental psychology, and creativity and transcendence more broadly.

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and Helga Synnevåg Løvoll

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Wenche Torrissen and Helga Synnevåg Løvoll
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Terms

deep ecology – this refers to the eco-philosophical tradition from Arne Næss (1912-2009) and his introduction of "deep ecology" as a contrast to "shallow ecology" in an article from 1973, also developed in the book *Ecology, Society, and Lifestyle*. Shallow ecology refers to finding technical solutions to environmental problems, while deep ecology refers to a mindset approach where ecology also includes our actions, desires, and choices in human lives. Deep ecology is inspired from Spinoza's Gestalt thinking, and includes ethics, based on the acknowledgement that every living being in nature has intrinsic, ethical value. Thus, deep ecology challenges the idea of antropocentrism, which place the human perspective in the centre of our worldview.

ecopoiesis – the term "poiesis" has roots in ancient Greek philosophy, meaning "making" or "creating", from the verb poieîn, "to make". The prefix "eco" refers to the ecological perspective. In an attempt to build an interdisciplinary understanding of human dependency of nature, the term seeks to combine ecology and the humanities. In the text *Ecopoiesis: a manifesto for ecological civilization*, Alexander Kypotin and Arran Gare suggest the need for using our imminent capacity to shape and co-create the world where the Earth, our home, also has agency. Nature is seen as a subject and an artist in this co-creation.

eudaimonia – this is the ancient Greek word for philosophy of the good life, translated variously as happiness, prosperity, and flourishing. Many scholars have argued it is a complex term and that it is not sufficient to cover the term with only one English word. Greek philosophers have different contributions explaining eudaimonia.

eudaimonic wellbeing – written in this form, this term refers to the philosophy of Aristotle when interpreting Eudaimonia, with reference to his *Nichomachean ethics*. In psychological wellbeing conceptualisation, the term builds heavily on Aristotle's contributions. Central is human growth and wisdom, where growth relates to being a good person. To live according to our inner values today, which also harmonises with good actions from a social *and* ecological perspective, is a lifelong project

seeking deeper coherence between what we think and what we do. This way of conceptualising wellbeing is a counterpart to common ways of measuring what we otherwise might believe are important values, such as the massive focus on success, money, and pleasant feelings, which we can see in many Western societies.

friluftsliv – this Norwegian term refers to both activities of being outdoor and a mindset of paying attention to nature. The term (literally translated as free-air-life) was invented by the Norwegian dramatist and poet Henrik Ibsen and was first mentioned in a poem called “Paa Vidderne” [On the hights], written in 1859/1960 and published in his collection of poems called *Digte* in 1871. The word appeared in the national romantic era as a rich description of feeling alive in remote mountains, distanced from society. In this era, being immersed in nature was associated with the development of one’s entire physical and spiritual being. Today, the term relates to a cultural interpretation of Norwegian’s identity formed by living close to nature and how this is seen as a cultural practice of loving nature for recreational purposes. The same term is used in Sweden and Denmark. Being countries with high CO^{2-} emissions per habitant, as well as high material consumption, loving nature has layers of complexity, and ambivalences are seen whether using a romantic versus an ethic view of nature.

Rune and to rune – refer to the substantive meaning “a troll song” or “a spell” and to the verb meaning “to cast spells”, “bewitch”, or “practise magic”, respectively. The clergy in the 17th and 18th centuries considered yoik (see below) and rune as two similar acts, stressing this connection, which gave a strong incentive to destroy them both as sorcery. The contemporary yoik and health-studies referred to in this book are based on the study of participants’ perspectives on their musical tradition and their yoiking practice. None of them connected yoiking to runing or to any kind of mysterious or magical ideas or actions, but to everyday life.

Sami – is the English word for the Indigenous people living in an area that encompasses large parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. This area is called «the Sami land» in English. In the different Sami languages, different variations of this name have always been used by the Sami people themselves, e.g. Saepmie, Sábme, Sápmi, and Sää’mvu’vdd. The Sami land originally stretches from Mid-Scandinavia and the Finnish peninsula all the way up to the Arctic Sea in the North and the Kola peninsula in the East. «Sami languages» contain nine languages today. They are named according to the geographical regions they are practised in, e.g. South Sami, Ume Sami, Inari Sami, and North Sami. They belong to the Uralian Fenno-Ugrian language family. Although related, their orthographies and partly also their vocabularies differ from each other, and those geographically far away from each other are that linguistically as well.

vegleder – this is the Norwegian professional name for the conveyor or mentor of *friluftsliv*, which also refers to a specific pedagogic tradition, namely the deep ecologic tradition. A certain code of conduct is developed on

the ideas of being in dialogue with participants, and nature. For this purpose, the *vegleder* only works in small groups, stays overnight with the group, practising simple living for several days, and learns from local nature and culture. The general idea of formation is to build hope for a transformative change towards an ecological lifestyle. This education differs from guide training or instruction relating to nature-based activities, although skill training and expertise is also part of the *vegleder* training. Ideally, skills training and expertise is integrated into an ecological setting whereby fostering transcendence towards an ecological lifestyle comes in the foreground.

Windjammer – is the name of a social entrepreneurship programme on a full-rigged tall ship for youths in Norway. The name also stems from a movie with the same title from 1958, which in many ways captures the growth process of youths (boys) that are part of the sailing crew. The general idea is to participate in ordinary sea guards as a growth process, guided by a professional team. Gradually, the *Windjammers*, the participants in the *Windjammer* project, become skilled in the various positions organised in the team on duty. There were three special positions that were individually organised after a pre-defined schedule: The *rudder*, the *outlook*, and the *safety*. When finishing these individual duties, *Windjammers* joined the general sea guard, which was four hours on duty and eight hours rest. Each of the individual duties was of one-hour duration, but people were needed in these positions 24/7 when sailing, making each sea guard consistent of four shifts with individual duties within these three positions. The rest of the team at duty collaborated on demand by the captain in setting sails, shifting sail position, or rescuing sails, which needed crew members to pull ropes, climb, and manage rope operations with air under their feet. The individual duties on the *rudder* included steering the tall ship in open air and with a large, wooden steering wheel, following the compass course given from the captain. The *outlook* included standing in the bow of the ship, watching for anything that the captain should be aware of, such as, lights, whales, other boats, and floating things. A huge bell was pulled each time anything of interest was observed, and the person at rudder, verified the bell signal to the captain with a second bell, followed by pointing at the object observed. *Safety* included walking all over the tall ship to observe that everything is in good condition. These individual sea guards included time alone, where the individual youth is entrusted with huge responsibilities. They were alternated each hour.

yoik – is the English word for a traditional vocal art of the Indigenous Sami people living in a land area divided by Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The word is derived from the North Sami word «juoigan», a verb describing this distinct art. In all Sami languages, the verb for this art is very similar, while the nouns vary. It is worth mentioning that the act of singing is described with an entirely different word than yoiking.

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Foreword

Sailing into
the midnight sun
Breathing sea salted artic air
Sharing
Tears of wonder
These were endless days
Of gliding past mountains
Of tireless blessings
Silence stills
And light plays
On
These days of endless wonder

In late June 2024, I met with Wenche, Helga, and other authors of this book in Volda. They were preparing the final draft of this book. I had so enjoyed reading their earlier drafts. I was keen to hear what form this book would take. As we talked, I became increasingly excited about their ideas of the interplay between creative and eudaimonic wellbeing.

We spent some time talking about the power of the arts and nature to transcend the everyday. I remember wondering if "transcend" was the right word. Can we merely, and should we only expect, to be transported out of the everyday by participation in creative activity? In my leadership of the Centre for Arts and Social Transformation at the University of Auckland, I often wonder whether the idea of social transformation is an overreach. I wonder whether it is a romanticising of the power of the arts to bring about change in a world where everything seems to mitigate against genuine and lasting social justice. I remain unsure of the answer.

There is a light and air in Norway that is hard to explain and fortunately impossible to measure. I realise now that this book could only have been dreamed and written here in the fjords of Norway. The extraordinary beauty that surrounds Volda makes the notion of transcendent growth almost tangible – to transcend, to rise above the everyday, to lift beyond

the mundane, to embrace the sacred in the space between sea, sky, and mountain, and render that into art is important work. The work that brings purpose and genuine joy. It may even bring joy way beyond mere happiness. All perfectly reasonable to dream for in Norway.

I left Volda and travelled to Bergen where I boarded a coastal ship that sailed to the very top of Norway and then rested for a few days in Kirkenes, alongside the Russian border. The ship travelled along the coast, down the Geiringer and Trolls fjords.

The midnight sun called us on
Through starless nights
Past mountains
Stamped with
Ancient footprints

I breathed in deeply, inhaling all that is possible as an older, white male professor who because of his privilege can afford to be transported and transcend his everyday existence. On board, I wrote my poetry alongside the other largely white, prosperous boomers. Art and nature, creativity, and eudaimonic wellbeing perfectly captured in and through this privilege.

One of the real strengths of this book is in its criticality. It purposefully addresses issues of accessibility. It raises questions about the barriers to a full life for everyone. It recognises the inequity of access to the joys and wonders of the arts and the natural world. It makes clear how they are often limited to those whose position and status allow them access to creative participation. How we might address both the possibilities and limitations for growth beyond the individual to a shared communal wellbeing is one of the real challenges the authors of this book identify.

These travels certainly made me feel more alive. It restored my sense of wonder. It meant that I nearly discarded my earlier foreword that focused on the power of the imagination. In that previous iteration, I had constructed an argument that the space between creative and eudaimonic wellbeing is where the imagination resides. It is the power of the imagination that frees the capacity to become more fully human, both as individuals and as communities.

On returning to Oslo before leaving Norway, I spent some hours wondering the Nationalmuseet. I was struck by the work of Bard Breivik, Norwegian sculptor, who created the first land art in Norway. It seemed somehow to connect my experiences on the boat and this new foreword. In 1970, he created a line of snowballs pressed onto dark tree trunks in a clearing on the island of Stord near Bergen.

Stumbling upon this art on the remote island, participants would perhaps understand that art and nature are inextricably linked. The excited surprise in seeing this fragile art might awaken them to reimagine their relationship to art and the wilderness it was made from and was now differently part of.

Perhaps, without a gallery signpost, many might not notice the snowballs or see them for what they are.

This book seems to me to be a critical signpost to direct our attention to what art, wellbeing, and a purposeful life might be.

I gaze into the spaces
Between
Sky
mountain
Sea
To the spaces where
My soul can rise

Peter O'Connor

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Introduction

Creative wellbeing – how nature and culture can build a flourishing and sustainable future

Wenche Torrissen and Helga Synnevåg Løvoll

In a post-COVID-19 pandemic world marked by soaring global inequality, accelerating climate change and pervasive challenges with mental ill health, it is critically important to identify factors that support personal and social wellbeing and the development of a fairer and more sustainable society. A sustainable approach requires a holistic perspective that weaves together economic, environmental, and social dimensions (UN, 2024). However, to develop a more sustainable society, it is not enough to address these three dimensions within the current mindsets of today's Western lifestyle, which is the same mindsets that produced the problems in the first place (Pacis & Van-Wynsberghe, 2020). Rather, we need to reframe the meaning of a good life, and how practices, philosophies and pedagogies can support and facilitate us to find ways that help us transcend our way of thinking about ourselves and the world.

The need for a transformed mindset, a *mindshift*, that moves us in a more sustainable direction is anchored in the "inner development goals" (IDGs), a non-profit initiative to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by contributing to personal development and capacity building (Jordan, 2022). The rationale behind the initiative is that the progress towards meeting the SDGs is too sluggish, and that urgent action is needed to find new ways to understand and react to the complex challenges we are facing (https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/). In short, to be able to find and agree on new solutions to existing problems, we need to embrace novel ideas that challenge our extant notions of what constitutes a good life, not least the vision advanced by the capitalist and consumerist mindset. These ideas must catalyse urgent changes in both personal and social behaviour. This mindshift is summed up in the research-based IDG Framework and comprises 5 dimensions (being, thinking, relating, collaborating, and acting) and 23 skills (i.e. integrity, self-awareness, sense-making, co-creation skills, empathy and compassion, humility, courage, creativity, optimism) that support human inner growth and development (Jordan, 2022).

In this quest for developing a new mindshift, it is our contention that active engagement in cultural activities (music, arts, theatre, reading, hiking,

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camping in the outdoors, gardening, etc.) has unique potential to promote insights and feelings that can inspire wellbeing from a rich perspective of human capacities, possibilities for growth, and development of mindshifts in relation to IDGs. Indeed, it is our bold claim that engagement in nature and cultural activities can help us transcend our current malaise, moving us towards becoming wiser, better versions of ourselves; versions who take better care of our fellow human beings, our communities, and the world in which we live. The aim of this book is to develop arguments and provide empirical examples that support this claim, and we start by introducing the editors, our backgrounds, convictions, values, and hopes.

Our stories of transcendence and hope

We (Wenche Torrissen & Helga Synnevåg Løvoll) come from the fields of theatre and *friluftsliv* (literally free-air-life), respectively. Although very different fields of practice, our shared journey started with a playful exploration of what the fields might have in common, which resulted in a publication, showing that both engagement in theatre and friluftsliv have the potential to transform identities and lives for the better (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022). We had both experienced the transformational potential of theatre and friluftsliv over the years but had never explored or described this academically. Convinced of the potential for individual and social good inherent in these fields, we wanted to document, share, and begin to theorise about what we had discovered and learned. We, therefore, engaged in a process of mutual encouragement to document and share our histories of transformation and hope. We were inspired by Doris Sommer who argues: "Too often, academic [texts] offer analysis and critique but stop short of speculation about possible remedies, as if intellectual work excluded an element of play that explores what Shiller called imaginative 'appearances' or alternative arrangements" (2009, p. 87). Like Shiller, we believe that our humanity depends on more imaginative play that can help us envision "alternative arrangements" for greater wellbeing, and our stories testify to the importance of this.

Wenche's story

I have been teaching and researching theatre since 2001, but I have been a zealous theatre-lover for as long as I can remember. Whether as an individual, teacher, or researcher, I earnestly believe in the powerful and transformative impact that theatre-reading, theatre-going, and theatre-making can have on all of us. As an individual, I have been deeply moved by theatre experiences and theatre-making in ways that have shifted my perspectives of myself and the world I inhabit. As an example, my recent acquaintance with the drama *The frost-haired and the dream-seer*, written by the Sami multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, made a profound impact on me, putting me in touch

with my Sami heritage. This enabled me to see, and not least feel, myself in a new light as belonging to a large group of Norwegians who have been robbed of their Sami identity, language, and culture by a brutal assimilation policy called Norwegianisation that lasted from 1850 to around the 1960s, and which made it illegal to drum, yoik (Sami Indigenous song/music), and speak Sami at school. My experience was deeply emotional. It evoked both sorrow for the lost opportunities to connect to this rich cultural heritage, and gratitude and joy for the opportunities Valkeapää provides as he gives us an opportunity to reconnect and learn from the wisdom inherent in Indigenous Sami culture. In this way, theatre and other art forms can help us transform and reconcile. The same point is also made by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, the result of an investigation of the Norwegianisation policy and the injustice done against the Sami population: "Art and cultural expression contribute to verify people's experiences, and to create symbolic spaces for transformation and processing of experiences, feelings, longings and needs, and can, therefore, be important in reconciliation processes" (Høybråten et al., 2023, p. 527; our translation).

As a teacher, one of my main aims is to explore how theatre can help us nurture self-realisation and personal excellence, and how we (teacher and students) can facilitate theatre experiences that help us probe how we understand ourselves and the world we live in. Moreover, my objective includes asking how we can envision alternative paths for living more fulfilling lives and creating more sustainable mindshifts. Every year, I see students who flourish as a result of involvement in creative theatre-making, and every year students express how rewarding it is to be able to explore existential issues creatively and to envision different alternatives. As a researcher, I have witnessed and heard countless testimonies about the ways in which theatre has changed lives for the better. People who have been involved in theatre-making as part of their personal recovery from mental ill health and/or substance-use often claim that theatre-making has been a life-changing experience for them. One member of Teater Vildenvei expresses this eloquently: "[t]he theatre group has been my salvation. I would say that. So, if I had not had that, I would have been destroyed" (Torrissen & Stickley, 2018, p. 51). Consequently, I have pivoted much of my teaching and academic work to build on the power of these experiences to enable us all to imagine that change for the better is possible.

Helga's story

I have worked as a teacher and guide within friluftsliv programs for over 30 years. Throughout this period, I have sought inspiring physical locations for being roused and moved, finding opportunities for my friluftsliv students on weeklong outdoor education programmes for spontaneous discussions on curiosity, self-reflection, and growth by exploring nature. For me,

an underlying motivation has been to promote awareness of our environmental connection to the land and the ecosystems. The working method involves inviting a small group (up to 10 people) together for several days away in nature. In the evening while sitting around the campfire, it is a privilege to participate in discussing shared moments from the day and observe participants start to explore their perspectives and convictions about life in a philosophical way. Through spontaneous reflection, I become more aware of my own and other's values in life, exploring what a sustainable lifestyle might look like. I have observed that social interactions and relationships become closer and more intense when living together outdoors. This observation triggered my interest in conducting psychological research on these nature-based group experiences. My assumption was that being together as a group over several days made a positive difference. Many testimonies from students support this idea. "This has changed my life" was one student's written evaluation from a 30-day course in the fjord landscape exploring personal values and the deep immersion of nature and culture through slow experiences (partly hiking and partly rowing by boat), campfire discussions about the meaning in life, and awareness of the landscape. The student was referring to how he had reframed his core values in life and wished to live in accordance with his altered worldviews.

During the last few years, I have, however, become more self-critical of the idea of bringing people into areas of pristine nature. Is this project simply a romantic and Western idea? Are we producing more consumers at the cost of fragile nature while facilitating experiences of nature? Are we also exploiting places of unspoiled, wild nature at the cost of insects, birds, wild animals, and flora? Are we invited to be there? This self-criticism led me to interrogate my own Westernised, romantic view of nature and to become more open to exploring alternative ways of immersion in nature. While I was working on my Ph.D. in Psychology, I asked my eight-year-old son: "What is a good hiking experience?". His answer thrilled me: "A good hiking experience is when you have fun, don't get hurt, and are kind to the forest. You can hear the tree scream if you lean your ear very close to the trunk", followed by a demonstration of how to put your ear to the trunk. What if adults shared the same wisdom and perspective?

More recently, I explored the Japanese concept of Shinrin Yoku (bathing in the atmosphere of the forest). I trained myself to become a forest bathing guide. I learned that experiences touching our inner feelings in relation to nature were not about distances nor activities. Rather, we can be present and attuned, adopting a nuanced and fine-grained approach to understanding our emotions in relation to the atmosphere of the forest. This is an empathic response to being in nature and being sensitive to the agency of other living organisms. I found deep inspiration, tranquillity, and contentment in learning to pay attention to tiny details that, over time, inspired me to imagine new ideas of understanding my feelings, giving me hope to become more

resilient and optimistic of my ability to make better life choices. I discovered that nature is a powerful catalyst for my personal development. I experienced a revitalised spirituality in nature. I began walking in my nearby forest with a new mindset, almost overwhelmed by the abundance of sensory information that I previously ignored. From this fresh perspective, my conception of "nature" evolved. Nature is not merely something "out there". It is relational. It is as much about us as part of nature, and nature being part of us. Inspired by my long-time interest in Indigenous practices of living in nature and the concept of friluftsliv, I instinctively embraced the development of a nature-culture relational perspective as a holistic means of exploring creative wellbeing.

Creative wellbeing: waking people up to their senses and feelings

In our pedagogical practices and our research on the impact of participating in cultural activities for the promotion of health and wellbeing, we are consistently struck by how alive, present, excited, and creative people become. With reference to Maxime Green, we see how participants transcend into a state of "wide-awakeness" where they are fully alive, present in the moment, their senses heightened, and where they are ready to reflect on the self in relation to the world (1995). In Greene's conception, "wide-awakeness contributes to the creation of the self" (1977, p. 121). This resonated with our experiences. Throughout years of practice, we have come to understand this state of "wide-awakeness" as something akin to creative wellbeing, where participants engage creatively in processes where they "transcend" and "transform" themselves in ways that promote wellbeing in the form of vitality, self-actualisation, self-insights, and connectedness. As a preliminary definition of creative wellbeing, we explored how creativity and wellbeing could be combined to express this vital "effect". We defined it as follows: "Creative wellbeing involves engaging in activities or experiences that stimulate creativity and result in the creation of something new (such as a new perspective, a human-nature relationship, an artwork, etc.), fostering transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual".

We are aware that the terms "transformation" and "transcendence" might be problematic for many who are uneasy about the far-reaching claims that are made about the inherent power of arts and nature to transform people's lives (Callagher, 2014; Nicholson, 2005; Balfour, 2009). When we employ this language without hesitation, it's because we genuinely believe in the transformative power of nature and art to inspire creativity and the creation of something new. This shift moves us beyond our self-centred experiences towards a deeper sense of responsibility for both our communities and our planet. Following Peter O'Connor (2016b) and Selina Busby (2021), we also argue that the possibility to imagine change is essential for bringing hope

and change into people's lives. In short, creative engagement and creative processes should not be underestimated when the aim is to produce a transformed mindshift that matters.

Indeed, using terms like "transformation" and "transcending growth" captures how important we believe art and nature are for a flourishing, happy life. The terms "transcendence" and "transformation" carry reference to humanistic psychology and progressive pedagogies. These frameworks embrace the belief that people have the possibility to grow, self-actualise, and, consequently, reach higher levels of self-insight, happiness, and ethical actions. The Cambridge Dictionary defines "transcendence" as "experience that goes past normal limits, or the ability to achieve this". This is also a liminal experience, pushing our normal boundaries of imagination to new insights (Turner, 1969/2008). Drawing on literature from the fields of theatre studies, psychology, pedagogy and philosophy, we use the terms to signal how crucial it is for individuals to have the chance to grow and develop through engagement in art and nature. It also underscores the significance of ensuring that people have access to such experiences. Central to our arguments are scholars like John Dewey (2005), Abraham Maslow (1968), Erich Fromm (1959), Carl R. Rogers (1961), Maxime Green (1995), Martha Nussbaum (2010), and Carol Ryff (2019a, 2019b; Ryff & Singer, 2008) in understanding the power of experiences and actions for human growth. This aligns with the concept of "eudaimonic wellbeing" within positive psychology, which delves into the philosophical question of what constitutes a good life. While there is no straightforward causation between participation in cultural activities and transcendence, these complex processes will be further explored in Chapter 1.

The significance of creative entrepreneurship

In a world of rapid change, creativity is suggested as one of the most important skills we can acquire and teach our children (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). In a review of the literature of 21st-century skills, creativity is identified as the number one future skill (Løvoll & Botellero, 2024). In a "world that don't make much sense", Peter O'Connor argues that creativity can bring hope, helping us tackle the complexity of our times and reimagine what the world can be (2016a, p. 5–7). Creativity thus holds radical possibilities. However, the big question remains: To what extent are these radical possibilities developed and pursued by citizens, school leaders, teachers, social workers, and authorities?

Based on recent reports, research, and personal experiences, we argue that the world we live in provides few opportunities to engage in activities that stimulate "wide-awakeness" and creative play (By et al., 2020; Oxford Research, 2023). We believe that this lack of opportunity and engagement has negative consequences for how we as individuals and society can imagine

and create better futures. In the context of public health, Phil Hanlon and a team of researchers argue that despite overarching threats such as climate change, inequality in health, pandemics, and decline in democracy, there are few efforts to move from abstract ideas to actionable practices. There is a lack of development of new practices or new ways of thinking to address these threats. Hanlon and his team describe this as "an ingenuity gap", where there is seemingly a "yawning gulf between problems and our capacity to think up workable solutions" (Hanlon et al., 2011, p. 336). Therefore, one of the most important and urgent tasks of politicians, policymakers, communities, and individuals is to address this "ingenuity gap" and develop solutions that support human wellbeing, flourishing, health, and sustainable futures. But how can this be done?

This is a complex question, but we contend that to create the transformational change necessary to address urgent and even existential challenges, we must radically rethink the role of arts, culture, nature, and ethics. This book contributes to this radical rethinking by providing arguments for why creativity must be harnessed and why access to nature and culture makes a fundamental difference to the promotion of wellbeing, human happiness, growth, and sustainable practices. The idea that creativity and creative endeavours support health and wellbeing is by no means a new idea, but we believe that this ancient knowledge is now more crucial than ever to address the myriad challenges we face. Before we introduce the contents of this book, we will, therefore, very briefly outline some historical context and some of the recent developments in the emerging field of "creative health" and "creative wellbeing".

A potted history of creative wellbeing

The knowledge that creative activities and encounters heal, support wellbeing, and restore health is firmly established in Indigenous cultures across the world (Fancourt, 2016; McNiff, 2004; Morriss-Kay, 2010). In the Nordic context, art has been used as an important part of health and wellbeing rituals for at least 8,000 years (Torrissen et al., 2022; Løden & Mandt, 2010). This is true of both our Sami and our Norse ancestors (Gunnell, 1995; Solli, 2002). Creative engagement was also an important source of wellbeing in the daily life of our ancestors. Early studies of the Sami people reveal that the ancient music-making tradition (yoik) had an important function for people's wellbeing also beyond official healing rituals (Qvigstad, 1910; Hämäläinen, 2023; Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025). The knowledge that the arts support wellbeing is also evident in the Norse tradition. The most important source on Old Norse philosophy, *Håvamål*, a text from the thirteenth century, shows that songs and poetry played a vital role in both general wellbeing and in medical practice (Mortensson-Egnund, 1986).

This ancient knowledge that creativity is crucial for health and wellbeing has resurfaced at various times throughout history (Moreno, 1946/2019; McNiff, 2004). The impact of this knowledge has varied across regions, but from the 1970s, the use of arts therapies – such as music, fine arts, drama, dance – in treatment and health promotion has gained increasing traction worldwide. In art therapies, creativity is often described as the most significant element in change processes that lead to health and greater wellbeing. Conversely, many theories have linked a lack of creativity to mental illness (Moreno, 1953; Maslow, 1968). Shaun McNiff emphasises that "the core process of healing through art involves the cultivation and release of the creative spirit. If we can liberate the creative process in our lives, it will always find the way to whatever needs attention and transformation" (2004, p. 5). Thus, releasing and supporting the development of creative capabilities has been a central task for art therapists across disciplines.

Taking a broader perspective than therapy, the international field of arts and health has developed into a robust field of practice, research, and education over the last three decades (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Jensen, 2022). There is no consensus on the exact scope of the arts and health field, but its remit is broad (Angus, 2002; All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017). This field encompasses various areas and posits that health and wellbeing can be enhanced through creative activities, whether as treatment, rehabilitation, health promotion, or everyday creativity. In Norway, and the other Nordic countries, developments under the international arts and health movement are even broader and are defined as "culture and health". The national pilot project "Culture gives health" (1997–1999), was Norway's first major investment in the field. Initiated by the Norwegian Arts Council and the Ministry of Health and Care Services, this project marked the beginning of the "official" Norwegian "culture and health" policy development (Theorell et al., 2016).

In the 1990s, another significant Norwegian development shaped the growing awareness that culture can promote health and wellbeing. This time, nature was explicitly included in the practical and theoretical explorations of how creative activities in and through nature and culture could support individual and communal wellbeing and health. Professor in Social Medicine, Gunnar Tellnes, introduced a vision for a more health promoting, and healthy society encapsulated in the concept, NaKuHel (or NaCuHeal in English), "which stands for holistic thinking and creativity within nature, culture and health in our time" (Tellnes, 1995, p. 128; our translation). Tellnes' vision emerged from his practice as a general medical practitioner on Røst Island, located on the remote edge of the Lofoten archipelago, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. Here, he reflected on the limitations of modern medicine, discovering other sources of wellbeing through immersion in nature, engagement in cultural activities, and the powerful dynamics fostered by such experiences.

Significantly, the NaCuHeal vision and philosophy emphasise a broad understanding of creativity that encompasses experiences and outcomes achievable through nature and culture (Tellnes, 2005). The arts and health movement has partially adapted this understanding, shifting the focus from discussions about art in health, to broader considerations of creativity in and for health and wellbeing. This evolution is also evident in the United Kingdom where initiatives like the Arts Council England's 2020–2030 strategy, *Let's Create*, envision "a country transformed by culture and creativity, in which people live happier, healthier lives" (2022, s. 4). To realise this vision, they have developed a delivery plan for Creative Health & Wellbeing, where "creative health and wellbeing" is defined as "the connection between creativity and the health and quality of people's lives" (2022, s. 4). The central idea here is that "creative and cultural activity must be viewed by society as a fundamental part of living well" (2022, s. 4). While the term often refers to arts and culture based health and wellbeing initiatives (Taikusydän, 2018), researchers and practitioners are increasingly including nature in their conceptualisation of creative wellbeing (Bøe, 2020; Aula & Masoodian, 2023). The integration of nature into the triad, however, remains somewhat limited.

Overarching research focus and epistemological position

The overall goal of the book is to deepen our understanding of how experiences in art and nature can foster transformative mindshifts through creative wellbeing. This is a nuanced and multifaceted endeavour for which we do not claim to provide definitive answers. Instead, we invite readers to engage in discussion, debate, and exploration. Throughout the process of writing this book, the authors were tasked with exploring creative wellbeing within their respective disciplines and across disciplines. Authors were also encouraged to investigate the intersection between creative wellbeing and eudaimonic wellbeing, posing questions such as: How can we best understand the term "creative wellbeing" in the context of striving to create a more sustainable world? How can experiences in art and nature enhance human creativity and promote wellbeing that fosters fairer, better, and more just societies? What are the defining characteristics of experiences that enable individuals to experience personal transcendence or transformation? and What mindsets are conducive to achieving transcendence or transformation? These questions and more are examined through theoretical explorations and empirical studies presented in this book, culminating in an afterword that synthesises insights from the different chapters.

The chapters in this book reflect a diverse range of epistemological positions, embracing both quantitative, qualitative, and hermeneutic approaches. Drawing on Trond Gansmo Jakobsen's critical realism, we acknowledge that knowledge is complex, multi-layered, and dynamic, and that insights from various paradigms, including positivist and non-anthropocentric

perspectives, can help us understand creative wellbeing (2021). As editors, we have intentionally curated a collection that embraces diverse contributions and perspectives. The aim is to foster dialogue and connect different views and approaches to creative wellbeing within a comprehensive exploration of the concepts of goodness, truth, and beauty in pursuit of sustainable solutions. The hope is that this book raises awareness of the manifold ways in which engagement with nature and the arts can promote transformative wellbeing with moral and existential implications. Furthermore, we hope that this book will inspire others to engage in entrepreneurship, promoting creative wellbeing for a more sustainable future.

As we have seen, the term "creative wellbeing" is gaining traction, yet the field lacks consensus on its definitions and explanations. While it is premature to offer a definition that potentially limits the scope of the field, we believe that this emerging field would benefit from a clearer understanding of what "creative wellbeing" entails, and how it can be fostered. Thus, in Chapter 1, "Frameworks for creative wellbeing: Arts and nature meets positive psychology", Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Wenche Torrissen address how creative wellbeing encapsulates the uniquely powerful transformative power of arts and nature. They explore eudaimonia and psychological theories of eudaimonic wellbeing in understanding how activities in art and nature can catalyse change. Moreover, the chapter proposes that emotions play a central role in fostering creative wellbeing.

In Chapter 2, titled "Creative wellbeing in Nature", Knut-Willy Sæther, Helga Synnevåg Løvoll, and Dag Erik Wold explore how encounters with nature contribute to creative wellbeing. Drawing from eco-spirituality, which emphasises place, belonging, and aesthetic experiences, the chapter identifies creative wellbeing in natural settings as involving heightened awareness of surroundings and openness to transcendent experiences. The discussion extends to Norwegian friluftsliv pedagogy inspired by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, exploring how eco-philosophy and eco-spiritual perspectives expand from individual self-awareness to an ecological self-concept. This chapter also examines the practice of friluftsliv within higher education and the potentials for an integrated understanding of creative wellbeing.

In Chapter 3, "The Sami yoik as creative wellbeing", Soile Päivikki Hämäläinen, Anita Salamonsen, and Wenche Torrissen explore the traditional Sami vocal tradition known as yoik. In ancient Indigenous cultures, nature and culture are profoundly integrated. Here, every element – people, animals, and natural surroundings – holds agency and directly influences when and where, and what is yoiked. The act of composing a yoik, being yoiked, and listening to others' yoiks are all contributors to eudaimonic wellbeing. Here, spiritual, creative, and aesthetic qualities blend into a cultural practice that has historically faced severe threat and stigma due to colonialisation of Sami areas in the countries inhabited by them. Throughout this chapter, the authors

emphasise the importance of being attuned and mindfully present as essential aspects of creative wellbeing through yoiking. This mindset fosters ecological awareness, enriching our understanding of our place in the world and our interconnectedness with the ecosystem.

In Chapter 4, "How are you? Exploring creative wellbeing as aesthetic experience in the theatre", Wenche Torrissen and Ann Iren Jamtøy examine the performance *How are you?* by the Danish/Norwegian performing arts company, Sir Grand Lear, to explore how theatre experiences can foster transcendent growth, enabling audiences to develop new perspectives on themselves and the world. This chapter contends that aesthetic experiences in the theatre can cultivate "creative wellbeing", offering audiences valuable opportunities for personal and relational insight and growth. By delving into practical insights, this chapter highlights ways towards active citizenship, dialogue, and community engagement.

In Chapter 5, "The art of walking: Finding resources for creative wellbeing", Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Raul Grau-Ruiz analyse situational experiences of 11 participants from Norway walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain as a wellbeing intervention. Using daily sampling questionnaires and diary entries, they find that eudaimonic emotions correlate with measures of personal growth. Applying a theoretical framework from Scheme theory, they discover that eudaimonic emotions strongly contribute to the formation of new cognitive schemas, typically associated with intrinsic motivation and new choices. These changes were identified in the qualitative material and were characterised by several aesthetic qualities. Once narratives were coded, it became evident that many participants focused on inner exploration, and several reporting moments of transcendence. Some narratives also identified animistic experiences where nature, culture, and human beings are viewed through an ecological lens. The study demonstrates how walking in nature can enhance creative wellbeing, by fostering sensory attunement, curiosity, wonder, and mindful presence.

In Chapter 6, "Creative wellbeing at sea: The Windjammer project", Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Gunvor Marie Dyrdal investigate how participation in a month-long sailing adventure fostered creative wellbeing in a group of youths aged between 16 and 25 years. Employing a sensory ethnography approach, they conducted interviews with seven adolescents during the sailing journey. Being a part of the sailing, crew entailed rigorous work discipline around the clock. Some tasks required individuals to spend time alone in the open air, such as the outlook post at the ship's bow or steering the rudder. Initially daunting or monotonous, these moments evolved into opportunities for creative wellbeing over the course of the voyage. Participants engaged in new activities, cultivated imagination, and practised mindfulness. Several participants developed a sense of belonging aboard the ship, drawing inspiration from the starry night sky or the vastness of the horizon to contemplate broader ecologic perspectives.

In Chapter 7, “Relaxed performance: promoting creative wellbeing for all”, Wenche Torrissen and Anita Salamonsen explore how relaxed performances can promote creative wellbeing for disabled audience, their families, and carers. Many people living with disabilities often face exclusion from traditional theatre settings due to strict theatre etiquette that limits their ability to express themselves freely or move in and out of the auditorium as needed. Reflecting on how access to theatre experiences, and the theatre experiences in themselves can bolster human and community flourishing, this chapter emphasises the critical need to prioritise relaxed performances. This will contribute to ensure that everyone has equitable access to experiences and activities that foster self-realisation, personal growth, and happiness.

In Chapter 8, “Creative wellbeing in higher education: The use of theatre in the education of social workers”, Vibeke Preus, Borghild Otelie Aasebøstøl, and Wenche Torrissen illustrate how a theatre course based on Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and the pedagogy of discomfort fosters an environment of “wide-awakeness” that promotes growth and development. This chapter demonstrates how students derive significant benefits from being pushed beyond their comfort zone, suggesting that personal growth and development often entail navigating challenges and discomfort.

In Chapter 9, “Creative wellbeing and formative processes in teacher education and school: Student teachers’ perceptions”, Siv M. Gamlem, Marianne Hustvedt, and Wenke Mork Rogne investigate the impact of integrating creative learning methods into the classroom settings for teacher education students. Divided into two parts, the first part of the chapter expands on the significance of creativity and wellbeing in schools through a comprehensive pedagogical framework. The second part presents a case study involving a mini-intervention of using Lego© bricks in teacher training. Following this playful learning approach, five teacher education students were interviewed about their understanding of creative wellbeing. While the student teachers enjoyed the activities, they reflected on their own limitations in conceptual understanding and pedagogical tools. Students unanimously agreed on the need for greater emphasis on creative wellbeing in their teacher education and training.

In Chapter 10, “Creative wellbeing in school: Nurturing human growth and happiness through drama in education”, Eleanor Dodson and Wenche Torrissen explore how the arts, particularly drama/theatre, can enhance human growth and wellbeing in educational settings. This chapter examines drama’s potential to foster student flourishing and eudaimonic wellbeing through elements like playfulness, liminality and aesthetic *Bildung*. However, this chapter highlights a significant setback: the exclusion of drama/theatre from the Norwegian national curriculum, “Kunnskapsløftet 2020”. This omission underscores the potential consequences when arts subjects are marginalised or removed from the curriculum. It serves as a reminder of the high stakes involved and calls for action to advocate for more creative wellbeing practices in schools.

In the "Afterword", Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Wenche Torrissen explore the narratives presented in the book, identifying eight recurring themes across the contributions that can enhance our understanding of the potential conditions that are needed to support the facilitation of creative wellbeing. Discussing how access, social community, playfulness, letting go, discomfort, time, attunement, and aesthetic experiences all in various ways contribute to creative wellbeing, the aim is to point towards possible causal connections that can provide guidance for the creation of future creative wellbeing practices. The hope is that these reflections will encourage and inspire further research and future dialogue about the many ways in which art and nature can support wellbeing.

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Chapter 1

Frameworks for creative wellbeing

Arts and nature meet positive psychology

Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Wenche Torrissen

Transcendence through nature and the arts

The idea that humans can transcend, becoming happier and wiser through experiences in nature and the arts, is central in Norwegian culture. By "transcendence", we mean experiences of becoming larger than oneself, the realisation of our place in the world and our interconnectedness within a web of life. We can find this thought expressed in many works of literature. As an example, Nagel, in Knut Hamsun's Mysteries, describes that "a tremor of ecstasy ran through him" as he was lying in the woods, wondering about the vastness of the universe (Hamsun, 1892/1971, p. 43). As he lay here, "he felt himself carried away and engulfed by the magic rays of the sun. The stillness filled him with an intoxicating sense of wellbeing; he was free from worry" (Hamsun, 1892/1971, p. 43). Like Nagel, many of Hamsun's other characters experience nature as a place where they can be themselves, find meaning, and be inspired to live more sustainable and harmonious lives (Knutsen, 2006; Wærp, 2018).

The notion that art and nature can help us transcend and experience mindshifts is very strong in Sami culture. Indeed, the idea of transcendence has an everyday function in many Indigenous cultures. States of consciousness beyond our regular perception of space, time, and causality are expressed in relation to nature, stories, ceremony, dance, chanting, song, and visual design (Keltner, 2023, p. 63). These expressions are part of everyday life, but when such expressions are threatened, so is the possibility of experiencing transcendent states. This is described in the play, *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* [The frost-haired and the dream-seer] (1995), written by the multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. Here, we meet a young reindeer herder who is following his trekking herd in a rather disengaged, uninspired, and disenchanted manner. As he settles for the night, he dozes by the fire, and in this dream-state, he is visited by "the frost-haired", an old man who can be seen as a symbol of a Sami elder or a Sami shaman (a Noaidi). In the dream, the old man makes it very clear that the young herdsman must open his senses and embrace Sami culture and identity to thrive and be well.

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More specifically, the play shows that yoiking, here described as "the breath of these plains", is as essential as breathing oxygen for the Sami people (Valkeapää, 2020, p. 47). It is implied that the herdsman has lost this sense, and that he suffers as a result. Throughout the play, he is introduced to the yoik and other transcending experiences, and by regaining this lost knowledge, we see his transformation of self and his mindshift. In short, we witness him develop greater self-love and a greater understanding of the intimate connection between humans and nature, acknowledging the importance of showing reverence and respect for this connection as the cornerstone of being well.

The idea that arts and nature can facilitate transcending experiences, helping us to envision a better and more sustainable world, is also embraced in the wellbeing sciences. Carol Ryff highlights that the arts, the humanities, and encounters with nature are vital assets in our efforts to create a future that fosters good lives and just societies. She emphasises the importance of finding "venues for nurturing compassion and insight about human suffering, which has become so widespread" (2022, p. 10). According to Ryff, the arts, the humanities, and nature can play a particularly important role in shaping a good and just future by touching us and enabling us to change our outlook of both ourselves, and our place in the world. In her view, art and nature might also address issues of social justice, although this perspective is largely understudied. It can be argued that Ryff recognises the inherently creative potential of encounters with both nature and the arts which can lead to mindshifts and greater wellbeing. In her theoretical exploration of why the arts and nature are so effective at producing these mindshifts, her main argument is that activities and experiences in art and nature uniquely promote eudaimonia and eudaimonic wellbeing (2019, 2021, 2022).

Taking Ryff's theoretical developments as a departure point, this chapter further explores the complex connections between arts, nature, eudaimonia, and shift in states of mind. We refer to these as mindshifts. Our proposition is that the term creative wellbeing captures the unique potential that lies in the arts and nature to produce mindshifts. This chapter aims to develop this argument by understanding how creative encounters in arts and nature can help us change how we think and act in the world. We begin by exploring how the philosophy of eudaimonia and the psychological theories of eudaimonic wellbeing can help us understand the complex relationship between experiences and activities in art and nature and possible mindshifts. The role of creativity and creativeness is then briefly explored before addressing the significance of emotions. We contend that the role of emotions has been undervalued in existing theories, and emphasising how emotions contribute to mindshifts will enhance our understanding of why arts and nature are so important for nurturing good lives and just societies. A major contribution of this chapter is thus to highlight the centrality of emotions in understanding the mindshifts that often occur through encounters with art and nature.

Finally, we suggest an explanation for understanding creative wellbeing with the ambition to identify conditions for this explanation through different contributions.

Eudaimonia and eudaimonic wellbeing

When Ryff argues that the arts and nature have a unique capacity to produce mindshifts, it is because they help us develop into more compassionate, fairer, less selfish, and more moral individuals. In short, they help us cultivate, foster, and achieve the best within us (2019, 2022). This is the essence of eudaimonia and a central component in eudaimonic wellbeing. Thus, understanding the philosophy and theories behind these concepts in depth is fundamental. The Greek term "eudaimon" consists of two words: "eu" means "well" and "daimon" means "divinity" or "spirit" (Kraut, 2022). To be *eudaimon* is to live in a way that is well-favoured by a God.

In his *Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle asks: What is a good life? Is it about feeling good or performing good actions? The hedonistic answer would be that living a good life is to cultivate positive emotions, filling life with stimuli to increase these positive emotions. Aristotle, however, critiqued this notion, proposing that eudaimonia, translated into English as "happiness, prosperity, and flourishing", is the aim of a good life (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 148). According to Aristotle, a good life entails being a morally virtuous person. Pleasure, for Aristotle, is a by-product of realising good deeds (such as honesty, bravery, wisdom, and moderation) rather than being a goal in itself. Pleasure is thus contingent on the realisation of *virtues*. In other words, those who act according to the realisation of virtues are also the ones who experience highest pleasures. Virtues play a central role in the *Nicomachean ethics*, representing what is good and just, which is highly context and culture dependent. Aristotle views virtues as integral to practice that involves our relationships to *others*. For Aristotle, happiness is synonymous with virtue: It is a state or activity achieved when we excel in virtuous actions and is inherently pleasant in its fulfilment (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1992, p. 243). Virtue, Aristotle further distinguishes, manifests in two forms: virtue of thought or intellectual virtue and virtue of character or moral virtue (p. 250). Intellectual virtue primarily develops through instruction and education, while moral virtue arises from habits. Actions are therefore central to Aristotle's ethical framework. According to Aristotle, we need to repeat the same activities several times to enable ourselves to act virtuously (p. 253).

While early research on quality of life and happiness focussed on the hedonic viewpoint and studies of life satisfaction, the next generation of happiness researchers has embraced the Aristotelian critique, recognising eudaimonic wellbeing as a more holistic conception of human happiness. In search of understanding human happiness, the eudaimonic viewpoint foregrounds growth-related dimensions, drawing from several theoretical

frameworks. These include theories such as psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989), eudaimonic identity theory (Waterman & Schwartz, 2013), experience of meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016; Steger & Kashdan, 2013), and functioning well, such as the functional wellbeing approach, which explains wellbeing as a function of emotions (Vittersø, 2013a, 2013b). These dimensions are rooted in an understanding of eudaimonia where growth transcends the individual ego, pointing to ethical growth and ethical awareness. Moreover, philosophical truths from the Greek antique, such as "know yourself and become what you are" remain relevant in a scientific understanding of wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 2008). To "know yourself" involves reflective and emotional self-exploration, becoming aware of our feelings and life values. Triggering these deeper associations between feelings and our values becomes a life-long project to become a better person. The Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia encompasses various dimensions, such as maturity, individuation, mental health, will to meaning, self-actualisation, executive processes of personality, basic life tendencies, personal development, and fully functioning persons (Ryff, 2023, p. 12).

In an artwork from Tuva Synnevåg, consciousness is illustrated as a constant stream of thoughts going in all directions (See Figure 1.1). Here, we can

Figure 1.1 "Know yourself and become who you are". Illustration by Tuva Synnevåg.

imagine the constant negotiation of emotions and thoughts of who we are and what we are heading for. This can be a rather chaotic process of dealing with ambivalences, negative thinking, and striving to fit into some norms. The question of who we are in a world that is imperfectly known is a massive question. We have limited resources to deal with it, but our emotions are at the centre of human cognition and can guide us to find perspectives that we didn't know existed (Oatley, 1994, p. 3).

In a review of contributions to positive psychology research, Ryff (2022) raises important questions about the Western project of promoting happiness. She contends that the concept of wellbeing is inherently vague, leading to scientific measurements that are equally imprecise. We agree with Ryff that "neglected negatives" such as greed, indifference, and stupidity can be problematic in a field centred on individual happiness, often at the expense of others (2022, pp. 9–10). The pursuit of amplifying individual happiness is primarily a Western idea. Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, emphasise other values, such as *compassion* as the principal source of happiness. Recent research underlines the value of an interdependent model in which happiness centres on relationships, attunement to others and social support, which are typical Eastern values (Ushida & Rappleye, 2024). Typically, eudaimonic wellbeing envisions a fully functioning person who develops their human potential in a social context. Therefore, individual wellbeing cannot be divorced from the society or physical environment they inhabit.

According to Ryff, arts and nature can help us discover and understand how to do good and be well (2019, 2022). This can be done by exposure to the arts and nature. Citing Edmundson, she suggests that literature can help people "pursue their own hopes of becoming better than they are in a human sense – wiser, more vital, kinder, sadder, more thoughtful, more worth the admiration of their children", taking people to places where they have "fuller self-knowledge, fuller self-determination, where self-making is a primary objective not just in the material sphere but in circles of the mind and heart" (Ryff, 2019, p. 142). As we see it, the cultivation of creativity and imagination is central to this endeavour, necessary for producing mindshifts. Although creativity might be an implicit component of eudaimonia, we believe that creativity is crucial for understanding why the arts and nature hold such a unique position in fostering minsdshifts. Inherent in the understanding of *change* is the role of creativity in facilitating growth, development, and possible transcendence. We now explain some core aspects of creativity and the creative process to demonstrate this point.

Creativity and creativeness

Creativity has become a suspect contentious concept for many who believe that it aligns with a neoliberal agenda where consumerism, profit, and commodification are paramount (Davis, 2014; Nicholson, 2005, 2011).

In relation to education, for instance, Helen Nicholson contends that mainstream perspectives now interpret creativity, not as "an expression of personal fulfilment, nor a […] socialist utopia, but as a commercially exploitable and marketable commodity" (2011, p. 94). While navigating and avoiding the commercial aspects of creativity can be challenging, we believe it is possible to reconceptualise creativity as a space that fosters opportunities for both personal and relational growth, as well as for utopian ideals. Drawing on the insights of Robert Sternberg, we argue that arts and nature can contribute to "transformational creativity", which carries significant ethical implications (Sternberg, 2021). One Western blind spot in understanding "creativity" is its often-limited focus on ethical purpose, neglecting how creativity is essential for societal and planetary caring beyond market imperatives and profit-motives. According to Sternberg, it is a crucial distinction between transactional and transformational creativity. Transactional creativity relates to an expectation of finding creative solutions to solve a task, often with the expectation of a transactional reward at the end, such as employment or recognition. In contrast, transformational creativity entails creating positive and meaningful contributions for the common good. The latter is closely linked to eudaimonia.

Drawing on the arguments of O'Connor (2016), Busby (2021), Nussbaum (2010), among others, we propose that promoting creativity through the arts and nature can effectively catalyse mindshifts, countering the dehumanising effects of capitalism and social injustice. Theories exploring how the arts can facilitate change often spotlight creativity, possibility, imagination, and spontaneity and play as key elements (Landy & Montgomery, 2012; O'Connor, 2016). In Nussbaum's seminal work *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities* (2010), she argues that citizens need to cultivate their "narrative imagination" to develop a moral compass in the world (p. 95).

The ability to imagine things differently is one of the central reasons why the arts is particularly well suited to envision change, as maintained by Cecily O'Neill: "If students are unable to imagine things differently and consider the world from unfamiliar perspectives, they will be unable to bring about any change in their circumstances. The arts […] have always provided these shifts of perspective" (2006, xi). According to bell hooks, "the function of art" is precisely "to imagine what is possible", so that the world can change (1994/2006, p. 281). Selinda Busby uses the phase "not yet" to signal the potential for change in arts practice. Drawing on Bloch and Ricoeur, she argues that the "'not yet' is what might be, and as such, 'not yet' produces the imagination and possibility for change" (2021, p. 50). Building on this perspective, Busby has developed "a pedagogy of utopia", using theatre practices to explore the potential to "allow for the possibility of change so participants might see that there is the potential for them to create, choose and change" (2021, p. 12).

According to Jacob Levy Moreno, best known for his development of psychodrama, spontaneity and creativity are essential components of change and the production of mindshifts (Moreno, 1946/2019). It can even be argued that he saw the twin concepts of spontaneity-creativity as the primary force underpinning all human growth and development (Nolte, 2014). In Moreno's spontaneity-creativity theory, spontaneity is the catalyst for creativity and creativity is a necessity to be able to adapt well in life (Orkibi, 2019). Both creativity and spontaneity are thus needed to cultivate happiness and wellbeing. Indeed, he defined spontaneity as the ability to "respond with some degree of adequacy to a new situation or with some degree of novelty to an old situation" (Moreno, 1946/2019, p. 48). Without spontaneity, people are thus not able to adapt to changes and challenges they face in their lives.

Moreno's starting point is that everyone has the potential to be creative, but that creativity often becomes blocked by age or life situations, causing languishing and anxiety (Moreno, 1953). One of the main goals of Moreno's theatre practices, whether linked to therapy or community arts, was thus to restore spontaneity-creativity in people's lives. One of the key methods he utilised to enhance people's spontaneity and creativity was role play. According to Moreno, "role playing is prior to the emergence of the self. Roles do not emerge from the self, but the self emerges from roles" (1946/2019, p. 45). As he saw it, the "individual craves to embody far more roles than those he is allowed to act out in life" (p. 48). Being prevented from acting out these roles or feeling pressured to play roles in restrictive ways, often led to "feelings of anxiety" (p. 48). Giving people opportunities to explore different roles through roleplay was thus a way to help people realise their potential as human beings. In short, through roleplay people are able to explore and experience aspects of their self that otherwise would have remained unexpressed. In this process, people are allowed to engage in processes of self-creation and self-discovery, both associated with the development of identity and wellbeing (Waterman and Schwartz, 2013).

Humanistic psychology also emphasises the idea that the arts can shift perspectives and foster change (Maslow, 1967; May, 1975/1994). According to Maslow, creativity in the arts is crucial to guiding individuals towards actualising their potential and becoming moral citizens (Maslow, 1967, p. 43). For Maslow, May, and Rogers, creativity is linked to self-actualisation, which in turn, is correlated with health and wellbeing. According to Rollo May, "the creative process must be explored not as the product of sickness, but as representing the highest degree of emotional health, as the expression of the normal people in the act of actualising themselves" (1975/1994, p. 40). Similarly, for Maslow, "the concept of creativeness" is closely intertwined with the "concept of the healthy, self-actualising, fully human person" to the extent that these concepts may "turn out to be the same" (1968, p. 43). Significantly, self-actualisation

is associated with transcendence of self, where individuals move beyond themselves (Maslow, 1967). Fromm describes the creative process not an egocentric or narcissistic process, precisely because it enables transcendence. On the contrary, it is a process that connects the individual more deeply with the world: "He [sic] transcends the boundaries of his own person, and at the very moment when he feels 'I am' he also feels 'I am you,' I am one with the whole world" (1959, p. 51).

Studies of experiences that have the potential to transcend the way we perceive ourselves and the world are particularly significant. One such experience is the flow state: "The climber feels at one with the rock, the wind, and the weather; the musicians feel that the sounds they produce link them with the 'harmony of the spheres'" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 390). He continues: "the surgeon becomes part of the choreography of the operating theatre; the dancer gets lost in the dance" (p. 390). Here, by becoming totally immersed in the situations, there is an expansion of the self, being a part of a "great force, a system or process larger and more powerful than the individual selves we were before" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 390). According to Csikszentmihalyi, the constant critical reflection of the ego disappears during the flow state. There is simply no room for irrelevant thoughts, worries, and distractions when an individual is fully engaged in their activity, whether it involves dialogue with other humans, animals, arts, or natural environments. Intrinsic motivation is a hallmark of the flow experience. To be intrinsically motivated for the chosen activity is closely related to eudaimonia, which entails self-fulfilment, contentment, making sense of actions, and feeling a sense of purpose. These are experiences or stimuli essential for individuals to realise new levels of connection to others, humanity, and the planet, thereby broadening their perspective towards change and growth. This approach to understanding creative processes offers a clear connection to eudaimonia. Indeed, creative processes offer a pathway to achieving eudaimonic wellbeing. To gain a deeper understanding of how creative processes in arts and nature can stimulate change, we will now explore the role of emotions in producing mindshifts.

Eudaimonic emotions and the creation of mindshifts

Is transcendence and change possible without emotion? Not according to researchers. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio suggests that "learning that is separate from emotion, while possible, cannot affect our practical behaviour in life" (DeCoursey, 2019, p. 6). Emotions are thus essential for producing mindshifts, but to understand the complex relationship between emotions and change, we must understand more about how we are motivated for change, how different emotions affect us, how hedonic and eudaimonic emotions differ, and how art- and nature-rich experiences might awaken our emotions to produce change.

Emotions and action readiness

Positive emotions stimulate our cognitive functioning, enabling us to see new opportunities for ourselves, for others, and the planet. This emotional and cognitive process is known as the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004). By understanding how emotions drive processes, we gain insights into how art and nature can support such growth.

Emotions are closely tied to our social relationships. By interrogating our emotional perceptions of ourselves and the world, we enhance our imagination enabling us to challenge, refine, and create new understandings. To mention a few examples, Oatley argues that reading *fiction* stimulates an emotional engagement in various social worlds different from our own, thereby fostering new dimensions of empathy (Oatley, 1994). Nussbaum reflects on her personal experience of immersing herself in music, noting that it made her aware of emotions she hadn't previously recognised (Nussbaum, 2011). Moreover, many go to the theatre precisely because it provides opportunities to experience emotional depths. According to Erin Hurley, one of the true enjoyments of theatre is that it can perform a unique "feeling-labour" that helps us to cultivate our emotional and imaginative capacities in unexpected ways (2010, p. 29; Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 67–81).

Acknowledging basic emotions, which is "happiness", "contentment", "fear", "anger", and "sadness", and combinations of these, helps us understand how these emotions guide specific actions (Oatley, 1994). For instance, happiness manifests when an event aligns with our plan. It is a positive evaluation, rewarded with positive emotions, and can energise us even if there are emotional costs involved. When content, individuals will be prepared to continue what they are doing. For the case of fear, when an event is perceived as a threat, the body responds by preparing to confront danger, leading to flight or fight responses. Anxiety, on the other hand, can trigger a range of responses from immobility and obsessional checking, to phobic avoidance or hypervigilance (Oatley, 1994, p. 208). In the classification of basic emotions, the role of "interest" might have been overlooked. In Tomkins' theory of affect (1970), the role of interest is to maintain attention to novel stimuli long enough to make the unfamiliar stimulus meaningful. This makes us deal with difficult tasks and accomplish them.

Eudaimonic emotions, such as interest, engagement, enthusiasm, and inspiration, play a significant role in our moral development in subtle ways. Because "interest" is moving us to stay in unfamiliar conditions (Tomkins, 1970), we argue that this is a central emotion for understanding growth development. Expanding on a richer understanding of eudaimonic emotions, there are other complex emotions that are also highly affective. Studying the flow experience, *engagement* seems to be essential – to be so fully engaged that you lose your self-perception could be seen as a precondition of the flow experience, which is highly related to dynamics of intrinsic motivation (Vittersø, 2016). Other

eudaimonic emotions could be *enthusiasm* and *inspiration*, which together with *engagement* are grounded as appetitive feelings in social and personality psychology (Straume & Vittersø, 2012). In other words, these are feelings that make us want a growth development. In addition to the already mentioned four eudaimonic emotions, we acknowledge the dynamics of interest to be followed by several complex emotions, such as awe, wonder, and love. In particular, we are curious to identify emotions that touch our moral and epistemological thinking. Some emotions have influence on how we understand what is true and important. A "moral" emotion is an emotion thought to relate to the capacity for human morality (Walsh, 2021). Typically, negative emotions such as disgust, shame, anger, and guilt are moral emotions, making us change our habits or actions from the worse to the better, but also positive emotions such as gratitude, compassion, and pride are moral emotions that can be cultivated for wiser actions and lifestyles. Following the philosopher Laura Candiotto, *wonder* is "primarily an experience in which the feeling is not only the one of amazement, but also the feeling of doubt, uneasiness, and the questioning is filled with uncertainty and curiosity" (Candiotto, 2019, p. 854). Wonder relates to questioning what we would believe was truth and is a boost for seeking knowledge and wisdom.

Since the turn of the Millenium, there has been a growing interest in understanding transcendent experiences, particularly through the lens of "awe experience" (Keltner, 2023; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Keltner defines awe experience thus: "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world" (Keltner, 2023, p. 7). There are two central elements in this definition: the experience of vastness and the encountering of something novel that expands our perspectives of being in the world. Neurologically, experiencing awe quiets down regions in the brain associated with the ego. These regions are linked to self-criticism, anxiety, and even depression (Keltner 2023, p. 36).

Regular experiences of awe can therefore ameliorate feelings of depression and anxiety, making awe experiences important for health and wellbeing. In the development of the Awe Experience Scale, experiences of *beauty* were the most common theme for the identification of awe (Yaden et al., 2018). Triggers of awe were identified as natural scenery (this was the most common trigger), a great skill, an encounter with God, great virtue, a building or monument, a powerful leader, a grand theory or idea, music, art, epiphany, or other triggers. Moreover, awe experiences are significant because they contribute to transcendence and the development of moral emotions (Løvoll & Sæther, 2022; Løvoll et al., 2024). However, accessing awe experiences is not straightforward, as merely being exposed to stimulating environments alone may not be sufficient. We will now turn to a scientific experiment on these relationships.

Sturm et al. (2022) tested the theory that awe experience depends on how we pay attention through "awe walks" in nature. They conducted a

randomised controlled trial where older adults participated in 15-minute outdoor walks, either alone or in a group, once a week over an eight-week period. The experiment participants were primed: "with the right outlook, awe can be found almost anywhere, but it is most likely to occur in places that involve two key features: physical vastness and novelty" (Sturm et al., 2022, p. 5). These participants were encouraged to embrace wonder and explore new locations to walk every week, whenever feasible. In contrast, the control group received no particular instruction beyond the 15 minutes of walking in nature. From this study, participants from the experiment group reported bigger smiles, heightened positive affect, and a sense of feeling smaller in relation to nature compared to the control group. The results highlighted that only a small intervention of 15 minutes per week, embracing wonder in nature, can yield positive results. Interestingly, the intensity of awe experiences gradually increased over the course of the experiment, supporting the notion that "the more we practice, the richer it gets" (Keltner, 2023, p. 106). In other words, cultivating the ability to discover transcending experiences in daily life becomes a valuable life skill.

"Vastness" can be interpreted broadly – whether it's through physical grandeur, a shift in perception, encountering mystery, or through human interaction. Arts, culture, and human interactions provide significant opportunities for us to reflect on ourselves in relation to others, experience vastness, and contemplate who we aspire to become. According to Keltner, "Awe enables us to see life as a process, that all endless forms most beautiful are deeply interconnected, and involve change, transformation, impermanence, and death" (2023, p. 248). Today, there is a growing desire to engage in practices that evoke awe, such as "chanting, song, and music; painting, carving, sculpture, and design; poetry, fiction and drama; and supernatural explanation and spiritual practice" (p. 249). Awe experiences and meaningful interactions fostered from arts and nature-based activities might be difficult to obtain for today's children, especially in the age of digitalisation and internet entertainment. Awe experiences should be recognised and valued essential elements in a flourishing life, offering emotional depth and opportunities for transcendent experiences.

Love, as another complex emotion, can help us understand how people are transformed through encounters in nature and art (Pomfret et al., 2023). According to bell hooks (2000), love enables us to challenge and change dominant views that are internalised as "truth". Moreover, Barbara Fredrickson's definition of love as "connection" is also insightful: "Love blossoms virtually anytime two or more people – even strangers – connect over a shared positive emotion, be it mild or strong" (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 17). Moments of love, or positive connection, change our minds and enable us to see others and ourselves in new ways. Every time we experience love we are thus transformed: "The more you experience it, the more you open up and grow, becoming wiser and more attuned, more resilient and effective, happier and healthier"

(Fredrickson, 2013, p. 4). This transformation refers to eudaimonic wellbeing, as it involves becoming more aware our moral emotions in the interpretation of "know thyself and become what you are" (Ryff, 1989).

Negative emotions are not necessarily detrimental to creative wellbeing. Eudaimonic emotions can coexist with negative emotions such as discomfort, frustration, and fear. A recent publication on "creative being" asserts that negative emotions are seen as sources of a transcending process. When acknowledged and channelled effectively, negative emotions can contribute to creativity and personal growth (Beresford et al., 2024).

Emotional dynamics of stability and change explain human behaviour

Understanding the role of stability and change in human functioning is perhaps "the most fundamental insight generated in the sciences of humans and other biological organisms" (Vittersø, 2016, p. 270). This insight is fundamental because human growth processes and a possible mindshift depend on how we understand change. How we understand stability is equally important in maintaining an ecological and virtuous lifestyle. Although we acknowledge these are vast and fundamental questions, we are curious to explore how these processes occur, driving the individual to change perspectives and embrace new possibilities.

Change is a precondition for achieving a mindshift towards sustainable futures. But why do we so often prefer to remain in our comfort zones? Why do we avoid risks and shy away from the possibilities of new experiences? On the other hand, *stability* is very much needed, when life is stressful and chaotic. Understanding stability and change in human functioning refers to our motivational dynamics and wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016). This understanding includes our willingness to behave morally, allowing "benefit-related" emotions to be challenged by "opportunity related" emotions, as described by Smith et al. (2014). Here, based on appraisal theory, benefit-related emotions relate to our individual here and now rewards and preferences for being in the comfort zone, while opportunity-related emotions move us away from the individual and safe perspective and push for exploration, curiosity, and meaning. This also resonates with the acknowledgement of emotions in the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016), and the differences between equilibrium (to feel safe, within the comfort zone, associated with stability) and disequilibrium (to push for exploration, curiosity, and meaning, associated with change). Choosing a more complex path for greater good, often involves discomfort. Grasping opportunities for development can be challenging but essential for individual growth.

Understanding how we perceive complexity reveals that growth-oriented wellbeing favours higher levels of complexity in comparison to satisfaction-oriented wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016, p. 264). Moreover, remaining engaged in tasks that require our sustained focused attention is not drawn by

feeling "pleasure". This feeling does not make our attention focused. Instead, pleasure makes us relax from our task. In contrast, "interest" fuels our growth-oriented wellbeing, helping us to sustain concentration and energy. The four feelings interest, engagement, enthusiasm, and inspiration are identified as typical eudaimonic feelings, all of which are growth and opportunity oriented (Straume & Vittersø, 2012). These eudaimonic feelings are triggered by challenges that disrupt our mental equilibrium. Following scheme theory (Eckblad, 1981), inspired by Jean Piaget, our experience of a new situation depends on our familiarity with it. If it is familiar and pleasant, we tend to feel *pleasure* representing a state of equilibrium where we feel safe and satisfied. However, if the situation is entirely novel and unfamiliar, we experience disequilibrium, and we must expend mental resources to interpret how we can deal with the new situation.

Here, dealing with the new and complex situation, there is a *creative act* "which make sense of what has happened and proposes what to be done" (Oatley, 1994, p. 399). Hence, we connect growth-oriented wellbeing to creativity. We emphasise the importance of change and novelty in challenging the equilibrium state. Various stimuli, particularly arts- and nature-based facilitated activities, can catalyse such changes by inviting participants to take new social roles, play, introduce new skills, and explore new places, etc., which are typical qualities within the field. In this process, the emotional transition from frustration and challenge to interest, facilitated by increasing familiarity and competence with the novel situation, is essential for empowering growth-oriented wellbeing (Eckblad, 1981) (See Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, pp. 82–99 for a more detailed explanation).

The role of nature and art in awakening our eudaimonic emotions

Within the contexts of nature and art, people are invited to be open to sensory experiences, imagination, and play, to mention a few common characteristics. These contexts can be very stimulating for emotional arousal. Typically, the body is activated and there is a need for openness to put emotions in front of the experience, at least in the artistic expression, the immersion in nature, and the willingness to be a part of a group experience exploring new things.

Centring emotion, Reber employs the term "critical feeling". Reber asserts that "critical feeling" is a more fitting term than "critical thinking" since it acknowledges that a human thought is also felt, and this feeling comes first and is essential to refining our critical thinking (Reber, 2016). Reber suggests that in developing interests, there are at least three effective strategies: personalisation (building on personal interests), choice (having opportunities to choose between options), and relevance intervention (understanding why the subject is relevant for life) (2016, pp. 188–189). In presenting arts- and nature-based activities, these three principles are essential in awakening eudaimonic emotions. We need to be emotionally touched

to learn from an experience. This process must build on personal interest, provide choices, and feel relevant in the creation of meaning, values, and identity. As such, arts and nature-based activities will appeal differently to different people, necessitating a variety of approaches to include everyone. While theatre might appeal more to some, outdoor recreation might be preferred by others. Therefore, diverse strategies are essential to foster creative wellbeing.

Creative wellbeing: an emotional framework

Building on a mix of theories and empiric contributions, we hypotheses a clarification of creative wellbeing based on our preliminary definition: "Creative wellbeing involves engaging in activities or experiences that stimulate creativity and result in the creation of something new (such as a new perspective, a human-nature relationship, an artwork, etc.), fostering transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual" (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 5).

Being aware that making theories of human transcendence is extremely complex and difficult, we also believe that the potentials of arts- and nature-based activities for eudaimonic wellbeing and the transition into a sustainable society are largely overlooked. As an initial step, we argue that "creative wellbeing" happens when "arts- and nature-based activities" (A) stimulate "subjective feelings of interest, wonder, awe, and/or love" (B), and there is a "transcending experience that promote moral awareness" (C).

The hypothesised argument is as follows:

If (A and B), then C

Emotions are not in the periphery or "add on" to the experience, but a core. Eudaimonic emotions are necessary for transcendence. If participants do not develop eudaimonic emotions during an activity, then transcendence is not likely to happen. We explore the hypothesised argument by trying some other combinations.

If (A and not B), then not C

This does not mean that the activity is not meaningful for the participant, but the potential for change and transcendence is not fully developed in this situation. However, any emotional valence could happen, depending on personal interest, opportunity to choose, and experience of relevance (Reber, 2016). The introduction to a new activity could typically be characterized with disinterest, or even fear or frustration. However, by developing skills and trust, initial negative emotions might turn to eudaimonic emotions if the process is facilitated in a good manner.

We do not say that the feelings of interest, wonder, awe, and love are exclusive to arts and nature-based context. We could have a situation where these emotions have other causes, which also leads to transcendence:

If (not A and B), then C

In the acknowledgement of emotions for transcendence, there could be other ways these emotions could be triggered. This is an interesting situation, but if we call it “creative wellbeing”, the concept might lose direction. Could every action facilitating transcendence be creative wellbeing? We believe that the strong stimuli from arts and nature-based activities is essential to the narrative.

Following this line of reasoning, what are the conditions for “If (A and B), then C” to happen? Why, how, when, and where could arts and nature-based activities stimulate B? These are important questions for further exploration.

We are not making a simplistic causal claim about complex emotional processes, but rather asserting that interest, awe, wonder, and love play central roles in promoting creative wellbeing. Arts and nature-based activities are privileged approaches for fostering these complex emotions, which are somewhat underdeveloped in society. Personality and cultural issues influencing openness to engage in facilitated experiences are crucial considerations. However, emotional engagement in arts and nature-based experiences ultimately hinges on a willingness to commit.

While transcendence is inherently unpredictable, establishing supportive structures is crucial for fostering understanding. Moral emotions challenge equilibrium and inspire opportunities for transcending perspectives or relationships toward better lives and more just societies. This knowledge involves encouraging decision makers, therapists, educators, and entrepreneurs to embrace a *mindshift*, learning how to lead good and virtuous lives with emotional awareness of our roles in promoting wellbeing for *all*, including all living organisms.

Concluding thoughts

By facilitating rich nature and culture experiences that stimulate our imagination, people might revise their personal narratives. Such stimulation encourages individuals to test new actions or develop new habits consistent with their exploration of complex feelings, a knowledge that often lies dormant in our everyday consciousness. Participation in arts- and nature-based practices offers the chance to move from equilibrium to disequilibrium through exposure to new environments, new practices, and new social roles. This process fosters a possibility-oriented mindset, promoting growth and positive change.

At the centre of this growth process are feelings of interest, awe, wonder, and love, which drive spontaneous motivation (Eckblad, 1981), aesthetic experiences, spirituality, and moral emotions (Løvoll & Sæther, 2022) – all crucial components of eudaimonic wellbeing (Ryff, 2022, 2021, 2023). Engaging in arts- and nature-based activities invites the awakening of eudaimonic feelings by exposing participants to the sublime, the mystical, the imaginative, rich

sensory experiences, social community, and rhythmical, among others. These practices challenge traditional ways of learning and foster creative action readiness, which is the most important skill to learn today, learning to adapt to new and unknown situations (Løvoll & Botellero, 2024).

Emotions of interest, awe, wonder, and love guide us in exploring our values. By adopting a nature and arts approach to changing our perspectives, we access our feelings and imagination. In this context, the facilitated nature and arts experiences can spark novel imagination and new stories in our self-creation journey. Acknowledging the centrality of emotions within the arts- and nature-based activities opens for a rich exploration of conditions for how, when, and where this happens.

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Chapter 2

Creative wellbeing in nature

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Seeing nature along with spiritual awakening

There is a growing interest in spiritual approaches to understanding the human-nature relationship to restore our lack of connection to nature (Jirásek, 2023; Wheeler, 2022). This new understanding has become increasingly urgent, as our alienation from nature poses an existential threat to the Earth. Western lifestyles are characterised by an anthropocentrism where nature is literally subjugated by human need. Eco-philosophers emphasise the necessity of adopting a less anthropocentric viewpoint to address the planet's current sustainability challenges (Næss & Rothenberg, 1992, 2008; Vetlesen, 2015). Shifting our perspective from a consumerist to a caretaking attitude to nature recognising it as the foundation of our existence is not only a philosophical question, but also a spiritual and existential one. What if, in our overdevelopment, we have lost our ancient sensitivity to nature's agency that remains evident in Indigenous cultures?

According to Ryff (2021), spiritual experiences are somewhat overlooked in wellbeing sciences. To understand who we are and what we need, Ryff states that our souls are longing for poetry, myth, and metaphor. She links this longing to our intrinsic connection to nature, observing that encounters with the natural world often play a crucial role in spiritual awakening. Like Ryff, we argue that we need to broaden our ways of engaging with nature to help our souls thrive and to discover more effective ways of caring for the natural world. This process aimed at inspiring a spiritual revitalisation of the human-nature relationship is a crucial aspect of creative wellbeing: Here, creative wellbeing

> involves engaging in activities or experiences that stimulate creativity and result in the creation of something new (such as a new perspective, a human-nature relationship, an artwork, etc.), fostering transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual.
>
> (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 5)

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This understanding draws inspiration from a eudaimonic wellbeing approach which emphasises values and virtues related to Aristotelian ethics (see Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, pp.17–35).

In this chapter, we delve into understanding how creative wellbeing manifests through interactions with nature. We approach the relationship between creative wellbeing and nature in four steps. First, we contextualise nature, culture, and creative wellbeing as a departure point. Second, we explore eco-spiritual perspectives on creative wellbeing in nature, emphasising the significance of place, belonging, and aesthetic experiences. Third, we examine the transformative aspects of human-nature encounter. Fourth, we present friluftsliv as a cultural practice of fostering friendship with nature. Finally, we contextualise these theoretical insights by exploring effective methods to cultivate friluftsliv pedagogy for creative wellbeing in nature. Overall, we demonstrate how these steps – which partly overlap – illuminate the concept of creative wellbeing within our interactions with nature.

Creating wellbeing in our encounter with nature

Creativity is often associated with arts activities such as theatre making, music, painting, and dancing. However, describing experiences and activities in nature as creative endeavours is less common. Based on empirical research with both students and vulnerable groups in society, we found that experiences in nature frequently open creative spaces *within* individuals, which have the potential to enhance wellbeing (Løvoll et al., 2020; Løvoll & Torrissen, 2020; Løvoll & Sæther, 2022). Thus, a greater awareness of the nature-creative wellbeing connection enables a broader and more inclusive understanding of what participation and active engagement means for promoting creativity for wellbeing. This connection between nature and wellbeing has long been recognised, as described by the founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale: “Nature alone cures…and what nursing has to do in either case, is to put the patient in the best condition for nature to act upon him” (Nightingale, 1859 cited in Hegge (2013, pp. 1, 10). Interestingly, Nightingale acknowledges the profound impact of nature in the healing process. Moreover, she emphasises the importance of creativity in enhancing patients’ engagement with nature. This perspective sees nature as fostering creative wellbeing by offering opportunities for self-development.

In our review of literature, a recent meta-analysis found the human-nature connection as positively correlated with environmental knowledge, time spent outside, engagement in mindfulness practices, pro-environmental and humanistic values, happiness, and good health; and negatively correlated with materialism/consumerism and political conservatism (Sheffield et al., 2022). Embracing these findings, we identified relevant attitudes and behaviours as pathways to re-establishing a connection with nature. Our exploration

included fostering a willingness to learn about nature, spend time outdoors, building a mindful mindset, understanding the development of virtues and values, and promoting aspects related to happiness and health. Additionally, our approach has been guided by leadership research focused on delivering the UN Sustainable Development Goals with particular emphasis on Inner Development Goals (IDGs). These goals – which emphasise the relationship to self (Being), cognitive skills (Thinking), caring for others and the world (Relationships), social skills (Collaboration), and enabling change (Action) – foster our inner development towards a sustainable future (https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/framework). Hence, IDGs resonate clearly with creative wellbeing and underscore emphasis of Eudaimonia in our own research and practice.

Our goal is not merely academic but also ambitiously far-reaching: We hope to effect a transformative shift in perspective, a mindshift. We seek to enhance the current knowledge and practices of creative wellbeing shaping how individuals see themselves, think, relate, collaborate, and act – in alignment with the five overarching principles of IDG. We place particular emphasis on human transformation to a life more harmonised with nature and our inner values. In this chapter, we map out the concepts and practices of creative wellbeing to better understand the processes and frameworks so that our ambition might be realised.

Place, belonging, and aesthetic experiences: eco-spiritual insights for creative wellbeing

In this section, we identify how an eco-spiritual approach to nature offers valuable insights into fostering creative wellbeing in nature. Insights drawn from eco-spirituality help us unpack the significance of place as a focal point for aesthetic experiences. Eco-spirituality, influenced by eco-philosophy, eco-theology, and environmental aesthetics, encompasses a broad and varied range of perspectives (Sæther, 2023). Despite its diversity, there are common themes across these theories that are pertinent to our investigation of creative wellbeing. We privilege three of these. First, eco-spirituality advocates for a holistic approach to the human-nature encounter. Second, we examine the significance of place and belonging within an eco-spiritual approach. Third, we address the importance of aesthetic experiences in nature for creative wellbeing.

Given the existing "separation from nature" paradigm that dominates life in much of the Western world, we posit that adopting a holistic perspective provides a more appropriate framework for addressing the human-nature relationship. At the same time, we acknowledge the inherent tension that arises from juxtaposing humans and nature. In the heritage of Descartes, the separation between mind and matter (including body) is articulated as dualism. Dualism has often been used pejoratively to criticise everything bankrupt in the human-nature relationship. However, we often simplify dualism

(Haila, 2000, p. 155). By limiting the debate to the dualism of the dyadic human-nature relationship, we overlook other dualisms including transcendence/immanence, reason/senses, nature/culture, intrinsic human dualism (mind/body), or human/nature (Hastings & Sæther, 2023).

In exploring the relationship between humans and nature, we invariably encounter dualities or, more accurately, dual perspectives. Most fundamental is the distinct treatment of the notions of "nature" and "human" as substantially different entities. To contrast "nature" and "human", we argue for *distinctions,* and in so doing, we amplify difference and separation. Conversely, embracing holism does not entail merging humans and nature into a singular phenomenon, since this would undermine the relational aspect between them. Hence, in both our research and practice, adopting a holistic approach to nature primarily emphasises its *relational* character.

Eco-spirituality engages with our encounter with nature by highlighting both how we *see* nature and the importance of *place*. How we see nature involves how deeply and attentively we observe the intricate complexity of the natural world and all its details. Such an awareness also includes a temporal dimension. Being attuned to nature over time requires dedication and focus to cultivate a profound connection. It is not enough to just "be" in natural surroundings, whether exercising, listening to music, engaging on a mobile phone, or performing other activities. Rather, seeing nature requires us to be fully present and attentive. Being consciously present and attentive enables us to truly attune to the trees, plants, birds, and insects that surround us. Cultivating this sense of attunement can expand our perception to recognise agency in the natural world. For example, we might see in a tree's twisted branches a strong determination and resilience to survive.

Cultivation of empathy stimulates our awareness of own feelings, which is essential for becoming aware our inner values and achieving eudaimonic wellbeing by "knowing thyself and become who you are" (Ryff & Singer, 2008). We posit that these perspectives on can foster a deeper sensitivity and encourage practices that promote growth in awareness, acceptance, and appreciation for others, as well as the Earth. Weeler describes such consciousness as spiritual awareness (Wheeler, 2022, p. 3). Further, the awareness of place has an integrative function "… among what takes place and what we perceive and then how we reflect upon and interpret experiences" (Bergmann & Eaton, 2011, p. 3). According to Bergmann and Eaton, this interaction forms a zigzag pattern where senses and cognition unite in a complex manner, rather than a linear progression from senses to cognitive reflection. This interplay raises questions of values and ethics: "What we become aware of influences the kinds of questions we ask, how and what we reflect upon, and ultimately how we answer our queries" (Bergmann & Eaton, 2011, p. 3). For Bergmann and Eaton, such a broad understanding of awareness is clearly relevant for global environmental challenges.

Another dimension of place involves humans' sense of *belonging* (Washington, 2019). Because humans and the natural environment are intertwined, there is an opportunity to experience a profound sense of being at home in nature (Graves et al. 2020). Feeling at home in nature can also be encompassed by *topophilia*, understood as love to a place, or *biophilia* as love directed to nature and all living beings (Tuan, 1974; Wilson, 1984; Kristiansen, 2007). Both terms encapsulate the idea that connecting with nature involves relating to a given place, and through this connection, one also connects more deeply with oneself. However, what we sometimes experience instead is alienation, distance, and even "ecogrief", stemming from humans' negative impact on nature. In the Christian tradition, this sentiment calls for the restoration of the garden of God, or in the words of the Leonard Boff: "Our task is to build a home for all people" (Boff, 2015, p. 32). In a similar way, Philip Hefner describes humans as active participants in nature through the concept of humans as created co-creators (Hefner, 1993). In our context, Hefner's notion of humans as co-creators can be described as *ecopoiesis*. This idea emphasises nature's inherent capacity, particularly through human agency – for creative acts and behaviour. According to Alexander Kypotin and Arran Gare, *ecopoiesis* is a generative process "whereby human beings together with nature shape the world and themselves, bring new forms and meanings of life from the mode of possibility into the mode of existence" (Kopytin & Gare, 2023, p. 12). Hence, whether humans experience a sense of belonging to nature or, conversely, a disconnection from it, there is a potential for humans to creatively shape both the world and themselves.

The context of the human-nature relationship inherently encompasses a cultural dimension. As shown, qualities such as awareness and acceptance (cf. Wheeler, 2022; Bergmann & Eaton, 2022) are essential traits that we must cultivate in our encounters with others and with our environment. Therefore, a fundamental aspect of our holistic-relational approach to nature is the integrations of social and cultural dimensions. Importantly, creative wellbeing in nature is shaped and developed through our interaction *with* others in nature.

The cultural dimension is addressed by both Boff and Hefner through the expressions "for all people" and by referring to humans as "co-creators". Creative wellbeing is not an isolated, individual concern. It extends beyond the individual. Creative wellbeing finds its true context within *relationships* with other living beings. The social and collective, dimension is evident in different concrete "practice spaces", such as within friluftsliv which we explore later. Hefner's concept of humans as "co-creators" underscores a dynamic and creative element (*creatio*). We need to creatively act in such a way that fosters wellbeing, and in even more ambitious terms, contribute to making the Earth a better place.

An important constituent of eco-spirituality is the emphasis on aesthetic-emotional encounters with nature (Sæther, 2023). Research has spotlighted

three aesthetic experiences in nature: beauty, the sublime, and wonder (Graves et al., 2020). In particular, feelings of awe feature prominently in nature-based experiences of the sublime and wonder. The study of aesthetic experiences in eco-spirituality is explored by the field of environmental aesthetics, which emphasises the power of aesthetic appreciation. Environmental aesthetics provides tools to appreciate the qualities of aesthetic experiences in nature. According to Allen Carlson, aesthetics is not confined to art but encompasses our broader sensory perceptions (Carlson, 2000). Hence, aesthetic experiences include our surroundings, taking in the whole environment and can, accordingly, be applied to experiences in nature as well (Carlson, 2000).

The experience of beauty in nature is central to our love of nature. We develop strong feelings and attachments for certain natural places (Parsons, 2008). However, such experiences are more than disinterested observations. Martin Seel expresses it this way:

> … the aesthetic of nature is (…) simultaneously part of an ethics of the individual conduct of life (…) for aesthetics, being concerned with specific forms of and opportunities for process-oriented activity, is generally part of an ethics of the good life.
>
> (Seel, 1998, p. 342)

Hence, the field of "environmental aesthetics" emphasises a complexity involved in appreciating aesthetic experiences in nature, such as beauty (Berleant, 1998). Although aesthetic experiences in art and nature share similarities, the field of environmental aesthetics emphasises that the complexity of these experiences is different in nature than in arts. Roland W. Hepburn, a pioneer of environmental aesthetics, argued as early as 1966 that the frameworks used for aesthetic appreciation in art are inadequate in our encounters with nature. Our aesthetic reflections on nature require approaches that can both accommodate its indeterminate and varying character, as well as our own multi-sensory experience and diverse understanding of nature (Hepburn, 1966). In addition, aesthetic experiences in nature can promote what Martin Steel refers to as an "ethics of good life", integrating aesthetic appreciation with ethical living (Seel, 1998). According to Kathryn Alexander, a connection between aesthetics and ethics can advance ethical commitments (Alexander, 2014) and shift ethical awareness. Inspired by Josiah Royce, Alexander suggests that such a commitment can be expressed as loyalty to a community. For our work on creative wellbeing in nature, such loyalty can be nurtured as a commitment to each other and nature.

We recognise the complexity of aesthetic experiences and that our encounter with nature might also evoke negative emotions, especially given our current environmental situation. Nevertheless, aesthetic experiences in nature

can foster feelings of wellbeing: "What [the stars] did stir in me (...) was wonder, and I have turned this wonder loose in my imagination many times as I have looked into the clear night sky. And each time I have been given joy" (Sobosan, 1999, p. 1). These experiences of wonder and joy highlight the positive emotional impact that nature can have on our wellbeing. We believe that this joy is not an experience limited to "oneself" but might extend to include concern for other humans and nature in general. This corresponds with Næss and friluftsliv, to which we will return later. Further, Sobosan describes the experience as both aesthetic and moral:

> It is aesthetic because the panorama of shapes and colours my eyes take in produces an experience of beauty; it is moral because knowledge of the sheer size and age of what I am seeing produces an experience of humility.
>
> (Sobosan, 1999, p. 1)

Similarly, Bergmann employs the term aesth/ethics to describe the strong connection between aesthetics and ethics. He argues that when addressing moral problems, perception – an aesthetic experience – necessarily precedes reflection and the pursuit of solutions (Bergmann, 2006). Given the intrinsic value of aesthetic experiences, they have the potential to engender moral agency (Sæther, 2023). The use of "potential" is crucial here as this process is neither guaranteed nor straightforward. We will return to how aesthetic experiences might catalyse a transformation (Løvoll & Sæther, 2022).

Sobosan's (1999) and Bergmann's (2006) theories of aesthetic experiences and action – in terms of safeguarding nature – are relevant to human creative wellbeing. In one sense, we are turning back to our elaboration of a holistic-relational approach to nature, and how this approach is integrated with our emphasis on "place" for aesthetic experiences. Aesthetic experiences in nature take diverse forms, and we do not attempt to standardise how individuals experience nature. People have different aesthetic preferences, various ways of paying attention to their surroundings, and different ways of interpreting what they experience. However, some natural phenomena evoke universal aesthetic responses, such as the awe-inspiring beauty of sunsets, the grandeur of mountains and oceans, and the beauty of flowers. When these shared human experiences in nature are informed by our knowledge about these phenomena, they reveal grand evolutionary narratives of the universe and humanity's intertwined relationship with nature where imagination and empathy play crucial roles.

Insights from neuropsychology support these perspectives. Evidence indicates that aesthetic experiences activate reward-related brain regions (Crone & Leder, 2022, p. 440). Moreover, the processing of pleasure appears to be independent of sensory stimulation, suggesting a complex interplay between

context, cognition, and sensory input. Working memory plays a significant role in this process, favouring beauty pointing to higher-order cognition in some aesthetic experiences. The concept of *accommodation*, together with perception of vastness, emerges as a fundamental aspect of awe, which is central to understanding aesthetic experiences (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Further, identifying the context for these experiences involves important social and semantic components (Crone & Leder, 2022). While these processes are generally studied within arts, interpreting nature with the help of a mentor or guide serves a similar role as a curator of a museum or art gallery. We will revisit the role of such a facilitator later.

The transformative character in the human-nature encounter

Our argument traces the transformative potential of aesthetic experiences in nature towards ethical considerations, suggesting that creative wellbeing in nature is relevant to the care for all beings and the environment. In this section, we highlight the notions of caring and imagination. *Caring,* in our context, involves acting ethically in our encounters with both other humans and the natural world. Caring is foundational condition for creative wellbeing by including all humans with shared interests in nature, irrespective of privilege and background. Nature serves as a worldwide "community place" for caring for all living beings (biophilia) and the entire environment, including non-biological aspects (topophilia). Hence, like Nussbaum, we argue that by recognising how humans are deeply intertwined with and inseparable from nature, and by paying attention to our specific location, we enhance our awareness at a given place (which emphasises awareness, aesthetic and possible transformative experiences), we gain resources for further elaborations of creative wellbeing in nature. This attention to place, coupled with aesthetic and potentially transformative experiences, provides valuable resources for further developing the concept of creative wellbeing in nature. By employing a "Capabilities Approach", we leverage the free expansion of our imaginative capacities to uphold "human dignity and of a life worthy of it – or, when we are considering other animal species, the dignity appropriate to the species in question" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 29).

Caring is intrinsically linked to imagination. Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker articulate the relationship this way: "What we long for is profound intimacy of relationship. Our human imagination brought something radically new to Earth's life: the capacity to experience the world from another's perspective" (Swimme & Tucker, 2011, p. 115). They describe this capacity as empathy. It is the Earth that engenders and inspires the possibility of humans as empathetic beings, and through this capability, human can experience intimacy. Hence, experiencing meaning in nature fosters empathy, a process that involves imagination (Fischer, 2010, p. 178). Here, two

aspects of imagination are relevant: first, experiencing meaning reinforces our ability to imagine ourselves as part of a larger whole; second, it enables us to envision how our relationship to nature and other humans needs to change to realise a common sustainable future.

In addition, the human-nature encounter raises another dimension of transformation. Creative processes depend on certain environmental contexts, which in turn, further foster transformative creative processes. Thus, the *place* where we investigate a creative process is highly relevant. In modern societies, where we spend most of our time indoors, we often overlook the influence of the physical environment on creative processes, including sensory experiences. Research on creative processes tends to focus on social and organisational environments, rather than physical environments, and rarely includes natural settings in the study of creativity (Ratcliffe et al., 2022). This research tradition may stem from the challenges of controlling experimental conditions, especially given the ever-shifting conditions in nature. Also, within psychological science, creativity is often measured through self-reports or standardised problem-solving. In a study by Ratcliffe et al. (2022), researchers interviewed 20 adults from the United Kingdom about how nature influenced their creativity. The participants, including amateurs and professionals, were recruited from the creative arts, including music, writing, and dancing. Their thematic analysis revealed that environmental properties such as weather, landscapes, plants, and animals either enhanced or hindered creativity, depending on how these elements were experienced through different senses. Moreover, a deeper analysis revealed that creative experiences generated three elements. First, creative experiences prompted aesthetic appraisals, including perceptions of change/contrast, spatial extent, and beauty. Second, they elicited affective appraisal, such as feelings of pleasure and arousal. Third, they produced cognitive appraisals regarding attention, which were perceived to impact creative processes and outputs. This study underscores the fact that being in nature and experiencing significant affective and aesthetic encounters enhances we extend our creativity, driving further creative process. However, since conditions in nature are unpredictable, our spontaneous affective experience can vary widely.

Creative processes benefit significantly from immersion in nature. This aligns with Swimme and Tucker's grand vision: "Our destiny is to bring forth a planetary civilization that is both culturally diverse and locally vibrant, a multiform civilization that will enable life and humanity to flourish". (Swimme & Tucker, 2011, p. 117). In a similar vein, Sheffield et al. (2022) outline five pathways to connection to nature: sensory, emotional, beauty, meaning, and compassion. Importantly, these pathways can be cultivated, and certain learning environments are more conducive to fostering them, particularly those that prioritise the significance of place and aesthetic experiences in nature as exemplified in friluftsliv pedagogy.

Friluftsliv pedagogy – fostering creative wellbeing in nature

Building on our theoretical reflections, it is valuable to consider the concrete context of friluftsliv to shed light on how creative wellbeing in nature can be fostered and enhanced. The Nordic tradition of friluftsliv – literally "free air life" – can be understood as a "philosophical lifestyle based on experiences of the freedom in nature and the spiritual connectedness with the landscape" (Gelter, 2000, p. 78). We cannot understand friluftsliv separately from the Nordic historical and cultural context. The proximity to nature, even for urban dwellers, and the unrestricted access to natural environments are crucial conditions for experiencing freedom and contemplation. In the following section, we explain the emergence of friluftsliv. Here we delve into its core values which have shaped friluftsliv pedagogy, and we elaborate on how the distinctive aspects of friluftsliv pedagogy nourishe creative wellbeing in nature.

Friluftsliv, deep-ecology, and mountaineering philosophers

While there are variations of approach within friluftsliv pedagogy, they are unified by certain shared assumptions. The philosophical foundations of friluftsliv have been shaped and informed by various scholars, with notable contributions from mountaineering philosophers (Wold, 2023).

One of these mountaineering philosophers is Arne Næss. In his philosophy of *deep ecology*, he argues for a relational approach to nature that transcends modernity's exploitation of nature. For Næss, the concept of rights extends not only to humans but also to animals, trees, rivers, and landscapes. While Næss' views have been criticised as being misanthropic (Gamlund, 2012), Næss refutes this characterisation. Rather, he asserts by identifying ourselves with other living beings – as deep ecology advocates – we experience profound joy (Næss & Rothenberg, 1992, pp. 82–83). This sense of wellbeing arises from feeling interconnected with the entire ecosystem.

In Næss' *Ecology community and lifestyle* (Næss & Rothenberg, 1992), he elaborates on the concept Ecosophy T is presented, named after his remote cabin and place called Tvergastein, in the Norwegian mountains. Rather than using the term deep ecology, he prefers ecosophy T, which is one of several "ecosophies". Another relevant ecosophy could be ecosophy F, where F expresses a nature friendly friluftsliv. Nonetheless, our work on friluftsliv is deeply embedded in the broad understanding of deep ecology. Another relevant ecosophy for our work could be ecosophy F, emphasising a nature-friendly friluftsliv. However, our exploration of friluftsliv is firmly rooted in a comprehensive understanding of deep ecology.

Deep ecology advocates several seminal normative values such as willingness to change, respect for all lives, and active action. The last is crucial

for another mountaineering philosopher, Kvaløy Setreng, who draws eco-philosophy in the direction of an eco-political education and its expression in action (Reed & Rothenberg, 1993). One example of political action is the Mardøla waterfall demonstrations in Norway (1970). These protests against hydroelectric development in vulnerable Norwegian wilderness exemplified the practice and endurance of deep ecology values over time, guided by leadership. Inspired by Gandhi's non-violent philosophy, activists sought to prevent the physical destruction of the landscape. Among these activists were mountaineering philosophers who significantly influenced friluftsliv pedagogy. Their involvement was not incidental: a central tenet of friluftsliv is the role of the mentor (vegleder in Norwegian) who imparts deep ecological insights through friluftsliv.

There is a clear social dimension in friluftsliv pedagogy. The "cultural inspiration" for this social aspect of friluftsliv can be traced back to the experiences of Norwegian mountaineering philosophers on their expeditions, including to the Himalayas. Næss, Setreng, and Faarlund were surprised and impressed how the Sherpas in Beding always performed long rituals before climbs despite living in a landscape of dramatic natural forces, and with limited technological and financial resources. The rituals, which consist of ceremonies involving art, music, and creativity, hold profound meaning for these cultures living intimately with nature. Such a close relationship between nature and culture served as inspiration for the development of friluftsliv pedagogy. Indeed, rituals making is a hallmark of pedagogic practice, including rituals of making circles to communicate, as well as bringing a cultural interpretation to nature, such as philosophising over life, and using poetry, storytelling to cultivate curiosity for observed objects like ruins, flowers, or natural phenomena.

The emergence of modern friluftsliv education is rooted in deep ecology and the mountaineering philosophy. Inspired by their extensive expeditions to remote regions and interactions with nature-oriented cultures, Faarlund and Atle Tellnes envisioned bringing friluftsliv into schools, or more accurately, taking schools into nature (Wold, 2023).

Identifying how friluftsliv pedagogy promotes creative wellbeing

Drawing on its historical origins, the main characteristics of friluftsliv foster creative wellbeing. Intrinsic to the friluftsliv philosophy and pedagogy, we emphasise the concepts of place and aesthetic experiences. While aesthetic learning processes in nature overlap friluftsliv (Illeris, 2023), friluftsliv pedagogy has some distinct characteristics. Næss elaborates on the concept of "homestead" which underscores nature as a place of belonging (Næss, 2008). Hence, understanding both place and aesthetic experiences are important conditions for shaping friluftsliv. Such awareness and experiences extend

beyond individual encounters and, importantly, have ethical implications that evolve and endure within specific social contexts.

Friluftsliv education underlines the significance of group dynamics. The group size is deliberately kept small and heterogenous, influenced both by eco-philosophy's advocacy for diversity and practical didactic considerations. Although human interactions with nature are individual experiences, friluftsliv emphasises the communal aspect within a group setting. The focus on the group stems from the belief that experiences in nature, whether positive or negative, are enriched by collective engagement. Rituals within friluftsliv pedagogy facilitate the sharing of these experiences among participants, whether they pertain to encounters with nature, personal reflections, or interactions with others. The evening campfire exemplifies the social dimension of sharing experiences where creative wellbeing is fostered through participants' guided exploration of their emotions and reflections on living in alignment with their values. Through sharing and mirroring with others, the ritual of gathering around the campfire is an opportunity to gain deeper self-awareness, as well as a profound appreciation of nature and culture (Wold, 2023).

The friluftsliv encounter with nature spans several days, allowing ample time for learning processes and opportunity to reflect upon what happens in nature and its rhythms (Næss & Rothenberg, 1992). Spending extended periods together in remote natural setting fosters awareness not only of others and nature, but also of safety practices and role of being a positive example (Wold, 2023). Hence, friluftsliv education is consciously grounded in values, nurturing virtues through interactions with nature.

Thus, participants not only acquire practical skills but also learn to deepen their connection with nature and develop heightened awareness of their surroundings which makes room for experiencing joy in nature. As Næss and Rothenberg (1992) assert, "the ability to experience deep, rich and varied interaction in and with nature is developed" (p. 179) through friluftsliv. In this way, friluftsliv aligns with the eco-philosophical concept of joy (Wold, 2023). Inspired by Spinoza, Næss employs the term *hilaritas* to describe this joy. A fundamental prerequisite for experiencing joy is creating space for nature to unfold and recognising the right of all living organisms to flourish. Only then, joy – in terms of *hilaritas* – manifests itself. This joy impacts the entire person resonating as a disposition akin to Spinoza's inner calm (Næss, 2008). According to Næss, such joy is experienced in concrete encounters with nature, whether it be a small flower meadow, a forest, or a stream (Næss, 2008). These joyful experiences are cultivated within the friluftsliv learning community.

Therefore, the educational role of the mentor is crucial in friluftsliv. A foundational principle of this learning framework involves participants' progression through levels of competence within a milieu of "trying and failing" (or "tumbling and fumbling"), always with safety as a priority. Mastery of the skills necessary for the chosen activity and landscape is essential.

The mentor plays a pivotal role in guiding participants through the three-step learning process in friluftsliv: preparations, experiences, and reflections. Typically, in the evening, the group gathers to discuss day's experiences and the mentor facilitates discussions on relational issues, both within the group and with nature.

The human-nature encounter within friluftsliv pedagogy must be understood as specific learning process centred on nurturing awareness of nature, cultivating attunement to nature over time, and recognising nature as a place of belonging. Within this context, experiences of nature experiences, including aesthetic ones, not only yield joy but are also fostered through the active creative participation towards eudaimonic wellbeing.

Towards creative wellbeing in nature

Insights from eco-spirituality regarding awareness, belonging, and place help us to understand how our interactions with nature are fundamental to grasping creative wellbeing in nature. Further, the human-nature relationship is in our context an *encounter* characterised by activity, dynamism, and relationality. Thus, insights drawn from eco-spirituality are consistent with the principles of friluftsliv pedagogy. What eco-spirituality highlights reflective practices and deep engagement with nature, including understanding place and appreciating aesthetic experiences. These principles resonate with friluftsliv pedagogy, where spending time in nature fosters a profound connection with the environment. Friluftsliv thus becomes a conducive context for nurturing creative wellbeing. We do not attempt to merge eco-spirituality and friluftsliv as a unified approach, nor do we argue dogmatically that friluftsliv is *the* sole *way* for cultivating creative wellbeing in nature. Indeed, we acknowledge some aspects of friluftsliv that warrant critical scrutiny. Our intention has been to explore diverse philosophical and contextual perspectives to enrich our understanding of the human-nature relationship and its potential to enhance creative wellbeing. This exploration has allowed us to draw upon various resources to support thoughtful and holistic engagements with nature that promote personal and collective flourishing.

Humans possess the ability to foster wellbeing in nature. However, first and foremost we need to recognise ourselves as an integral part of the natural world. Eco-spirituality and friluftsliv pedagogy advocate for a relational and dynamic approach to nature, nurturing specific values, virtues, and practices. Grounded in ethical awareness, human creative agency in nature can effectively promote wellbeing. We argue that aesthetic experiences have transformative potential, serving as catalysts for deeper explorations. Creativity extends beyond individuals being creative *in* nature or *with* nature; it involves collaboration with others as agents towards a greater purpose for improving the world.

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Chapter 3

The Sami yoik as creative wellbeing

Soile Päivikki Hämäläinen, Anita Salamonsen and Wenche Torrissen

Introduction: the significance of yoik for happiness, wellbeing, and health

The Norwegian teacher and missionary Isaac Olsen (ca. 1680–1730) was one of the first Norwegians to work as a teacher for the Sami in the Northern part of Norway. He also made extensive studies of Sami religion and culture, and in the period 1716–1717, he worked on a manuscript called *Lappernes Vildfarelser og Overtro* [Sami Delusions and Superstition]. In this manuscript, he provides important information about the traditional Sami vocal art, yoik, arguing that Sami children "know the melody and the notes of the rune and yoik songs" before they can "talk or call out for their father and mother in their mother tongue" (Qvigstad, 1910, p. 24; our translation). Moreover, he argues that the Sami perceive yoiking "as contributing to happiness, liveliness and pastime, so they are so lively and happy when they experience it, as if they were out in paradise" (Qvigstad, 1910, p. 24; our translation). Significantly, he suggests that the Sami "cannot live long, keep their good luck, nutrition, health and healing without yoiking" (Qvigstad, 1910, p. 36; our translation). These quotes show how important yoiking has been for the Indigenous people inhabiting the northern parts of the Nordic region. Olsen, like other Norwegian teachers and missionaries at the time, sought to understand Sami culture to be in a better position to critique and suppress it (Pollan, 2002). We should, therefore, be cautious about how we use and interpret these sources. There is, however, little reason to mistrust Olsen's accounts of the significant role the yoik played in the lives of the Sami people (Graff, 2022). Olsen spoke the North Sami language and lived with Sami people while he was working as a teacher. He was thus in a unique position to gain insights into Sami culture. As Ola Graff argues, it is reason to believe that Olsen's account serves as an accurate historical document in this regard (Graff, 2022, p. 350). What emerges from this historical account, then, is a culture where music permeates life, and where music is considered one of the most basic and essential aspects in life for prosperity, health, happiness, and healing (Graff, 2022).

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With this historical backdrop, it is particularly sinister that the colonial regime consisting of both church and state made it illegal to yoik on account of it being sinful, enforcing the law by threat of death penalty (Graff, 2022). When many Sami resisted the law and continued to yoik, they must have done so because their happiness, wellbeing, and health depended on it. Later, when the death penalty was abolished, the policy persisted, insisting that yoiking was sinful. Many Sami people internalised this belief and contributed to suppress their rich yoiking traditions (Gaski, 2022). Despite external and internal forces seeking to suppress yoiking, this tradition has showed a remarkable resilience. It has been argued that the significance of yoiking for wellbeing, health, and happiness can at least partially explain why this tradition has been protected from extinction (Hanssen, 2011; Hämäläinen et al., 2018).

Research investigating the significance of yoiking for happiness, wellbeing, and health in contemporary contexts is limited. A notable exception is the four qualitative studies by the first author of this chapter, Soile Hämäläinen. Summed up, Hämäläinen's research shows that contemporary yoikers yoik for similar reasons as their ancestors, regarding it as essential for health, wellbeing, and happiness. Hämäläinen's (2023) explanation for this is that yoiking may be interpreted as embodied health knowledge, supporting our need to know and relate to ourselves and others, both humans and non-humans. As such, we argue that there is congruence between yoik as an embodied health practice and creative wellbeing, as defined by the editors of this book (see introduction). The aim of this chapter is thus to explore this congruity, discussing how yoiking might stimulate the creation of something new that promote transcending growth that overreaches the individual. It is our contention that conceptualising yoik as creative wellbeing can help us understand how yoiking might support more sustainable ways of being in the world.

Our motivation for writing this chapter is connected to our scholarly backgrounds as researchers in the field of arts and health. Soile Hämäläinen has studied yoik related to health and wellbeing in qualitative in-depth studies with predominantly Sami participants who have yoiking experience (Hämäläinen et al., 2017; Hämäläinen et al., 2018; Hämäläinen et al., 2020; Hämäläinen et al.,2021). Her Doctoral thesis (Hämäläinen, 2023) addresses in detail ethical considerations related to the study of yoik and Sami culture. Significantly, participants encouraged her to disseminate the research results to contribute to more knowledge about and respect for yoik beyond the community of Sami yoikers. Anita Salamonsen has supervised and co-authored studies about Sami culture and health, and Wenche Torrissen has published broadly on the significance of the arts for health and wellbeing.

In our exploration of yoik as creative wellbeing, we start by describing some central features of yoiking and its functions. We present the main theoretical frameworks of this chapter: *ecopoiesis* and *eudaimonia,* before we present a re-reading of previously published studies on yoik and health and relate this to eudaimonic and creative wellbeing.

Some words about yoik and its functions

Yoik, the traditional vocal art of the Sami, presumably originated in prehistoric times (Arnberg et al., 1969). Yoik traditions vary across areas inhabited by Sami people today, which includes parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Yoik styles stretch from pentatonic and microtonal syllabic melodies with occasional words, to song-like yoiks with regular lyrics, and storytelling yoiks with creative application of lyrics. Yoiks might incorporate animal and other natural sounds and characteristic movements with the possibility of dramatic elements (Hämäläinen et al., 2021). As expressive precision is the guiding ideal, using the whole of one's vocal potential is encouraged (Daling, 2014). It is impossible to do justice to this rich vocal tradition in words, so we recommend that the reader listen to recordings of yoik, e.g. by following the QR code below, or by checking out music that can be streamed from the internet such as the music of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, or the album "Russuoh vuölieb" (Figure 3.1).

Historically, there have probably existed three different categories of yoik: epic yoiks, religious yoiks, and, everyday, worldly yoiks (Graff, 2022, p. 354). It is the last category that we address in this chapter. A central feature in yoik is its' mimetic character, that is, "miming the world into being" through sonic alignment (Diamond, 2019, p. 255). This sonic alignment is characterised by many yoikers who assert that a yoik is not *about* something, it *is* that something (Gaski, 1996). This refers to the idea of expressive precision in yoik, which allows the yoiker to presence the yoik's subject so vividly that the possible listeners can feel and sense it (Hilder, 2015).

Yoikers may yoik anything they want to in any situation and context. Common subjects are other people, especially loved ones. Yoiks describing other people are called *personal yoiks*. These yoiks are so inextricably linked to the person being yoiked, that they function as the "musical names" of the yoiked persons (Gaski, 1996; Graff, 2016). In a personal yoik, a yoiker describes with musical means their perception of the innermost character of the person yoiked (Hämäläinen et al., 2018; Hämäläinen et al., 2021).

Figure 3.1 QR code for accessing examples of yoik in youtube, performed by Ánde Somby.

Indeed, the symbolic reference can be so strong and intimate that it has been considered a person's "innermost name" (Graff, 2016). Also, animals and places are yoiked. A common maxim is that yoik is a way of remembering (Turi, 2012). Yoiking other people means that you can "remember" or presence them in social settings together with other people, or on your own in solitude (Hämäläinen et al., 2017; Hämäläinen et al., 2018). It is like saying "I know you", "I remember you", and "You are dear to me", to the yoiked one. This also applies to animals and places dear to the yoiker.

Yoik is so closely connected to the subject being yoiked that originally the yoikers did not consider themselves as "composers" or creators of the yoiks they yoiked, thereby having no copyright to any yoik, except to their own personal yoik(s). Today, however, yoik has also developed as a musical genre fused with different Western musical styles and thus, a merchandise and subject with a composer-owner holding copyright (Hilder, 2015). Nevertheless, yoik is still considered as closely connected to its subject, presencing this subject to the yoiker and possible listeners.

Throughout time, yoik has had several personal and social functions. Yoik has been used to express emotions; share memories; remember the past; communicate with people, nature, and animals; calm the reindeer; build community and to promote health and wellbeing (Gaski, 1996; Hämäläinen, 2023; Torrissen et al., 2022). Many of these functions can be linked to yoiking as an expression of creative wellbeing, a point that we will return to later in this chapter.

Theoretical perspectives: ecopoiesis and eudaimonia

One way of understanding how yoik might support transcending growth that goes beyond the individual is through the concept of *ecopoiesis*. *Poiesis* refers to humans as "shaping animals" who "shape the world around us with accordance to our needs" (Levine, 2022, p. 60). In the process of shaping the world, we also shape ourselves (Levine, 2022). The creative capacity of humans is, however, ambiguous in that we can shape the world, and ultimately ourselves, in ways that are both *pathogenic* (disease promoting) and *salutogenic (*health promoting). *Poiesis* is thus not always conducive of wellbeing, although creating with the aim of beauty often has health and wellbeing effects (Atkins, 2022; McNiff, 2004).

Ecopoiesis adds an ecological perspective to the human creative endeavour. Here, the shaping process combines creativity with the act of taking "care of the environment with the aim of being able to experience and create beauty" (Kopytin, 2022, p. 19). Indeed, as a species, we must acknowledge this causality if we are to live in ways that make sense. According to the principles of ecopoiesis or poietic ecology, in shaping the world, humans have an *aesthetic responsibility*. "Making sense" is here understood both as a cognitive event and as one of our fundamental bodily functions, sensing (Levine, 2022).

Our aesthetic responsibility thus lies in finding ways of responding to the world that make sense bodily, emotionally, and cognitively. According to both Atkins (2022) and Levine (2022), this aesthetic responsibility is linked to our ability to respond to the world in ways that pleases our senses and creates beauty, as an essential part of human happiness and wellbeing. In relation to ecopoiesis, aesthetic responsibility most importantly means that we must shape the world in a way that makes ecological sense.

The theoretical frame of eudaimonic wellbeing offers another way of understanding how yoik can support creative wellbeing. Aristotle's philosophical works, particularly his *Nichomachean Ethics*, have been central to the conceptual understanding of eudaimonia as a scientific field of study (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Ryff, 2017). According to Aristotle, wellbeing is linked to virtue and to the activities that express the best that is within us. Accordingly, Ryff and Singer (2008) suggest that eudaimonia can be understood as "personal excellence", where the aim is to get to know our unique capacities and strengths and then find ways of realising them in meaningful ways. Hence, eudaimonia is fundamentally about self-knowledge, sense-making, and growth in all human capacities. Simply put, eudaimonia is becoming who we truly are. Self-expression can also support eudaimonia, which is the classical Greek term for happiness (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Significantly, the focus on virtue, excellence, and meaning suggests that wellbeing cannot be reached by any means. Instead, true happiness is a process that is developed by living in accordance with one's true self, and by doing things that are meaningful and responsible. As such, we argue that eudaimonic wellbeing can be linked to poiesis and processes of shaping ourselves and our world in ways that make sense.

Our motivation to explore yoik in relation to *ecopoiesis* and *eudaimonia* lies in a desire to create cultural interfaces where Indigenous knowledge about sustainable human-nature interactions can be understood within Western academia (Nakata, 2002). In our view, centralising Indigenous knowledge, or indeed re-centring it, is important not only to redress historic colonisation, but also for our survival as a species. Traditional Sami yoik embodies basic knowledge about the foundations for human health (Hämäläinen, 2023). Furthermore, we argue that this knowledge contains an aesthetic acknowledgement of humans' intimate connection to their environment.

Traditional Sami yoik inherently carries both a philosophy and a practice of aesthetic responsibility that are much older than academic concepts such as ecopoiesis or eudaimonia. Hence, the knowledge embodied in yoiking can be characterised as "yoik philosophy" (Hämäläinen, 2023, p. 11). The central question becomes whether and how concepts such as ecopoiesis and eudaimonia can help us understand the complex connections between yoik, creativity, and wellbeing. We will return to this question, but first we revisit our published studies on yoik and health (Hämäläinen et al., 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021; Hämäläinen, 2023; Torrissen et al., 2022), exploring what they can reveal about the ways in which yoiking contributes to eudaimonic wellbeing and transcending growth.

Yoik and eudaimonic wellbeing: patterns from previous work

Our re-reading shows that yoiking contributes to eudaimonic wellbeing, enabling people to grow and develop as human beings in intimate and ethical relation to their environment. In the following, we provide examples of how people talk about their yoiking experiences, pointing towards how yoiking might be understood in relation to eudaimonia.

Yoik – a language of feelings, identity, and connection

Firstly, yoiking can develop self-knowledge in that it helps people to explore, express, and deal with their emotions. A famous yoiker, Biret Risten Sara, once said that where words become insufficient to express the depth of the *feeling*, that is where yoik begins (Hämäläinen et al., 2018). Some of the participants in the yoik studies commented that yoiking helped them to handle emotions. One said: “Yoik is an expression for feelings, which is a universal need” (Hämäläinen et al., 2021, p. 9). Participants claimed that yoiking could help them express a whole range of emotions, including anger: “When I’m really angry I yoik a special yoik so everybody can hear it and know I’m angry!” (Hämäläinen et al., 2017, p. 5). Participants also characterised yoiking as evoking good feelings and providing emotional relief. We argue that by using yoik to explore, acknowledge, and express one’s feelings, yoiking enables human beings to get to know themselves better.

In Sami culture, yoik is also associated with knowing who you are and where you belong. Traditionally, Sami children could receive a yoik early on, even before birth (Hämäläinen, 2023). This tradition still exists, and *being yoiked* was characterised by the participants as receiving the greatest gift you can ever receive. *Being yoiked* means receiving your own personal yoik, musically describing only you, commonly as a signifier of a deep acknowledgement of you as an individual: “For young people living in Sami areas, it is priceless to get their own yoik”, one participant said, continuing: “You know, today they have access to everything, but it is not personally theirs. The yoik you have, it is yours forever. Even when you pass away, the yoik remains. Yoik is a real treasure” (Hämäläinen et al., 2021, p. 9).

Secondly, yoiking was perceived as a way of connecting with others. Yoiking someone was said to be like having the person right there with you, so you never are alone. In a study of yoik experiences in dementia care, the participants, who were healthcare workers and family members, noticed a clear difference between yoik and other musical activities. According to one participant, “All the elderly wake up, pay attention and attend to their surroundings when we yoik with them”. Moreover, it was said that “they start communicating through it. Yoik is really like nourishment, it truly enlivens you. The whole atmosphere in the room changes when you yoik in a nursing home” (Hämäläinen et al., 2020, p. 30). People affected by dementia may not recognise their family and friends, but, according to the experiences of

the participants, they would recognise the yoiks of these people (Hämäläinen et al., 2020, 2021).

> You know they ask me whose daughter I am, but they won't remember the name of the person mentioned. But when I yoik my father's yoik, they know immediately who we are talking about. So, they may forget everything else except the yoik.
>
> (Hämäläinen et al., 2020, p. 30)

In living yoik cultures, it is not uncommon to greet each other by an exchange of personal yoiks (Gaski, 2022). Yoiking the other is also used as a way of saying "You are dear to me", for example between friends and family. Furthermore, it is a way of attaching people to their community or acknowledging their belonging to the community. In the yoik literature, there is a famous story about a six-year-old boy's pride upon receiving his personal yoik in a community gathering. He shared that he felt like a real person now that he had been yoiked in front of everyone (Graff, 2004). Thus, yoik is a strong marker of identity and belonging, and it is said that "As long as we keep on yoiking, we know who we are" and as long as someone is yoiked, that person belongs to a community (Jones-Bamman, 1993).

A third empirical finding relevant to how we understand yoik as creative wellbeing is that yoiking enables people to connect to something beyond themselves, such as ancestors, land, and nature. A respected traditional yoiker Berit Alette Mienna[1] said: "You know I've been seeing that mountain all my life, but first when I yoiked it I felt I got really close to it". Explaining this she says: "It's my, and my family's and my ancestors' mountain… we've wandered there for generations… it is ours, it is part of us… I felt a different kind of connection to it when I yoiked it" (Hämäläinen et al., 2017, p. 5). We interpret this quote as an example of yoiking connecting the yoiker with something beyond themself.

Mienna's quote beautifully describes how yoiking a mountain created a connection not only between the mountain and herself, but also with her family and her ancestors. Creating a connection to the land and to ancestors is a common function of yoiking. Indeed, there are yoikers who know yoiks that are more than 200 years old. By yoiking those yoiks, the yoikers maintain their connection with their ancestors, and thus, a connection with something beyond themselves. For people living with dementia, yoiking could presence known places and natural environments, bringing nature into the nursing home as one of the staff said: "So in a way you bring nature into the nursing home when you yoik there. Yoik creates a connection between the patient and the natural environment" (Hämäläinen et al., 2020, p. 30).

As we have seen, it can be argued that yoiking can support eudaimonic wellbeing in three interrelated ways, all important for creating transcending growth: development of self-knowledge; connecting to others; and connecting

people to something beyond ourselves, including ancestors and nature. In the following, we explore how the creative elements of yoiking support transcending growth. We suggest that creative wellbeing is a suitable term to capture the creative engagement that in our interpretation is a prerequisite for transcending growth.

Yoik as creative wellbeing: an attuned way of being in the world

Yoik is characterised by some yoikers as a way of being in the world: "Yoik is a way of structuring time, a way of thinking. Actually, we could say that yoik is a way of being in the world. A mode of existence" (Hämäläinen et al., 2021, p. 9). Others characterise yoik as an organic part of themselves: "Yoik is my life. It is around me all the time, in my work, in my freetime, in my sorrows and my joys… Without yoik, it's almost like having chopped off an arm" (Hämäläinen et al., 2021, p. 9). In our interpretation, yoik as a way of being in the world and as an organic part of you indicates an integration of body and mind. The necessity of such creative connection and expressivity for our bodily and psychological wellbeing is embodied silent and practical health-promoting knowledge in traditional yoik culture (Hämäläinen, 2023). It is our contention that this integrated attunement can help us understand how yoiking supports transcending growth.

Attunement as creative ecopoietic and eudaimonic potential

Attunement can be seen as a "key in understanding creativity" (Bunt & Stige, 2014, p. 98). The terms attunement and tuning into are terms with musical references. "In tune" refers to pitch accuracy in musical performances (Jacobsen et al., 2019, p. 307) and attunement can be illustrated by two tuning forks vibrating in resonance with each other. Although only one of them is hit, the other starts resonating in the same wavelength, making the same sound. Attunement and tuning into can be evoked metaphorically as a psychological dynamic when people seek to truly understand one another (Bunt & Stige, 2014). In such states, people say they are on the "same wavelength" or "resonate" with each other (Hämäläinen, 2023).

Attunement is a fundamental trait in yoik. Attunement is inaudible and precedes the audible expression of yoik. The yoiker attunes to or tunes into the yoik's subject, underlining the yoik's close connection to its' subject, whatever the subject might be. Importantly, yoik philosophy acknowledges the relational character of our existence since anything can be yoiked or attuned to (Hämäläinen, 2023). Maj-Lis Skaltje, a Sami film director and author has published a book with the North Sami title *Luondu juoiggaha* (2005) translated to Swedish as *Minsta lilla liv har sin jojk* (2014). Translated to English,

these titles mean “Nature makes you yoik” and “The tiniest life has its yoik”. The latter suggests that yoik is potentially present in all life forms. One famous yoik, for example, belongs to a mosquito (Somby, 2018). *Luondu juoiggaha* suggests that nature intrinsically inspires attunement, and can be expressed as yoik. In natural environments, anything you attune to might thus evoke that action or response.

We argue that since yoik is a way of being in the world, an existential, organic necessity where attunement with both ourselves and our environment are central traits, yoik philosophy acknowledges the creative potential in our existence, and its significance for our wellbeing. The creative potential lies in attunement, in that musical *feeling into* or *listening into* another being whether human or non-human. Since the tiniest life has its yoik, yoik is inherent in whatever we choose to listen and attune to, holding not yet expressed creative potential (Skaltje, 2014). The famous Sami multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää expresses this creative potential eloquently in a portrait documentary, where he said: “I don’t distinguish whether it be music or literature or a picture”. It can be argued that for him, the creative process happened in close attunement with his surroundings, and the creative product that emerged was a result of this process: “I just use different techniques to express it… sometimes words suit best, sometimes yoik, and sometimes pictures… Sometimes when I write, I hear a *luohti*[2] in my heart” (Andersen & Askerøi, 1991; our translation). In our interpretation, creating for Valkeapää was thus a way of expressing attunements between humans and non-humans, providing insight into alternative ways of being in the world. It is this attunement that carries with it potential for transformative growth. Significantly, attunement enables us to create and re-create ourselves in aesthetically responsible ways. To understand how yoiking might support such growth processes, it is, however, necessary to establish how we understand yoiking in relation to Indigenous knowledge and modern ecophilosophy.

Essentially, we apply the term “yoik philosophy” understood as the thought content embodied in yoiking as a life practice (Hämäläinen, 2023, p. 11). It exists only in the writings of scholars and artists who have written about yoik. It has no identifiable “philosopher” or progenitor to whom to credit the philosophy. Rather, yoik philosophy, which profoundly embraces the environmental-relational character of human existence, differs from Western ecophilosophy, such as ecopoiesis (Levine, 2022). Ecopoiesis refers to humans as “makers” of the world since human actions inevitably impact environments in some way or the other (Levine, 2022). Yoik philosophy, as we have argued above, refers to an attuned and relational existence. Hence, ecopoiesis is insufficient to capture the significance of relationality in yoik philosophy. The concept that might better catch the idea of the environmental-relational mutuality in human existence, and between a yoiker and yoik’s subject, is *sympoiesis*, meaning “creating-with” or “making-with” (Atkins, 2022, p. 27). The concept was first introduced by Donna Haraway (2015),

who argued that we must re-create and re-construct the way we understand our place in the world to live well on the planet.

Haraway proposed that we should call the current epoch the Chthulucene, evoking the image of the chthulu (spider) and the spiderweb to propose a new way of "living with" and "creating with" everything around us. According to Haraway, the spider and spiderweb symbolise a way of being and thinking that is relational, non-hierarchical and entangled, and which connects nature, humans, and other-than-human relationships. In Atkins' words, "this entanglement is like the strands of a web and the legs of the spider with which she feels and senses her environment" (2022, p. 27). We suggest that a yoiker feels and senses their environment equally fine-tuned when a yoik is created. This creative process is a dual process where both the yoiker and the yoiked subject are seen as having agency, as in Skaltje's "nature makes you yoik", Mienna yoiking a mountain, and Somby's yoiking a mosquito. In other words, a mountain or a mosquito is not just inspiration to the yoiker, which is the case in ecopoesis where man is the "maker" and "shaper" of the natural world. Instead, in the sympoiesis perspective, the mountain and the mosquito are co-creators.

Valkeapää expresses this relationality in poems 560 and 561 in one of his main works, *Beaivi, áhčážan [The sun, my father]:*

560. "čuojan/ mun čuojan, munnai/ čuojan/ ja viiddis lea ilbmahat/ humadeame/ healaideame/ Eallima Eatnu/ 561. ja mun čuojan/ go dat čuojaha mu, mus/ mu váimmu dovdduin, mu váimmus/ beivvii'an jođus/ šuvva/ollašuvva" (Valkeapää, 1988).

The North Sami translation of the poem sounds like this: 560. "I sound/ resound, me too/sounding/and the world is wide/ speaking/confidentially/ The River of Life". And 561. "I resound/ when it plays within, inside me/ with my heart's feelings, in my heart/ on the journey of my days/ it sings/ is accomplished" (Valkeapää, 1997). We interpret Valkeapää's poem as a description of attuned interaction between human beings and their environment. Environment, the wide world, and the "River of Life" are experienced as both external and internal phenomena. Expressions of this sounding and resounding, then, may take various forms, such as yoik. Haraway's thoughts of relational, non-hierarchical connectedness in "living with" and "creating with" get closer to the creative practice that yoiking represents. This is also significant for how we understand yoik as creative wellbeing, discussed further below.

Yoik, sentient ecology, and aesthetic responsibility

Yoiking as "living with" and "creating with" can best be understood with reference to the relational worldview of Indigenous people worldwide. Human reciprocity with, and responsibility to their environments are inherent and consistent in traditional Indigenous knowledge among global Indigenous communities. Human responsibility can be considered as a natural

consequence of the relational worldview this community shares (Kimmerer, 2003). According to this worldview, also called *sentient ecology*, "all things, rocks, earth, lands, plants, trees, waters, grasses, animals, and insects, are alive" and sentient (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2020, p. 47). Research in *bioacoustics* has in fact shown that all living organisms down to tiny microbial cells, such as baking yeast, emanate, and detect sonic signals, thus communicating acoustically beyond the range of human perception (Gagliano, 2012). This suggests scientific evidence of communication between beings, acknowledged in Indigenous cultures worldwide where people live in reciprocal communicative relationships with their environments, in a network of countless attunement possibilities (Hämäläinen, 2023).

"Knowledge" in an Indigenous context encompasses feelings and skills that developed both over time in particular environments and living conditions (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2020; Gaski, 2011; Kimmerer, 2003). Living in a *feeling* and relational coexistence with other sentient beings results in local adaptations, skills, and knowledge necessary to survive, live, and thrive in that environment. This includes sustainable perspectives, i.e., never depleting a resource, but only using what is needed, and in so doing, taking responsibility for future generations. Hence, sentient ecology as attuned, responsible, skilful, and knowledgeable usage of local natural resources can be described as a form of aesthetic responsibility, linking sentient ecology to the creation of beauty and a world that makes more sense ecologically. Adding the aesthetic practice of yoiking to this equation, we can start to conceive how yoiking as creative wellbeing might act as a transformative agent, supporting the reciprocal wellbeing between humans and their environments, where caring for the wellbeing of others (human and non-human) provides personal wellbeing and growth. In the case of the personal yoik, it can be argued that if being yoiked is considered the greatest gift you can receive, then yoiking someone is the greatest gift you can give. Yoiking the beings around you, both humans and non-humans, is a profound act of affiliation and expression of respect for otherness, which is a key ecopoietic principle (Levine, 2022). We further argue that this respectful attunement is a starting point for the creation of something new that promotes transcending growth that goes beyond the individual.

To envision how yoiking might support transcending growth, we reflect on how attunement relates to the eudaimonic growth processes identified above. As we have seen, since attunement is about feelings, one cannot attune, or feel into, unless one feels something (Hämäläinen, 2023). Attunement can thus be described as something we "do" with our feeling capacities. Creative wellbeing then lies in the relational attunement with ourselves, other humans, and non-humans. Attuning to ourselves, we connect with ourselves - (long) including our needs and emotions - (long) and feel and acknowledge who we are. When attuning to other humans, we connect with them in similar manner. We feel into them and acknowledge our shared experience as humans. In

acknowledging the other, we feel and acknowledge where we belong. Finally, attuning to other than human beings, we connect, feel, and acknowledge those other beings, and our existence as a part of something beyond ourselves, be it nature, land, or the universe. We argue that all these ways of attuning can initiate transcending growth that expands us beyond ourselves since tuning truthfully into another being, human or non-human, might provide new perspectives on who we are and who we might aspire to become.

Truthfulness is an aesthetic ideal in yoik, and as such, a yoiker's attunement and expression are expected to be truthful, honest, and accurate. In the ideal, one should truly and authentically *be* what is yoiked, so that one can really *presence* the other, whether human or non-human. The aesthetic idea of creating "beauty", then, equals creating (in) truthfulness and authenticity. We interpret this ideal as an expression of aesthetic responsibility. Through attuning to another being, one becomes bonded with that being. In other words, the yoiker comes to know that other, thereby acknowledging the other as they are. The converse is also true. As one attunes truthfully, one also come to better know oneself. Hence, in such truthful and authentic interaction, attunement functions to fine-tune and acknowledge our connection with ourselves, others, and our environment.

Our argument connecting yoiking to eudaimonic wellbeing is synthesised thus: As we develop our attunement tool, namely our feeling capacities, we move towards greater excellence. By moving towards greater personal excellence, we achieve transcending growth, and a state of eudaimonic wellbeing. We justify this argument by asking whether there is anything more personal than our individual feeling capacities. Feeling others as the living and sentient beings they are, with their necessary place in the wholeness of nature, moves us towards an increasingly sentient ecology, including our capacities to care for the mutual wellbeing of ourselves and others.

Closing remarks: how yoik may contribute to creative wellbeing

In this chapter, we have explored yoik as creative wellbeing through theoretical perspectives of ecopoiesis and eudaimonia. Ultimately, we have identified truthful and authentic attunement as a common universal element in all these three aspects of transcending growth. These universal elements are present in the culturally specific expression of yoiking. We argue that aesthetic responsibility and a requisite respect for otherness must apply to everything we do as "shaping animals". Importantly, this includes cultural production, including cultural signifiers such as the yoik. Significantly, the inaudible aspect of yoik, attunement, is a universal trait in humans and may thus be practised without fear or risk of cultural appropriation. Indeed, since attunement is key to understanding creativity, it is also a necessary component of creative wellbeing. Hence, we understand that living and practising a sentient

ecology means fine-tuning our attuned interaction with each other and our environments. Sentient ecology represents an understanding of what aesthetic responsibility is, and how it is expressed as a component in eudaimonic creative wellbeing. We argue that the ancient Sami creative tradition of yoiking can help us to understand the importance of co-creation for the wellbeing of humans and non-humans, and for a more sustainable future.

Notes

1 In the referred publications of Hämäläinen et al., Berit Alette Mienna is quoted anonymously. However, she has given a written request in 2021 to first author Hämäläinen to be quoted with her full name in all subsequent publications.

2 *Luohti* is a North-Sami noun for "a yoik".

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Chapter 4

Exploring creative wellbeing as aesthetic experience in the theatre

Wenche Torrissen and Ann Iren Jamtøy

How are you? **Theatre that probes the depths of being**

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the Danish/Norwegian performing arts company, Sir Grand Lear, began working on a performance called *How are you?* The company's ethos is rooted in social commitment to facilitate ceremonial social gatherings, where contemporary issues are presented in dramatic form to foster dialogue and community engagement. During the pandemic, such social gatherings were prohibited, and the company was concerned about the social and mental effects of the pandemic. How would the lockdown affect us mentally? How would we cope with the isolation? What were our thoughts on serious illness and the possibility of death? What did we fear? What were our hopes? How were we feeling, both individually and collectively? What were our thoughts about the future? These were some of the questions that the company asked themselves, and the performance emerged from a deeply felt need to debrief and make sense of the collective trauma that we had experienced during the pandemic.

In this chapter, we use this performance as a starting point to explore how aesthetic experiences in the theatre can promote wellbeing through creative and transformative processes. We are particularly interested in exploring how the arts, in general, and the theatre, in particular, possess a unique potential to nurture human development, potentially strengthening individuals' sense of self and belonging. The argument presented here is developed along two lines. First, we explore the argument theoretically, emphasising how creative wellbeing can elucidate the connection between creativity, aesthetic engagement, and wellbeing. Second, we provide examples from a case study of *How are you?* to demonstrate how creative wellbeing might be achieved in practice. The focus here is on how the collective debrief was experienced by one audience member, whom we have called Oscar (pseudonym). Oscar is not a regular theatregoer, and in an interview, he disclosed that he was sceptical about attending *How are you?* However, despite this scepticism, he conceded that the performance had made a powerful impression on him, describing it as an intense aesthetic experience. Many other audience members described

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similar experiences, but we have chosen to focus on a single instance here because it enables an in-depth exploration of how people might be nurtured through aesthetic experiences in the theatre. Before we delve into *How are you?* and Oscar's experience in more detail, it is necessary to refine the argument that aesthetic experiences can nurture human growth and wellbeing, promoting reflection and dialogue in ways that can be described as "creative wellbeing".

Aesthetic experiences and creative wellbeing

As we explore the connections between aesthetic experiences in the theatre and wellbeing, we engage in a dialogue that has endured for over 2,000 years. In the *Poetics* (ca. 350 B.C.E./2004), Aristotle states that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse "terror and pity" and the accompanying pleasure so that audiences can experience *catharsis* (2004). *Catharsis* is only mentioned once in the *Poetics* (Aristotle, 2004, p. 31), and the exact meaning of the term has been the subject of critical debate and heated discussions for centuries (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008). Here, we are following the argument that *catharsis* can have health and wellbeing effects on the audience by enabling them to experience intense emotions in a fictional setting, thus allowing them to express and release their emotions in the process. Watching a theatrical performance can, in Sigmund Freud's words, enable the audience to "blow off steam" in ways that can help maintain a healthy emotional life (Walsh, 2013, s. 8). This unleashing of emotions contributes to human wellness by providing an opportunity to express feeling that otherwise might have been suppressed due to societal norms of acceptable behaviour. It was, for instance, shameful for men to express grief aloud in antiquity (Destrée, 2013). Being able to express themselves in the context of the theatre in very physical ways, whether screaming or weeping out loud which was the tradition, thus allowed them to "blow off steam", relieving them of pent-up emotions, which was also associated with illness. In fact, many people go to the theatre precisely because it is emotionally rewarding (Bennett, 2006). In Hurley's words, theatre performs a "feeling-labour" that helps us to cultivate our emotional and imaginative capacities, providing access to our own and others' emotional depths (2010, p. 29). Marta Nussbaum and Carol Ryff further emphasise this perspective, arguing that the arts, and humanities more broadly, nurture inner vitality, counteracting the dulling of our senses and our spirits (Nussbaum, 2010; Ryff, 2019).

Significantly, Ryff argues that human growth and development, central to eudaimonic wellbeing, can be profoundly nurtured by the exposure to the arts and humanities. She suggests that the arts uniquely support "self-realization and continued development" (2019, p. 12). Eudaimonia and the concept of eudaimonic wellbeing stem from Aristotle's philosophy of happiness. According to Aristotle, eudaimonia is closely tied to virtue and actions

that express our best qualities. Ryff reiterates this point by explaining that "in all humans there resides a kind of unique spirit, known as the daimon. Our central task in life is to come to know our unique capacities and then to strive to realize them" (2019, p. 5). As such, the essence of eudaimonic wellbeing resonates well with the inscription in two epitaphs on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself" and "become who you are" (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Self-knowledge and the development of all human capacities are thus fundamental to eudaimonia (Skar & Torrissen, 2023).

Although Aristotle does not explicitly mention eudaimonia in the *Poetics*, there is a significant connection suggesting that theatre experiences can transform us both emotionally and intellectually. Aristotle argues that "to win understanding is the greatest pleasure" and highlights that one of the main reasons why humans engage in mimesis through art is for this purpose (p. 27). The pleasure derived from experiencing "pity and fear through mimesis" can thus have wellbeing benefits because mimesis fosters greater insights into the human condition, other people's interior life, and the natural world. For Aristotle, realising the best that is within ourselves was closely linked to community and commitment to the broader world. Nussbaum expands on this, arguing that one of the greatest strengths of the arts is their ability to cultivate the imagination, nourish the capacity for sympathy and empathy, and improve "the capacity to see the world through another person's eyes" (2010, p. 96). This aspect of the arts, their capacity to promote the importance of community, is crucial to citizenship and democracy.

To act and participate in society is a fundamental aspect of democracy. According to the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, a free and public "room" where people can act and speak is a prerequisite for democracy and a defence against totalitarian ideologies (1998). She describes the free and public space as the "room between us", where diverse voices can express themselves and be heard. According to Degerman (2019), Arendt sees emotion and reason as complementary; in order to respond reasonably, one must first of all be "moved" (Arendt, 1972, p. 161). In this respect, Arendt suggests a constructive role for the emotions in the development of individuals' capacity to act independently and make their own free choices. Arendt emphasises that both the emotions and the drive to seek community instigate an active response in human beings, and she argues that it is only within a community of diverse individuals that each person can fully emerge as a unique self. According to Zygmunt Bauman, community is essential for the development and expression of the moral obligation and basic responsibility that individuals have towards others (2006).

The personal and social growth associated with exposure to arts experiences can, in many ways, be described as a creative process. This is a perspective, which Ryff does not explicitly address in her account of how the arts and humanities can promote eudaimonic wellbeing (2019), which leads us to argue that the term "creative wellbeing" aptly encapsulates the potential for

growth and development inherent in aesthetic (arts) experiences. This growth and development are often described as a "transformation" in aesthetic theory. Erica Fischer-Lichte introduces the concept "transformative aesthetics" to underscore the transformative potential inherent in all forms of art (2018). Through an examination of influential theories of art and aesthetics, she concludes that these theories typically "call for some kind of transformation to take place in the recipient [...] during the aesthetic process" (2018, p. 2). The notion that aesthetic experiences can "transform" spectators is thus well-established (McNiff, 2004; Walsh, 2013). However, how is this transformative potential realised in practice?

In an interview, Fischer-Lichte explains that the transformative potential of art lies in aesthetic experiences: "My idea of what I call 'transformative aesthetics' is that, when you let go, only then, you will expose yourself to all these different experiences that a really exciting performance offers. Then, something can happen to you" (Perić, 2016). Fischer-Lichte elaborates on this process in more detail in her seminal study, *The transformative power of performance: A new aesthetics* (2008). In this work, she argues that an aesthetic experience comprises three factors, namely, the feedback loop's autopoiesis and the phenomenon of emergence, the collapse of dichotomies, and liminality (2008, p. 163). The first component refers to the fact that every performance is co-created in an ongoing feedback loop between the audience and the performers. The second factor highlights that in aesthetic experiences, the opposition between art and reality (and all resulting binaries) collapses. Consequently, the performers and audience members are mutually and emotionally exposed to each other's actions. Finally, according to Fischer-Lichte, both of these factors "enable experiences that always carry a liminal dimension" (p. 176), capable of altering the "energetic, affective and motoric state" of the audience (p. 177). In Fischer-Lichte's view, the aesthetic experience can thus be described as a liminal experience, capable of transforming those involved. By no means, all arts experiences "transform" or enable personal or social growth, but when participants experience transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual, we speak about creative wellbeing (see Torrissen & Løvoll (2025), p. 5–7).

The transformation most commonly discussed in relation to aesthetic experiences is the creative transformation of the self. According to John Dewey, an aesthetic experience is always a creative experience, encompassing experience, creation, and some kind of critique (Dewey, 1934/2005). The aesthetic experience is also action and when the audience has an aesthetic experience, it means that they actively use their imagination as co-creators (Dewey, 1934/2005). Dewey describes an aesthetic experience as a process of both doing and undergoing. This dual process of both creating and being created often feels pleasurable because it can shift or change our perspectives of the world. For Dewey, this is precisely the purpose of art and aesthetic experiences. He stresses that aesthetic experiences can

enhance our wellbeing because they can help us to build possibilities and to gain new insights about ourselves and our world. In his words, "we are carried beyond ourselves to find ourselves" when we experience art with aesthetic intensity (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 202). Similarly, Gadamer suggests that an encounter with an artwork is an encounter with oneself and one's self-understanding, during which the self undergoes transformation. In this art encounter, he argues, "it is not only the 'This art thou!' disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; 'Thou must alter thy life!'" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 131). In other words, the aesthetic experience can help us both to get to know ourselves better, and to question who we are and how we should live our lives.

Fischer-Lichte draws on Victor Turner's theories of liminality in rituals to conceptualise the transformation that might occur in performance. However, while transformations in rituals are permanent, those in and through performance are often perceived to be temporary. Fischer-Lichte acknowledges that performance is likely to cause only temporary shifts in emotions, attitudes, and behaviours, even though individual audience members might experience a powerful transformation that is more enduring (2008, p. 179). These transformations can only be studied in specific performative contexts and with reference to the specific goals of a given performance or performance event. To this end, we now turn to the context relevant to this chapter, focusing on some significant moments of Oscar's aesthetic experience. These moments form the foundation for a discussion on how aesthetic experiences in the theatre can promote "creative wellbeing".

How are you? Capturing some significant moments of the performance event

In an interview conducted as a part of a larger research project exploring the value of using theatre in public health work, Oscar, a social science student at a large Norwegian University, described the performance of *How are you?* as a powerful emotional experience that profoundly impacted him. In the following section, we recount five narratives that capture moments that we identify as significant for understanding how creative wellbeing is promoted in the theatre in this context. These narratives are based on careful analysis of video recordings, field notes, observation, and an in-depth interview with Oscar, which all offer insights into how he experienced the performance. The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, reference number 479367.

Letting go: transporting oneself to a different universe

In the first narrative, Oscar walks into the theatre space together with the rest of the audience members, immediately gripped by the unusual setting.

This performance takes place in the round, and placed on each chair, is a blanket, a decorated mask in a variety of forms and shapes, a questionnaire, and a pencil. A visibly nervous individual, Carl (pseudonym), stands next to Oscar. Carl tries to initiate a conversation about the mask and the unusual surroundings in which they find themselves. Oscar and others respond, contemplating the meaning of the masks. Once seated, a strict and commanding Voice is heard over the speakers. It instructs the audience to put on their masks to avoid stressful interactions with the other audience members and to cover themselves with the blanket to avoid getting cold. The audience complies. Oscar later reveals that despite his initial scepticism, he is almost instantaneously drawn into the action, suspending all disbelief. The performance gives Oscar the opportunity to let go and to participate in this immersive universe, and the performance creates the space and possibility for him to encounter himself.

Critical awakening

Early in the performance, the Voice instructs the audience to place four screens around the person sitting under the black blanket. There is some hesitation in the audience, but four of the audience members, including Carl and Oscar, comply with the demand. They duly place the screens around the person, isolating him completely from the rest of the group. Reflecting on the performance, Oscar says, "When we first isolated the one person, I did not think that it was so strange, but afterwards, when we just obeyed the Voice who told us what to do, I thought: This is very Big Brother". Afterwards, Oscar expresses that he is very uneasy about this; it made him realise that people tend to act unconsciously: "We have only followed slavishly what the government or the Norwegian parliament has said that we should do, without any form of critical thought at all". Oscar describes that becoming aware of this, even feeling it in his body, made an extraordinarily strong impression on him and prompted him to ask a number of questions. He reported being unable to get to terms with what has happened: Why did this happen? How could we be complicit in making it happen? Why did no one approach the isolated man to ask him how he was? Why did he continue to sit there throughout the performance without doing anything? What was the underlying issue? Was no one concerned for him? Was he all alone? Did he feel lonely? Oscar describes all the reflections and questions that flood his mind as urgent because they prompt him to consider how we treat each other, and how easy it is to become complicit and act complacently without considering the wellbeing of others in our daily lives. Reflecting on the isolated person in the audience, Oscar also imagines how similar experiences might have affected others during the pandemic. This insight deeply affects him because he had not previously seen and felt it with such intensely.

Really seeing the other

The performance is built up around 12 questionnaires, reflecting on and criticising how society deals with deeply personal and existential questions. The first questionnaire is staged as a traditional survey. The Voice warns the audience that some of the questions are easier to answer than others, before they are thrown into an emotionally challenging *tour de force* where they are asked to answer questions about physical and mental health at an accelerating tempo. Carl, (who the audience, at various points, comes to realise, is an actor), is visibly anxious, shifting back and forth on his chair. When the audience is asked the question, "how many people are so close to you that you can count on them if you get into serious personal problems", he hesitates, discernibly uncomfortable, attempting to make contact with the people around him. The people in the room are fully engrossed in the task of answering the questions. Oscar, too, remains silent until he is asked directly whether he thinks that the individual responses will be shared with the rest of the audience. Oscar answers that he does not know, but the Voice interjects immediately that the questionnaire is anonymous. The overarching impression is chilling, as the disembodied authoritative Voice assumes a controlling role. Carl's increasing unease compels him to speak up, asking if he can pose a question. The voice permits him to do so on condition that he leaves his seat and moves to the centre of the space to pose the question into the microphone. He complies. However, his attempt is interrupted by a sudden coughing fit that escalates in intensity. At this point, Oscar spontaneously offers Carl a bottle of water, which he gratefully accepts. Despite this, his cough persists and worsens. He apologises profusely, attempts to drink, coughs again, visibly discomforted. As the coughing fit eases, the sound of his cough is replayed over the speakers in a loop. Carl looks around, surrounded by a cacophony of coughs, as he returns to his seat in confusion and resignation, the question unasked.

The performance proceeds with different questionnaires that require varying degrees of interaction. Oscar is notably active, responding to the Voice's suggestions and demands. Oscar is also keenly attentive and responsive towards Carl who shows growing signs of anxiety and apprehension as the audience is questioned more intensely about crisis and crisis management. At one point, the Voice asks: *Can you imagine that the door gets blocked?* This further stresses Carl, prompting him to seek connection with Oscar. Oscar responds by smiling at him and attempting to reassure him, but the questions over the speaker continue to intensify. Suddenly, there is a **loud bang** that startles many, and Carl, unable to endure it any longer, begins yelling at the Voice to stop, stop, **STOP**. The Voice replies mechanically, repeating that any questions or comments must be posted from the middle of the space, using the microphone. Despite his obvious nervousness, Carl shows increased determination. As he steps into the middle, the Voice announces the beginning of the

next questionnaire, and Carl asks if he can take charge of it. He is permitted to take charge, transforming it into a playful quiz in clear opposition to the seriousness of the Voice's questionnaires. Carl becomes highly energised by this performance. However, when the Voice interrupts him again instructing him to return to his seat, he expresses deep indignation. He questions loudly: "Do we have no co-determination at all? Is there a legal basis for this? Don't we live in a democracy? Is having fun, banned?" Failing to take control over the Voice and not receiving the answers he seeks, Carl becomes increasingly vulnerable and distressed, working himself into a frenzy that culminates in a panic attack and ultimately death.

During the interview, reflecting on the events, Oscar expressed his shock at the lack of reactions and inactivity among the audience. He reported that watching the actor suffering was "very uncomfortable", because he "got a coughing fit and clearly suffered", but no one did anything. Oscar remarked: "All these masks just sat there in a circle staring, as if: Ok, this is life. This is totally normal". Oscar's interpretation of this event was that, although Carl "obviously had anxiety and struggled to take care of himself, [...] the world around him did not give a damn". For Oscar, witnessing Carls's distress became so agonising that he felt compelled to act: he "just thought, someone must do something. And then I saw that it was a bottle of water by the chair, and I gave it to him". Later in the performance, Oscar continued to offer assistance, asking him if he was alright and trying to help him navigate his confusion and anxiety. Oscar also admitted that he was shocked by his own passive response and delay in taking action, "that it took so long before I dared to do something, before I acted". Thinking back on this experience, Oscar described it as an "uncomfortable" realisation that prompted him to engage with questions probing deeply into his own sense of self.

Getting in touch with our emotional selves

Oscar described himself as a young man and student who typically left his feelings at home "in the drawer" or "under the carpet", as he expressed it. During the interview, he frequently revisited this tendency to repress emotions, attributing it to stereotypical behaviour of young men who often neglect to reflect on their own or others' feelings. Oscar reflected that it was "very good to get an external motivation to ask those questions". For him, this experience served as a catalyst for him to delve deeper into his emotional landscape. The third questionnaire was particularly powerful. Here the Voice asks: *Have you noticed that there is a mirror under your chair? Do you dare to look at yourself in the mirror?* Carl responded with a nervous laughter, saying "Yeah, do we dare to do that?". Nonetheless, he, along with everyone else in the audience, picked up the mirror, studying their masked reflections.

During the next sequence, a choir of different voices repeatedly sang "how are you?" over the loudspeakers while people studied themselves in

the mirror. Oscar was fully immersed in the task, and in the interview, he revealed that this sequence made a strong impression on him: "Seeing myself in the mirror was a lot, lot stronger than I had envisioned", he stated. "When I saw myself in the mirror, and I had the mask on, and then the 'how are you?' music played in the background. [...] it was really, really powerful". As he described it, "I felt a summary of all the feelings I had felt the last half a year. And that is a good thing". For Oscar, the most important takeaway was that the performance helped him "grasp and dare to acknowledge his own feelings". He described this experience as "liberating" and "wonderful". In his words, the experience was "tough, challenging and difficult, but it was something relieving about being given the opportunity to sit in a room at the end of a totally normal day, getting in touch with one's feelings and grasp new things about oneself". He then encapsulated the essence of the experience by emphasising: "I got a very unexpected and spontaneous release of feelings, thoughts, and reflections that I was not prepared for. It was very redemptive".

Collective experience

The theatre experience provided opportunities to forge social connections with strangers and to explore emotions and issues collectively. As Oscar saw it, one of the strengths of the theatre, is its ability to confront emotions that might otherwise be challenging to address publicly. Oscar observed that theatre breaks down the barrier between public and private spheres:

> It was really strange sitting in a room full of strangers, everyone sitting there with a mask on. And then having an inner dialogue where quite serious things are being discussed, things that often are left at home in a drawer.

Bringing these feelings and thoughts into the public realm made Oscar keenly aware of the other audience members, forging bonds with some and antagonistic connections with others. He felt a social distance from many audience members who seemed passive and inactive. He wanted to distance himself from them, forging a connection of social distance. However, the performance also fostered a sense of mutual connection and social proximity as Oscar formed a bond with Carl, the isolated person behind the screen, and other audience members with whom he joined in collective action.

In the fictional setting of the performance, one of the final questions posed to the audience relates to feelings of guilt surrounding the fear of infecting others with the coronavirus, potentially causing death. Those who had experienced this fear were invited to indicate this by leaving their seats and walking into the middle of the performance space. Oscar joins the group, and for a period there is room for silent reflection, until the voice of a hospital

chaplain encourages deeper introspection. In the chaplain's view, we all confront powerlessness in the face of death. She then challenges the audience to consider why they shy away from this sense of powerlessness which actually holds profound communal significance. She urges the audience to relinquish control, let go and embrace the support found in the community of shared powerlessness and vulnerability, so that we can dare to truly ask how we and everyone around us are feeling. The performance ends with precisely this: Letting go. As the performance ends, everyone is invited to join in a celebratory moment, singing "How are you?" to a mesmerising and repetitive melody. This time the question is not directed to the individual selves, but to the collective community at large.

Participatory theatre and creative wellbeing

Following Oscar's journey in the theatre, it was evident that he had a profound aesthetic experience and that, by letting go, he opened himself to an experience that deeply affected him. As already mentioned, Oscar was sceptical when he walked into the theatre, but he was struck by the power of the theatre to deeply affect and shift his perspective. He reflected that achieving such a profound emotional experience through other means would be difficult. He argued that seeking help from a psychologist would have felt like a "sterile, unpersonal and neutral" experience that "probably would have left me untouched and without the same deep reflections and revelations as I got through the theatre". It can be argued that the experience had a transformative effect on him, and although we must be cautious about the methodological limitations of a single case study, Oscar's story provides an illustrative example of how aesthetic experience in the theatre can promote creative wellbeing.

In advocating for why theatre holds significant potential in nurturing human development and growth, we highlight three aspects of the theatre experience, in particular: First, the theatre possess a unique potential to cultivate emotional capabilities, enabling the audience to develop emotionally and reconnect with parts of themselves that may be concealed or suppressed. For Oscar, the performance provided a valuable opportunity to connect with and address feelings that he typically repressed by brushing them under the carpet or leaving them in the drawer at home. As we have seen, Oscar was clearly surprised by the powerful emotional impact that experience had on him, describing it as "liberating" and "redemptive". This liberating and redemptive experience is also transformative in that it enabled him to tap into his latent feelings, release emotions, and discover something new about himself in the process. Significantly, Oscar's description of his experiences can be likened to a cathartic journey, empowering him to express and unleash his emotions while also gaining a deeper understanding, echoing Aristotle's assertion that he came "to win understanding", which "is the greatest pleasure" of

mimesis (Aristotle, 2004, p. 27). Like the male audiences in antiquity, Oscar was given the opportunity to express emotions while attending the theatre, emotions that otherwise would have been pent up and unexpressed.

Second, the theatre provides the audience with the necessary conditions to probe the depths of the self in ways that are conducive of gaining greater self-insight and self-understanding. According to Oscar, emotional involvement in the theatre was strongly associated with acquiring new insights about himself. Although Oscar did not specify what he learned or the nature of his self-understanding, it is evident that his encounter with himself through the performance led to realisations that were both painful and tough. This introspective journey, prompted by the theatrical experience, highlights the significant impact such experiences can have on personal growth and self-awareness. Nonetheless, the experience was also pleasurable because it contributed to growth and greater insights. For Oscar, this new self-understanding and the insights he gained were clearly linked to the creative experience he had in the theatre. Analysing the experience in more detail, it can be argued that his personal growth resulted from a creative process where he, to use Dewey's concepts, was both "doing and undergoing" simultaneously (2005, p. 46). In other words, he is both actively shaping the performance and being shaped by it.

As we have seen, Oscar let go very early on in the performance, and in this way, he co-created the performance through an ongoing and constant feedback loop that breaks down the opposition between art and reality. Although Oscar admitted that he realised quite early that Carl was an actor, he was nevertheless so immersed in the co-creation of the performance that the opposition between art and reality collapsed. This enabled him to enter a liminal space where preconceived ideas were challenged and where he could discover new aspects of himself and the world he inhabits. In this way, we can argue that the "as if" experience enabled by the theatre provided the necessary space for making the leap required to really see himself anew. Seeing himself in the mirror, it is the mask, the music, the space, and the time that provided the necessary space for making the leap required to see himself anew. As Oscar acknowledges, this opportunity for growth was not available in his day-to-day life because he didn't habitually pause to reflect on *who* he is or *how* he feels. In the context of the theatre, time is allocated precisely for such reflection. Oscar was given "an external motivation" to ask himself questions that he otherwise would not have considered. The questions posed to Oscar and other audience members during the performance sparked deeper introspection. For Oscar, these questions ignited his imagination, prompting him to grapple with existential issues about his identity, aspirations, and future trajectory, who he is, who he wants to be, and who he wants to become. In this way, we argue that these reflections guided him closer to the inscriptions on the temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself" and "become who you are" (Ryff & Singer, 2008). As highlighted earlier, the

performance confronted Oscar with an image of himself that unsettled him. In response, he felt compelled to act and evolve into a more proactive and engaged version of himself.

This brings us to the third aspect: the cultivation of sympathy and empathetic understanding of others. Oscar's inner growth did not happen in isolation, and it can be argued that his self-development is intimately linked to the development of a deepened sensitivity towards others. This double movement of "inner self-cultivation and responsiveness to others" often "develop in tandem", according to Rabindranath Tagore, "since one can hardly cherish in another what one has not explored in oneself" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 104). Watching the performance *How are you?*, Oscar was clearly experiencing the world and himself anew. Witnessing and participating in isolating a random audience member, was, for instance, a potent moment in which he experiences eudaimonic growth both personally and socially. This was a complex moment of revelation where we can identify three different processes of growth. The first process is related to self-discovery and greater self-knowledge. Oscar realised that he was not the person he wanted to be, laying bare unflattering traits in himself. These were aspects of himself that he had not confronted before. This self-awareness was a significant step towards personal growth. He was prompted to consider how he could align his actions with his desired self-identity. Gadamer's (2007) explanation of what can happen in an arts encounter is very relevant for understanding Oscar's experience in the theatre. Here, in his encounter with *How are you?,* he is confronted with both the reflective recognition "This art thou!", and the much more radical imperative "Thou must alter thy life!" simultaneously. This dual confrontation underscores the second process of growth: Oscar's desire to develop into a better person. He aspires to become someone who does not follow instructions without critical reflection, and someone who engages and takes responsibility as an active citizen. The third process of growth involves Oscar developing greater curiosity and empathy towards the isolated person. By placing himself imaginatively in his situation, Oscar wondered what it might be like to experience isolation and loneliness. This contemplation extended to a deeper understanding of what many had experienced during the pandemic. Interestingly, he presented this as though it is the first time he had considered these issues. Drawing on insights by Nussbaum, we can say that the performance "activate[d] and refine[d] [Oscar's] capacity to see the world through another person's eyes" (2010, p. 96).

Our case study illustrates how theatre experiences can help us to develop sympathy and an emphatic understanding of others through aesthetic experiences. The theatre experience is designed to help us identify with others. Studies in theatre and neuroscience show that seeing performances like *How are you?* can provide vicarious experiences, meaning we feel as if we are experiencing the same things as the actor on stage (Falletti et al., 2016). Erin Hurley illustrates this by explaining that "to the human brain, observation

and experience – or, put differently, simulation and reality – are effectively the same thing" (2010, p. 31). Watching an actor "in pain" evokes a similar response as experiencing the pain oneself. Experiencing theatre, whether identifying with others or feeling compassion for them, thus helps us to connect with others, thereby fulfilling one of our most basic needs, namely our need to connect and belong. In this way, Hurley argues, the theatre performs effective "emotional labour" enabling us to "move out of our ontological isolation, to connect with what and who is around us" (2010, p. 35). This process not only enhances our empathetic understanding but also enriches our social and emotional lives by fostering deeper connections with ourselves, the world and people around us.

An additional perspective lies in the theatre's capability to activate the audience, fostering shared meaning, stimulating reflection and empowering citizens, thereby promoting active citizenship. For Oscar, the performance became a platform for reflecting on the pandemic's impact, the Norwegian government's response, citizens' behaviour under restrictions, and the degree of compliance observed. It is striking how the performance provided Oscar with an opportunity for these critical reflections.

Drawing on Arendt's and Bauman´s insights, we can argue that *How are you?* created the necessary "room" for reflection crucial for active citizenship and the cultivation of a moral self. Both Hannah Arendt (1998) and Zygmunt Bauman (2006) emphasise the importance of individuals identifying and interrogating problematic aspects within their own values, principles, and assumptions to foster ethical awareness. *How are you?* provided this opportunity, where Oscar got to feel the discomfort in the situation and his responsibility towards others. Both the emotions and the drive to seek community instigate an active response in human beings, according to Arendt. *How are you?* provided a bridge from Oscars subjective experiences and emotions so that he could develop his moral sensibility towards the community. In Bauman's (2006) view, people's moral impulse is essential to drive and sustain society.

Through its capacity for "emotional labour" theatre can also perform a form of "social work" facilitating our ability us to identify and differentiate ourselves from others, share pleasures, take positions, and express dissent. In this way, "we as a society come to understand ourselves, our values, and our social world" in ways that carry significant ethical implications (Hurley, 2010, p. 10). While Aristotle's *Poetics* does not explicitly address the ethical aspects of theatrical experiences, numerous scholars have attributed an ethical dimension to his work, arguing that catharsis inherently involves moral insight (Sæbø, 1998/2011, p. 395). Regardless of Aristotle's original intent, the performance under discussion exemplifies how theatre can foster ethical and moral action and reflection. As we have seen, Oscar felt profound compassion for the main character, actively participating in trying to ameliorate his suffering. He expressed a genuine desire to alleviate the character's

distress and engaged with him supportively. These actions demonstrate that Oscar felt pity for the character, and by acting on this emotion, he exhibited virtue. According to Aristotle, human growth and self-realisation are dependent on action, not just ideas. As such we can argue that the theatre experience helped Oscar to realise "the best thing in us", which according to Aristotle is the essence of happiness and eudaimonia (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, we have illustrated how an aesthetic experience in the theatre, fostering co-creation and liminality, offer a pathway to wellbeing that nourishes human growth and development. Many of the positive wellbeing outcomes associated with the aesthetic experience relate to their unique ability to spark creative processes that facilitate and enhance the cultivation of emotional depths, personal growth, greater empathy, and a deeper connection with others. Moreover, another significant aspect is the potential of aesthetic experiences to stimulate critical reflection and ethical awareness. These experiences can prompt individuals to interrogate their values, assumptions, and societal norms, fostering a heightened awareness of ethical implications in personal and communal life.

With this understanding, there exists a potential for the aesthetic experiences to extend the individual's moral impulse to a collective level. By using the concept of creative wellbeing to describe the growth and development process stimulated in response to aesthetic experiences, we highlight the wellbeing benefits inherent in creative and aesthetic endeavours. Theoretical perspectives propose these potentials, but empirical examples allow us to assess the validity of these claims. Although Oscar's case is singular, it vividly illustrates how the theatre experience strengthened his emotional and imaginative capacities, offering him numerous opportunities to cultivate insights about himself and others that would have otherwise remained unexplored. This is not to say that creative wellbeing is exclusively promoted through the arts, but it does underscore the distinctive potential inherent in artistic experiences. While we cannot generalise from this single case study alone, it compellingly illustrates the unique capacity of theatre to provide immersive experiences that blur and push the boundaries between fiction and reality, transporting us into imagined worlds where our capacity to feel, imagine, and connect is enhanced. Recognising the potential for such experiences to cultivate empathy and understanding, opportunities to engage in aesthetic theatrical experiences should be valued and prioritised as a pathway to building a more empathetic future. Significantly, this growth has the potential to strengthen active citizenship and foster community. In essence, we need more meaningful, reflective, and compassionate *"How are you?"* moments in our lives to encourage human action and the co-creation of a more sustainable future.

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Chapter 5

The art of walking

Finding resources for creative wellbeing

Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Raul Grau-Ruiz

Pilgrimage and eudaimonic wellbeing

We were interested in examining whether walking a long distance between holy sites in a nature- and culture-rich environment could help us better understand processes of creative wellbeing. A pilgrimage can be defined as a journey driven by religious impulses, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes (Barber, 1993). Although the origins of pilgrimages historically stem from religious practices, the contemporary expression of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has become primarily secular (Amaro et al., 2018). In parallel, there is a growing interest for better understanding the therapeutical aspects of embarking on pilgrimages, such as promoting personal wellbeing, self-discovery, development, and spirituality (Jørgensen et al., 2020). According to the highly influential wellbeing researcher Carol Ryff, spiritual aspects of wellbeing have largely been overlooked in wellbeing research (Ryff, 2021). Ryff emphasises the centrality of *nature* in understanding deeper meanings of what the soul needs, itself a rare research focus, at least within psychology. Embracing a complex and philosophical view as articulated in Aristotelian eudaimonic wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016; Waterman, 2013), we consider how the pilgrimage contributes to creative wellbeing. Here, "creative wellbeing involves engaging in activities or experiences that stimulate creativity and result in the creation of something new (such as a new perspective, a human-nature relationship, an artwork, etc.), fostering transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual" (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 5). Growth includes perspectives that point to deeper levels of awareness as a creative process, including the ecological self (see more on eco-spirituality and yoik, both relevant for the pilgrimage experience in Torrissen & Løvoll (2025), p.36–66).

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which walking the Camino could be considered as creative wellbeing, connecting nature aesthetics, creativity, and wellbeing through the lens of situational eudaimonic experiences. We explore *what characterises experiences that correlate to personal growth and intense eudaimonic experiences*, to investigate how these experiences relate to intrinsic motivation and creative wellbeing.

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Situational experiences and personal growth

Wellbeing is a broad, multifaceted construct (Tov, 2018). Psychological science has typically conceptualised the good life in terms of either hedonic or eudaimonic wellbeing, although present empirical evidence challenges this dichotomy (King & Hicks, 2021; Oishi & Westgate, 2022). On the one hand, hedonic wellbeing emphasises the importance of pleasant (affective) and satisfactory (cognitive) experiences in a person's life. On the other hand, eudaimonic wellbeing assumes the existence of certain needs or qualities essential for one's psychological growth and development, including finding meaning in life, well-functioning, and the fulfilment of potentials and self-realisation (Tov, 2018). For a good life, eudaimonic wellbeing emphasises the knowledge needed to move humankind towards such growth and development (Vittersø, 2016).

An earlier empirical study by Løvoll and Torrissen (2020) sought to examine the wellbeing-promoting dynamics of pilgrimaging through a broad spectrum of wellbeing measures and bottom-up interpretation. This study found that pilgrimaging has strong impacts on both satisfaction with life and mental wellbeing, though a moderate impact on personal growth (Løvoll & Torrissen, 2020). These results support the idea that pilgrimage substantially boosts immediate wellbeing when offered as a social health care initiative. However, a fortnight after returning from the pilgrimage, the impacts measured for satisfaction with life and mental wellbeing decreased to medium and small effects, respectively. Hedonic aspects of life evaluation, such as measures of satisfaction with life, would be influenced by the patterns of hedonic adaption (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). In other words, we return more or less to our emotional hedonic baseline as this is a relatively stable construct. Nonetheless, there still remained a small effect after 14 days within these measures. For personal growth, the increase from the start to the end of the pilgrimage was smaller, but the decreasing effect 14 days after the return was also smaller, suggesting that the measure of personal growth could be less influenced by hedonic adaption than the other wellbeing measures. This remains a compelling question. Could situational experiences during pilgrimage contribute to more permanent changes in personal growth? Drawing on humanistic psychology and eudaimonic wellbeing, there might be some instances or contexts that could have a stronger influence in the participant's lives. To investigate these dynamics further, more analysis is needed on the emotional and contextual aspects of each individual from their pilgrimage experience. This chapter aims to build upon the data from Løvoll and Torrissen's study (2020) and explore how emotional and contextual aspects within/from the pilgrimage relate to eudaimonic feelings and personal growth. The chapter discusses these findings within the conceptual frame of creative wellbeing.

Spontaneous elevation of intrinsic motivation

A relevant question is whether situational experiences could have the power to make changes in wellbeing, both immediately experienced but also more enduring. Situational experiences were captured as emotional memories of events in an outdoor setting (Løvoll et al., 2017). Here, the influence from experiences were calculated in relation to baseline references of intrinsic motivation. When this baseline was taken account, a significant change (12%) was found in elevation of intrinsic motivation after the event, which was explained by the emotional power of situational experiences. The general principle of the "broaden and build" theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004) is relevant to understanding internalisation processes of how experiences can build renewed and lasting interest in being outdoors and in nature. The facilitation for people to be touched by emotional experiences is thus an important way to improve intrinsic motivation, independent of their baseline. Positive memories from events can start interest in new activities. Furthermore, intrinsic motivation and eudaimonic wellbeing are interrelated. Waterman and Schwartz (2023) found eudaimonic wellbeing to be a predictor of intrinsic motivation, which supports the eudaimonic identity theory (see Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 17–35) to identify the role of activities in our self-perceptions.

To further understand functions and dynamics of peak emotions, we draw on resources from the original scheme theory from Gudrun Eckblad (1981). Eckblad presents a model of curvex structure, what she calls a "sector model" of peak emotions, where different valences ("pleasant", "interesting", "complex") reach their peak level dependent of stimulus complexity (Eckblad, 1981, p. 80). In this model, "pleasure" has a peak level with low stimulus complexity, while "interest" has a peak level with higher complexity. This model contrasts with linear models of emotions, that explain higher levels of intensity as merely bodily phenomenon, not in relation to stimulus complexity. In the prediction of eudaimonic feelings, such as "interest", it is likely that this feeling occurs with some cognitive effort or *accommodation*, using the vocabulary of Eckblad. This resonates with the more recent theory of awe experiences, characterised by vastness and accommodation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). The emergence of moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion depends on complex aspects relating to the creation of human cognition and emotion.

Following Eckblad, the most interesting tasks are those which are found at the "moving edge of assimilation" (Eckblad, 1981, p. 94). This is the description of how a new and complex situation is followed by emotions like frustration and challenge. To be familiar with this new situation, there is an assimilation process going on, making this complex situation familiar. Emotions will gradually change by repeating this situation, from the initial frustration to interest, and maybe also to ease. In her model, she differentiates between six sectors on a continuum between very easy to very high complexity, which demands different levels of assimilation resistance.

Low assimilation resistance points to easiness, while high complexity points to difficulties in our emotional coping with the situation. Based on her characteristics in the different sectors, and their associated emotions, sectors III (from pleasure to interest) and IV (from interest to complex) seem to be particularly important for understanding motivational dynamics. In exploring spontaneous activity, experiences from sectors III and IV seem to correspond to eudaimonic feelings in the engagement with external stimuli, with the identification of "interest" as a feeling. Sector III is illustrated by adjectives and behavioural indices located in her factor analysis: "nice, liked, challenging, beautiful, happy, meaningful, light, good, full, powerful". Similarly, sector IV was: "challenging, difficult, active, deep, fresh, profound, vibrant, varied, tense, looking time, rating time, number of sides (in random polygons)" (Eckblad, 1981, p. 81). Based on Eckblad's scheme theory, hiking in nature on the heritage route to Santiago de Compostela, partly alone and partly with others, carries potential for experiencing a richly stimulating environment relevant for wellbeing, as well as for increasing intrinsic motivation to seek out further outdoor experiences and pilgrimaging. To understand underlying structures of how to identify growth-oriented experiences is essential. Through the mixed-method approach, this chapter offers an exploration of the narratives of Eckblad to identify powerful moments of experiences.

The transformative potential of walking Camino de Santiago

The landscape of the Camino de Santiago is known to tap into a multidimensional psycho-existential phenomenon with deep transformative potential, both historically but also for modern pilgrims. A recent phenomenological study on the experiences of Camino de Santiago walkers (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023) indicates that about ¾ of the participants were motivated to go by psycho-existential motives and experienced changes in life after walking it. The six major themes that emerged were (1) authentic experience, (2) walking in nature, (3) self-transformation, (4) community, (5) simplicity, and (6) spirituality. As Sørensen and Høgh-Olesen (2023) observe, the field of psychology has not studied pilgrimaging extensively. Nonetheless, their study shows a clear link, particularly with eudaimonic wellbeing facets (e.g., authenticity, self-transformation, community, spirituality) and warrants further research. For example, there is a valuable opportunity to advance their preliminary research which found evidence for an enduring influence of pilgrimaging on people's life concerning mental health aspects. Although the pilgrims' experiences are unique and personal and are understood through participant descriptions, such a study would also benefit from a mixed-methods analysis to supplement these discursive strengths by pairing them with quantitative data from psychological scales. This approach is valuable

for assisting in selecting experiences of a particular psychological intensity, adding precision in pre-post pilgrimage differences, assessing effect sizes, or easing comparisons across studies. Moreover, although the authors provide preliminary evidence for the key role of nature, this aspect is underdeveloped and even largely overlooked. For example, nature is discussed under a paradigm of walking, a human-centred activity. There is still much to learn about the value that specific non-human natural elements have in the experience, throughout the Camino experience and afterwards.

The art of walking: nature aesthetics and creative wellbeing

Creative wellbeing is highly pertinent in the context of pilgrimaging the route to Santiago. The Camino landscape provides pilgrims with the aesthetic conditions for experiencing a mix of sensations, emotions, thoughts, and life changes. What makes the pilgrimage experience distinct from a hike is that by embarking on a pilgrimage experience, participants are receptive to spirituality and a deeper understanding of the "sublime" dimension in nature, which points to existential aspects of being human and to feel a bonding to nature (Løvoll & Sæther, 2022; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023).

Although pilgrimaging might seem straightforward, pilgrimaging allows room for personalisation and creativity in intimate contact with all elements intrinsic to the pilgrimage experience. Thus, we expect that all aspects of creative wellbeing can be stimulated on the journey. Since the Camino takes place in vast areas of the natural landscape, it is especially important to explore the creative aspect of connectedness in relation to nature. *Connectedness to nature* is just one of the terms related to "human-nature connectedness" and includes similar terms such as nature relatedness or inclusion of nature in self (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023). The term connectedness to nature was introduced by Mayer and Frantz and specifically refers to a sense of oneness with nature, that is, to the extent to which people feel affectively connected and belonging to the natural community (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Mayer et al., 2009). Studies show that engaging physically with nature is a path towards connectedness to nature (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023). This, in turn, is a predictor of environmental behaviour and wellbeing (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023; Tam, 2013), including eudaimonic wellbeing and self-reported personal growth, in particular (Pritchard et al., 2020). As connectedness to nature taps into an existential experience involving the self in relation to the external world and enables personal growth, this experience can be argued as one of high complexity following Eckblad's (1981) scheme theory.

A mixed-methods approach to understanding experiences

For the study, researchers recruited a small sample of 11 voluntary participants from a social care and health organisation in Northern Norway.

These participants had various backgrounds, but they had in common that they experienced everyday struggles and wished to develop their life skills. This group of participants were offered an 18-day pilgrim hike to Santiago de Compostela as part of their personal recovery process, together with a professional health worker and a few volunteers. Before embarking on the pilgrimage, the participants were trained in mindfulness, as well as outdoor hiking skills. Nine participants, one professional health worker, and one voluntary worker walked the whole distance of 320 kilometres (from León to Santiago de Compostela). They walked for 16 days, with a mean daily distance of 20 kilometres (about 12.43 miles). Two additional participants joined only the last 6 days of the Camino (111 kilometres). Together with these participants, another health worker and two voluntary workers also joined the group.

Experiences on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela

The Way of Saint James, the walking route of the Camino de Santiago, has and continues to be the oldest, busiest, and most celebrated pilgrimage in Europe[1]. The Way of Saint James has as the official end destination the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a city in Galicia, Northwest Spain. During the Middle Ages, a Europe-wide network of pilgrim routes emerged in the belief that the body of the apostle James the Great rested in Santiago (Fletcher, 1984, p. 53). In 1993, a network of four pilgrimage routes was inscribed on the World Heritage List[2], under criterions of protection including the preservation of the most complete material registry of all Christian pilgrimage routes. Thus, reflecting a sustained interest in keeping alive this long tradition bringing together people from all social classes. The Camino route is vastly revered for traversing outstanding natural landscapes as well as a rich intangible cultural heritage, including churches, hospitals, hostels, monasteries, calvaries, and bridges, many of which retain their original artistic and architectural features. For Norwegian pilgrims, this landscape also offers a warmer climate than the weather in Norwegian mountains.

Before and after the hike, participants answered questionnaires on three different wellbeing measures. Data was collected by one of the organisers from Norway who was not a part of the research team but who followed the participants from start to return. After the hike, in Norway, researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with the participants. Results from these analyses are published elsewhere (Løvoll & Torrissen, 2020; Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022). In the current study, three data sources inform our findings, namely data from the daily diary entries, measurements (experiences and personal growth), and narratives from individual interviews upon return. Using the mixed methods design, the selection of narratives for analysis was made after information from the quantitative measures.

Written narratives from participants mixed with aesthetic measures

Every day participants were invited to think about their day hiking and describe episodes after instruction: (1) When you think through your experiences from the day, what would you consider as something beautiful? (2) When you think through the day, select one episode you felt a strong experience of nature. Guided by these questions, informants wrote free text in a designated space in their premade diaries. They also reported on these episodes according to two measures of experiences: basic emotions and aesthetic experiences. The professional health worker distributed and collected the diaries every day. Although participants gave voluntary consent for participating in the research, they often felt tired by the end of the day. Despite these challenges, participants nevertheless provided rich material for analysis. Based on the post-pilgrimage analysis, researchers analysed in detail two of the participant interviews, selected based on their self-reported experience of emotionally intense episodes.

The post-measure of personal growth composite (mean of all 12 items) was tested for correlations with the first question of aesthetics to see whether some of the experiences or certain of the days be more important than others. Moreover, based on previous research published by Løvoll et al. (2018) of nine dimensions of the aesthetic experience, this study employed just five informing about the sublime factor on the aesthetic experience during a 5-day ski adventure in winter mountains. These five items were: (3) "I appreciated variety in nature"; (5) "I felt everything was connected and related in nature"; (6) "I felt at home in nature"; (7) "I felt the nature experience evoked wonder"; and, (8) "I felt the experience of beauty in nature evoked wonder", and they correlated strongly to personal growth ($r = .59$, $p = .026$). We were curious to explore whether the same five items in this pilgrim sample were related to personal growth. Hence, we collapsed these five items into one measure and correlated these with the post-measure of personal growth. Last, the average of eudaimonic feelings (days with interest, engagement, and enthusiasm ≥ 6) was also correlated to post-pilgrimage personal growth.

To identify days and experiences of special importance, participants, and descriptions in narratives that correlated with personal growth were collected. In addition, interviews with any other informants reporting intense positive emotions were reviewed again and these supplemented the main findings. For a wider comparison, those participants for whom the pilgrimage did not arouse intense eudaimonic emotions were included as a reference. Lastly, researchers employed the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to identify and develop overarching themes from the start of the hike through to the end which allowed a holistic perspective of the pilgrimage.

Table 5.1 Descriptive information on intense eudaimonic feelings and personal growth

Participant	*Number of days with intense eudaimonic feelings*	*Pre-measure Personal growth Composite*	*Post-measure Personal growth Composite*
Sol	18		4.67
Martine	16	3.58	4.58
Frida	10	3.75	3.92
Kristin	7	2.67	3.75
Linnea	5	3.33	3.38
Sigrun	2	4.42	3.92
Kristine	0	1.62	1.50
Vilde	0	4.42	3.92
Rebekka	0	3.33	3.42
Ida	0		4.67
Carsten	0	2.67	2.67

Connection between personal growth and intense positive feelings

Table 5.1 presents descriptive information on intense eudaimonic feelings and personal growth for all 11 participants. "Intense eudaimonic feelings" were defined when the mean of the three eudaimonic feelings (interest, engagement, and enthusiasm) were rated to 6 or more (on the scale from 1 to 7). The pre-measure for the personal growth composite were missing for Sol and Ida. The reasons for this were due to practical issues about the departure.

"Intense eudaimonic feelings" correlated significantly with the post-personal growth assessment on nine of 18 days. Sublime experiences correlated with intense eudaimonic feelings significantly also on nine days. There were some overlaps in eudaimonic and sublime experiences, but the constructs also seem to be different in their relation to personal growth. Days 4, 6, 9, and 18 had significant correlations for both sublime and personal growth composite scores.

Themes from eudaimonic experiences during pilgrimage

A total of 120 individual narratives stemming from the two daily questions were created. All of these narratives concerned beautiful experiences and powerful encounters with nature. All satisfied the inclusion criteria of eudaimonic feelings on the quantitative measure (mean interest, engagement, and enthusiasm ≥ 6). These narratives varied from one word ("nature") to 121-word long-rich descriptions. After reading these narratives several times, they were coded, classified, and assigned terms. Four rubrics emerged:

context, body, attention to the outer world, and attention to the inner world. The rubrics comprised the following ideas:

Context: Alone, with others, landscape, view, ceremony, place (e.g., lush, magical, exotic, good company).

Body: Sensory experiences, rhythm in the body, movement.

Attention to the outer world: Mountains, flowers, details, weather, colors, old buildings, trees, butterflies, birds, lizards, sounds, smells, church, birds chirping, blue sky, cows, steep terrain, cultural landscape, place of sacrifice, sun.

Attention to the inner world: Being present, grateful, reflection, evoked good memories, freedom, love, afterthoughts, fascination, nice atmosphere, meditation, light thoughts, humor, good energy, pleasant, spiritual experience, magical, perspective of time, place and space, love in details, feeling touched ("the forest sang"), positive self-talk, humility, unity, essence of myself, pride, wisdom, enjoy myself, mastery, unity with nature, powerful, harmonious.

Overarching themes including narratives and interviews

The next analysis included material from the interviews, as well as the daily narratives. Through a back-and-forth interpretative process, five overarching themes emerged as elements in the participant's eudaimonic experiences. These themes were aesthetics, being in a different state/presence, connection with nature/elements, human connection, and becoming a better person. Some descriptions of the experiences seemed to be particularly associated to a single overarching theme, while other experiences integrated several simultaneously. For the presentation of quotes, researchers selected the narratives from the daily diaries of two participants, Martine and Sol. These narratives were selected because of their rich descriptions and their high frequency in reporting eudaimonic feelings that are relevant to understanding personal growth.

Aesthetics

The word beauty and beautiful recurred frequently. The word "beauty" was also commonly used in the daily diary questionnaire, inviting aesthetic attention. We see this aesthetic theme being applied in relation to multiple nature elements and qualities. Some examples are:

"The nature here is beautiful" (Martine, day 2). Some informants linked beauty to qualities of natural elements, like for example: "Movement, beautiful nature and colours [...] A big tree on the large field was beautiful and initiated good reflections" (Sol, day 1). Other respondents responded to a sense of deep immersion in the landscape: "[...] When you see all the beauty

around you, everything becomes more real and genuine. To see a blue sky, green colours and feel the warmth both from the sun and people around me, it becomes a powerful experience" (Martine, day 8). Novelty was also enthralling: "It was great to come to the new place and see how incredibly beautiful the nature around is" (Martine, day 14).

Being in a different presence/state of mind

Martine explained how walking helped her to become mindful: "I did not leave my thoughts at home, I threw them away while walking" (Martine, interview). The study participants often alluded in their descriptions to complex states of mind in contrast with their normal perception of the world and themselves. The overarching theme "being in a different state of mind" was used to encompass several experiences such as being mindful, exemplified by another of Martine's reflections: "It's just you and that country road and all nature around. And then you automatically notice things, smell things and everything. You get a completely different mindset. So, you are somehow in the present. That's what you are" (Martine, interview). She continues by contrasting this aroused state to that of home life: "If you sit on your ass at home in an armchair thinking, then you are not in the present, then you are in a bad circle [...]". To sum up, she mentioned: "All in all it is balm to your soul. It is so incredibly great to walk along the road and be present here and now. One feels a very strong presence when one walks, even though one walks alone". About this state of heightened awareness, she offered: "Suddenly one notices many things that one has not noticed before. [...] It was a euphoric experience" (Martine, interview).

Another unusual state of mind related to being authentic and engaging with the world in an unfiltered manner was: "Being childlike, that was very good for me. Outside time and place [...] Being a little informal. Daring to chase after butterflies or try to get them to sit on my fingers. Or talk to trees or hugging trees" (Sol, interview). She quipped that it was "excellent earthing".

Being in a different state of mind meant participants reported they became aware that their attention was absorbed differently: "It is like being in a bubble, but it is very satisfying to be in that bubble. Very good" (Sol, interview). With a different state of mind, came calm: "And how peaceful it is. There are no prejudices or judgements or claims or anything. Very simple" (Sol, interview). Participants also pointed to ambiguous feels of being simultaneously being both alone and in company, which Sol expressed by adding quotation marks to the "alone" word: "When I sat 'alone' in nature, and just paused/breathed and observed the chirping of birds, and felt fresh air against the skin. Deep light thoughts and reflections were pleasurable" (Sol, day 5). The next day, Sol deepened her appreciation of her new state of mind: "PRESENCE and joy. Got lots of energy, humility, gratitude, and great joy from the

elements. Unity. Strong, beautiful experience with a lot of HOPE and prayer in Cruz de Ferre – a great ceremony I got" (Sol, day 6). She continues: "It was MAGIC to walk 'alone' in nature, making a separate ceremony putting some good intentions and goals for myself. There was good meditation where time, place, and room disappeared". In this state, she noticed many details: "The butterflies, the trees, the sun, the flowers were beautiful! I could almost touch the butterflies [...] Especially one was as if it was talking to me, and I felt tremendous joy, gratitude, power and transformation. Freedom" (Sol, day 6). By Sol's description, her encounter with nature has created a different state of mind akin to euphoria.

Connection with nature/elements

This overarching theme related to a sense of affective connection to nature and, in a deeper sense, was associated with unity and belonging to the natural community. Sol referred to such powerful experiences on multiple days (e.g., 2–6, 8 and 15), with examples like: "I felt the unity with the birds, animals, and the nature; the elements" (Sol, day 2) and "The stork has become a companion. Beautiful nature – nice stones, flowers, trees" (Sol, day 3). Her emotional arousal also had spiritual character where she felt the boundaries between herself and nature merge: "I walk in unity with EVERYTHING in nature. I am the Elements" (Sol, day 8). Similarly, Martine also expressed comparable emotions: "I got with me the sounds of nature, became aware of them. I felt like one with the surroundings and peace" (Martine, day 7). After pilgrimage, Martine summarises: "It is balm for the body and soul and it should have been therapy for everyone" (Martine, interview).

Human connection

Connecting with fellow humans was another recurrent overarching theme. Some mentioned the generous salutation: "[...] The cozy greeting of 'you are amazing' written by pilgrims ahead of us. Pleasant company and good conversations. Great food" (Sol, day 2). Another example points to the description of atmosphere: "Had the day off. Took a taxi to the next place. Blisters in the foot. Incredibly nice atmosphere here in the quiet, calm place with a nice garden and calm people" (Martine, day 3). While bonding with fellow pilgrims was common, the sympathetic connection with local people also felt meaningful:

> Been a bit down/tired in the head. Something that is positive is the place where we will spend the night. The hosts here at the accommodation are absolutely fantastic. They smile and are nice and very friendly. That makes my day.
>
> (Martine, day 6)

Becoming a better person

The last salient theme that emerged through the analysis was framed as "becoming a better person", expressed with positively laden statements pertaining to various personal facets: "When I walk in nature, I have a lot of emotions inside me. And I think that makes me a better person, like that. In fact, I haven't been stressed or annoyed on the trip. It is absolutely fantastic" (Sol, interview). She deepens this process by explaining:

> I have become more aware of my values and my goals. I would like to live simply and in nature. I would like to eat healthy and have a clean body and yes, do things that benefit myself and others.
>
> (Sol, interview)

She even makes a personal statement: "The material world means less and less to me. I can live very simply, I have found out" (Sol, interview).

Contrasting narratives reporting lower levels of eudaimonic feelings

To contrast the findings of intense eudaimonic feelings, we include a few narratives with lower score on the intensity of eudaimonic feelings. Typically, these experiences were more typically related to pleasure (hedonic) than interest (eudaimonic), or mixed. The experience of beauty or the strongest experience of nature could for example be about singing. For one participant: "We walkers became musicians". "'We wander with boldness' (Translated from the lyrics of a Norwegian song) … and other songs. Very incomplete songs – several walkers song". Sometimes, the experience was hard to articulate: "Nothing stood out today". For another participant, the experience was contemplative: "Forest and silence, except for bird song". For yet another, her experience was marked by humour: "Friendship: dressed in rain ponchos. We looked like chickens. Common laughter, even though we were exhausted". One participant reported relief upon hailing a taxi or reaching a goal at the end of the day: "Nice to know that we were going to take a taxi down from the mountain. The weather was too bad" and "It was beautiful to arrive at the town where we were to spend the night. Long day of walking, then finally arrival". For another, her observations noted changes in the topography and the landscape as they journey: "Nice to get to a bigger river. We go inland with so far only small streams. Missing the sea…".

Creative wellbeing in relation to pilgrimage

The experience of personal transformation is common in the narratives. This relates to personal growth as an important ingredient in eudaimonic wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016) and supports earlier findings relating to nature connectedness,

in general (Pritchard et al., 2020), and pilgrimaging, in particular (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023). Experiences from the pilgrimage, identified as strong eudaimonic feelings, had similar characteristics as Eckblad's identification of intrinsically motivating experiences (Eckblad, 1981). Especially in sector III, between pleasure and interest, there are many participant narratives that correspond to Eckblad's description of being intrinsically motivated – here understood as intrinsically motivated for pilgrimaging. Much of the language in the narratives reflected the participant's attention to inner world, among several other descriptions of deepening this inner consciousness. These experiences were particularly articulated by Sol and Martine. We can understand these two participants as intrinsically motivated for the pilgrimage, by the identification of narratives, and their experienced personal growth, seen in Table 5.1. According to Eckblad, the identification of spontaneous activities in the pleasure – interest continuum of attractiveness – is a source for understanding intrinsically meaningful and enjoyable activities, closely related to mental health and happiness (Eckblad, 1981, p. 118). These experiences also include highly repetitive tasks, such as making them efficient, smooth, coordinated, and rhythmic (Eckblad, 1981, p. 117), which are relevant to understanding the rituals of pilgrimage walking. For Sol and Martine, there was a deep connection between their personal values and their day-to-day experience. However, for some pilgrims, though not all, a large number of situational experiences were identified as empowering experiences suggesting that noticing an identifying empowering moment is a skill that can be learned. Participants shared that their personal interest in nature and culture was revitalised or rediscovered through the pilgrimage. Some participants shared that they wished to make changes in life. These changes, in fact got realised in some instances. After the pilgrimage, Martine felt ready to make changes in her life, seeing the need for seeking therapist. For other participants, this change had an ethical character. Sol became aware of the values of living, by paying attention to nature and simple living as a way of living a good life. The identification of these strands of intrinsic motivation in the narratives underscores of the importance of situational experiences. This is a two-way process of external stimuli and internal thinking, where the moving body in the context of pilgrimaging is the studied case for these situational experiences. This can also be considered as a creative process. Here, the participant embraces a new perspective and decides to reframe how they wish to live in the future. There is a novelty, a change in self-perception and self-understanding, like Schmid's understandings of creativity with "little c" (Schmid, 2005). Indeed, analysing these participant responses, this research found a clear link between pilgrimaging and creative wellbeing when exploring such issues as using intuition, imagination, experiencing wonder; creating new perspectives of life; and reflecting about existential questions of being human.

Pilgrimaging is a challenging experience, from the idea of participating to completing the very long hike. Even for well-trained people without identified mental health struggles, the hiking distance is challenging and painful,

not least the inevitable physical discomfort of blisters and sore muscles. To participate in the pilgrimage means saying "yes" to the personal invitation of challenging oneself physically and being open to new experiences. Participants need to commit to this idea as an opportunity to grow. We argue that the willingness to appreciate daily moments and take notice of the environment like Sol and Martine did can be explained in multiple ways. It might be explained by the evolutionary need to connect to nature and the biophilia hypotheses (Barbiero & Berto, 2021) or by the argument of attention restoration theory, which indicates that changes in the sensory perception of nature produces soft fascination (Kaplan, 1995). This willingness and openness might also have intentional explanations like seeking to sharing values with other pilgrims, being intrinsically motivated to explore personal connection to nature, being open to explore deeper values in personal life, all of which resonate with eudaimonic wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016). Experiences that evoke some wonder and curiosity, by vastness and accommodation, are typically aesthetic experiences (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), and in our analysed material, such descriptions frequently coincided with high intensity eudaimonic experiences.

Experiences of being in nature seem to have the potential to start a transformative process. They do so by drawing attention away from daily environments and struggles to the situation that exists in the here and now where sensory experiences take primacy. The connection between awareness of sensory experiences, on the one hand, and personal reflection evident in the narratives, on the other, tethers elements of the self. Indeed, among these elements is the spiritual. Examples of the spiritual from the narratives worth highlighting are the account of how a stork became a companion, literally as a hiking partner, or the feeling of being one with nature, which was expressed numerous times. In one narrative, the forest became humanised, "the forest sang". These examples of animation transcend the human experience to evoke an ecological perspective. Such stories could indicate that through engagement with nature, the dichotomy between nature and human beings can be dissolved. In sum, although undergoing an arduous physical challenge, participants experienced intense eudaimonic feelings, and consequently articulated openness to deep and even transcended self-exploration was richly articulated by Sol and Martine.

Being part of a support group was central to the experience of growth. Along with peers, the support groups included professional health workers, volunteers, and companion hikers from the same recruitment process in Norway. Personal meetings along the route with other pilgrims and locals were also important in building human connections. Participants shared that an essential positive outcome of the experience was the opportunity to build friendships, share experiences, and have time to develop new relationships. Might this community of people and its various friendships have evolved had participants walked the Camino alone? Almost certainly not. To build

a safe environment in which one can be open to and vulnerable to exploring new personal aspects seems to be essential. The feeling of safety inherent in a given process depends on whether engaged facilitators are sufficiently sensitive, expert, and competent and both be a role model for others and make prudent decisions to support the pilgrims. Typically, a safe environment is developed by playfully connecting with the group, sharing new experiences, entering new places together, and building group cohesion. Some rituals, like leaving rocks brought from home, picking new rocks together, and having meals together seem to have been bonding experiences in the group. The routines of the day also developed their own rhythm, like a ritual. While the pilgrimage was a group experience, the long distances covered also created opportunities for contrasting the experience between walking alone and with the group. Time alone seemed especially fruitful for catalysing moments of self-reflection. Like Martine attested, she threw her (old) thoughts away while walking, being open for creating a new identity. These new insights were often shared with a concomitant feeling of gratitude.

Our analysis was predominantly driven by eudaimonic wellbeing and the information flowing from participants' intense eudaimonic feelings. Contrasting experiences were typically more hedonic than eudaimonic but seem to have been important moments for the participants as well. Hedonic feelings could be related to the positive effects of increases in life satisfaction and mental wellbeing from the start to the end of the pilgrimage, as identified earlier (Løvoll & Torrissen, 2020). However, these outcomes have yet to be fully explored. Hedonic moments were not detected in relation to personal growth, but they might impact other aspects of wellbeing, of which personal growth is just one. Eudaimonic feelings were particularly studied to explore the connection to intrinsic motivation and the potential for an enduring transformation, and the mindshift spoken about elsewhere in this book.

While intrinsic motivation was articulated through Eckblad's scheme theory (1981), we would need follow-up longitudinal data to reveal whether the impact of the pilgrimage was long-lasting. Moreover, the dichotomy between eudaimonic and hedonic emotions is mostly of academic research interest, to understand deeper connections between these concepts. People need both eudaimonic and hedonic feelings. A psychologically rich life is an example of the good life which goes beyond the eudaimonic/hedonic dichotomy (Oishi & Westgate, 2022). The archetype of the psychologically rich life is that of the wanderer and is associated with characteristics such as seeking novelty, accommodating complexity, changes in perspective, as well as personal characteristics such as curiosity, openness to experience, vivid fantasy, artistic sensitivity, depth of feeling, behavioural flexibility, and unconventional attitudes. We recognise that pilgrimaging, as it has been presented in this chapter, taps into this aspect of the good life. In sum, pilgrimaging, including the complexity of emotions developed in intimate relationship with nature and culture, is one way to nourish creative wellbeing.

Conclusion

By studying pilgrimaging as an offer to a group of 11 people seeking health care support for their daily lives, we identified several aspects relevant for the conceptual understanding of creative wellbeing. By committing to walk a very considerable distance, meeting physical challenges on the way, some participants frequently experienced intense eudaimonic feelings, correlating to personal growth and sublime aesthetic experiences. These people became attuned to sensory experiences, their experience distance from daily life, appreciation of beauty, and a wish to become better people (i.e. make better choices in life). Some narratives also point to spiritual aspects of being immersed in nature. Human connection was central to the experience as part of a fellowship and developing relationships to others. Although many of these benefits in creative wellbeing could be expected in unfacilitated conditions, we argue that for optimising these processes, a facilitator should have a significant role. By paying attention to the experiences of these participants, the project "The art of walking" invites to a double interpretation. On the one hand, pilgrimaging can serve as a wellbeing intervention. On the other hand, when considered as a way of walking, bringing full attention to momentary experiences, it is also a life skill promoting creative wellbeing beyond the therapeutic setting. By nourishing imagination, wonder, and curiosity, the hiking experience is an invitation to live more fully, wholeheartedly, and ecologically aware.

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Notes

1 https://www.caminodesantiago.gal/en/
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Chapter 6

Creative wellbeing at sea

The Windjammer Project

Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Gunvor Marie Dyrdal

Entering the water element

A personal journey into the elements

> As an outdoor educator, one life-long dream was to participate in a tall ship adventure, sailing vast distances on the open sea. The sea has a huge attraction: the smell, the horizon, the colour, abundant sea life both under and above the surface of the ocean, the hypnotizing waves, and the vastness of time and space conjured when seeing the horizon, to mention a few things. When Dr. Gunvor Marie Dyrdal, who teaches mindfulness at the university, invited me to be her research colleague on the social entrepreneurship project "Windjammer" to manage new data collection, I accepted enthusiastically. This experience continues to inspire me with abiding memories of the timeless way of being on the open ocean, with no land in sight for days, accompanied by the soundscape, the movement of the ship, the smell of the ocean and the feel of the ropes. In this, I discovered an existential feeling of freedom. While I missed my family, I felt gratitude and peace.

The research aimed to deepen our understanding of creative wellbeing on long sea journeys. We wanted more in-depth knowledge to expand on existing survey data and to explore how growth processes could be supported in the context of practical seamanship. Our first results from this data collection explored experiences of *meaning in life*, published elsewhere (Dyrdal & Løvoll, 2023). Reanalysing the material, we noticed moments where the participants, called Windjammers, tried out *new activities* independently by themselves. We identified this as part of the creative process, albeit an outcome that was unexpected. In this chapter, we explore these processes and identify these moments as potentially personally transformative, with inherent attributes of *creative wellbeing,* moments pointing to transcendence, where creativity and wellbeing merge and create ways of being that encompass living good lives. As a working definition, we define creative wellbeing

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as it "involves engaging in activities or experiences that stimulate creativity and result in the creation of something new (such as a new perspective, a human-nature relationship, an artwork etc.), fostering transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual" (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 5).

Living on a tall ship

The sea can be a magical place with calm waters, a clear blue sky, and wild animals like dolphins or pelicans playing in the water and the air. Living and working at sea involve entering another universe – literally another element. This seascape requires profound adjustments such as "finding one´s sea legs" (Phelan, 2007). On land, the body is the main vessel used to navigate the world. By contrast, on water, humans must rely on technology and equipment including the boat or ship used, the navigation system, and maps or GPS systems to operate in this element. The ship becomes the means through which the elements are managed and experienced. The ship becomes an extension of our human body, something to which we must adjust and adapt to operate to exist in this element.

At sea, one's senses and bodily experiences are particularly amplified. Sensory experiences can be quite intense, whether it is the waves, the rolling movement of the ship, and the natural movement of the sea all of which necessitate an adjustment. This adjustment involves letting go of control, releasing oneself into the natural movement of the ship, and opening our senses. Acknowledging and being aware of our senses and sensory experiences can require conscious effort, and the quality of our consciousness is found to affect wellbeing (e.g. Wilber, 2000). Being present is one of five ways to increase our overall wellbeing (e.g. Aked, 2011; Aked et al., 2008). Research has shown that mindfulness, whether dispositional mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) or formal mindfulness practice (Birtwell et al., 2019), involving being aware with intention and in the present moment without judging it, is positively associated with wellbeing.

Nourishing the imagination

For many modern city dwellers, life is fast paced and loud, with expectations of a successful life involving producing and delivering results. The quiet time needed for contemplation and "slow living" is limited when busyness and multitasking are encouraged and highly valued. Conversely, spending time at sea can provide a valuable opportunity for time by oneself, for aloneness, slowing down, and reconnecting with oneself. Humans have an inborn need for connection. During adolescence, the developmental task is individuation, cutting loose from the parental nest and becoming more self-reliant and independent. As a result, social relations and relationships change. Yet, there is also a need for time spent alone, or

aloneness. Research has shown that the ability to comfortably be alone is associated with greater wellbeing, lower levels of depression, and fewer physical symptoms (Larson & Lee, 1995). There is a distinction between loneliness, aloneness, and solitude, and research suggests that the attitudes towards aloneness change during adolescence (e.g. Danneel et al., 2018). A four-wave longitudinal study supported loneliness as a multidimensional construct, finding that reported emotional loneliness increased from early adolescence to mid-twenties, while social loneliness decreased in the same period (von Soest et al., 2020). These findings can illustrate how youths tend to increase their social interactions during these formative years, while close relationships change and are reorganised. This can lead to emotional distance, evinced in reported loneliness.

For youths, being at sea offers opportunities for exploring loneliness as well as literally "being in the same boat" as other crew members, presenting opportunities for collaboration and the possibility to develop new friendships. Creative wellbeing involves a possibility to imagine, explore, and adapt new ways of acting as human beings, as well as being part of our character development and seeking insights about life (see Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, pp. 17–35). On the ship, there is an emotional distance to life on land, including relationships with family and friends, and everyday society. For the youth, time and distance away create an opportunity to develop fresh perspectives on becoming more self-reliant and making active choices to live in accordance with one's own values, which are central for eudaimonic wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman, 2013).

Facilitating personal transformation at sea: the Windjammer project

To support youths aged 16–25 years who have dropped out of school, struggle to obtain or keep employment, or are at risk for drop-out behaviours, the Norwegian "Windjammer" programme was created. This programme offers a 30-day sailing adventure where youths live and work as part of the crew on the traditional fully rigged tall ship Christian Radich. The participating Windjammers and volunteering adults work one of three four-hour shifts, twice a day, with tasks including security rounds, lookout duty (watching for dangers at sea), navigation / rudder duty, and operating the sails by pulling and fastening ropes and climbing the rig. The Windjammers are taught practical seamanship by the professional tall ship crew, with cooperation and collaboration being essential on the small and crowded ship. Based on this context, we were curious to explore whether some moments were more important than others. This ended up with us asking: What are typical moments of creative wellbeing during a tall ship social entrepreneurship programme, and how can these experiences be characterised?

To explore the processes of creative wellbeing, the first author embarked on a 30-day Windjammer adventure alongside participating youths, volunteering adults, and professional crew. Being a "Windjammer" also entails the ongoing membership of an alumnus group for all those who have participated in this social enterprise programme. Their motto: Once a Windjammer, always a Windjammer. The motto also refers to the history of the tall ship, which was the inspiration for the popular movie from 1958, entitled "Windjammer". The movie reached an international audience and inspired many young people to embark on adventures at sea.

To capture the experience of being a Windjammer while sailing, the researcher employed a sensory ethnographic approach (Pink, 2015), with a sensory lens utilised when developing narratives (Calvey 2021). Ethical approval to collect and store data was given before embarking on the journey. While on board, the researcher participated fully in the daily routines, which involved demanding and hands-on learning. Being a part of a tall ship crew included adhering to the ship rules as an active member of the working community. Life on board the ship involved sleeping in hammocks, living in crowded common areas with limited (physical) space for privacy, daily seamanship shift work (four hours' work, twice a day), including rudder and lookout duty, security rounds, pulling ropes and setting sails, and climbing the rig.

After three weeks of sailing, seven Windjammers were invited to share and reflect on their experience of sailing. Finding a time and place to talk in private was a challenge on the crowded ship. However, for the interviews, the ship's captain made available the captain's lounge, a room at the very back of the ship. Seven Windjammers (William, 22; Robert, 22; Peter, 16; Fred, 25; Anna, 18; Paul, 18; Eric, 19) agreed to share their experience of life on the ship, with descriptions and insights regarding their immediate situation.

Fostering hardiness to become a valued crew member

The transition from land to sea is taxing and involved several challenges for both participating youths, as well as for the researcher. One of the first challenges faced by all newcomers was sleep disturbance. Performing shift duty twice a day and sleeping in a hammock in sometimes rough sea and weather conditions made sleeping through the night difficult. To enable the sleeping space to be used for different purposes, all personal belongings needed to be stowed away when not in use. This required discipline and an ability to be self-organised. Self-organisation and -care were also important in another early challenge on board, namely dressing appropriately for all weather conditions. Meeting on deck at the start of the shift, which often involved cold, windy, and wet conditions, required selecting the best and most appropriate clothing to protect oneself from rough weather conditions. This meant that to effectively self-care in wet and cold conditions, participants needed

to understand what gear to wear when and appreciate the effects of rough weather while working on the ship.

As mentioned, the rhythm on board the ship included four hours of shift work, then eight hours of rest and sleep, and another round of four hours of work followed by sleep and rest. Cooperation and collaboration were essential for the smooth functioning and social wellbeing on the ship. Three meals were served daily, with an additional night snack being served for those on the night shifts. Food was only served after the dining area was cleaned, all hands were washed, and all personal belongings were stowed away. The officer in charge of onboard activities organised the shift work. Meeting at the beginning of each four-hour shift and walking the hourly security rounds were mandatory for all participants, and if sick, a formal notice of sick leave was needed from the medic on board. Being a part of the crew meant complying with these, as well as other, rules and accepting ship duties and discipline.

Seasickness was another challenge many newcomers faced. Almost all the Windjammers and volunteering crew experienced seasickness during the first couple of days at sea. This is a common reaction resulting from the disorientation experienced when the human body adjusts to wave motion and life on the ocean. Learning practical seamanship was the next challenge. On a fully rigged tall ship, there are hundreds of ropes to identify by name, to release and to fasten. Operating the ropes and managing the sails required cooperation and collaboration, and everyone´s participation and effort were needed for sailing. During the work shifts, in addition to operating sails, everybody was required to do one hour of steering, one hour at the lookout post, and hourly security rounds, all according to the published shift duty plan. Steering the ship was done manually, based on a Gyro compass, and required physical strength, accuracy, and endurance. When windy, it was difficult to keep the ship on a steady course. It was physically strenuous, and sometimes, two people were needed to manage the wheel. At lookout, the task was to watch for potential dangers and to warn the captain of any objects in the water or on the horizon. Doing security rounds included walking through the ship's corridors and main rooms, from the bottom of the ship and all the way up to deck, visiting the engine room, bathrooms, laundry rooms, and toilets, checking for fire or other hazards, controlling the rescue boats, refilling toilet paper and cleaning toilets and showers when necessary, and generally making sure everything on the ship was working and in good condition. This required the use of all senses and full attention. All tasks were supervised by professional tall ship crew.

While participating in the daily shift duties was mandatory, the professional crew also needed volunteers to climb the rig to release and fasten sails for the ship to sail. Only the professional crew was required to climb, and many of the youths found climbing scary. Climbing the rig involved first climbing a rope ladder starting at the rails on the outside of the ship.

Entering the first platform required stretching the arms and doing a hanging manoeuverer. The first time this was done, it felt scary as one needed to move and shift the body in new and unfamiliar ways. From the platform, the sail rig is accessed by balancing on a wire stretched below the sails. Accessing this wire also felt alarming, especially when another person was already standing on it. The movements had to be synchronised, just like when two or more people walk on a hanging bridge. Balance was best achieved by leaning forward and hanging over the sail rig with the upper body. The task to either release or pack the sail required the technique of making double half stitch with slip with only one hand, all the while hanging over the rig. Reaching the highest sails involved climbing a second outward-facing rope ladder and entering a second platform even higher up. Above this second platform, another ladder, close to the mast, had to be climbed to reach the topsails. This is the riskiest climb, and only trained crew are allowed to operate these sails. Before entering the rig for the first time, basic physical strength had to be demonstrated. This was done by passing a hanging test involving dangling with straight arms for a minimum of 20 seconds. The correct use of climbing gear for safety was also demonstrated. Although many of the youths initially found climbing to be scary and challenging, after a few weeks at sea, several Windjammers became confident enough to be trusted with this task.

Informant's experiences of creating something new

Many of the experiences described by the Windjammers during their interviews included instances where their imagination was active, and they created something new and – for some – something unexpected. From the interviews, we learned that becoming familiar with the practical work at sea was hard for everyone. However, the structure and discipline resulting from following the ship's rules engendered a sense of freedom. Everyone onboard was forced to sleep, eat, and regularly take care of themselves to become a valued crew member. Starting the shift duty while sleepy and with low energy was physically and mentally unsustainable, so everyone onboard fell into the ship's daily rhythm early in the voyage. After this first familiarisation with life at sea, interviewees drew attention to special moments of being on the tall ship. Surprisingly, they mentioned two significant situations that were conducive to creating special moments. The first was spending time alone because of shift duty work, either on the lookout post or on the rudder, and the second was when paying attention to sensory experiences.

Imagination: contemplation and self-discovery

For Anna, one of the participating Windjammers, the hour of solitude when performing lookout duty was what she liked best on the ship. This was an hour where she, in her own words, could put her "thoughts to work".

The regularity of the shifts, including lookout / rudder duty, offered her the necessary structure to enable her to work through her own thoughts in a disciplined way, with no other distractions or demands. William, another Windjammer, also appreciated these moments of solitude as they offered an opportunity to contemplate life. He reflected over "big questions", stating that "…when I am at the lookout, I think a lot about what will become of me later in life, and I start to philosophize". When exploring his own contemplations, he stated that "It can be both good and painful in a way. But I do think it's a good thing". Both Anna and William expressed that being attentive and concentrated at home was a challenge. However, the moments of solitude and silence at sea helped them tune in and become aware of something within themselves, of their inner values. This enabled them to create meaning and make decisions that would impact them positively in the future, including returning to school. This change in mind, or mindshift, can be attributed to them seeing more complexity and discovering new options, which is a way to bring eudaimonic wellbeing into one´s life.

Personal emergence through silence

For Robert, participating in the sailing adventure led to personal self-development and growth. He explains: "… it gave me a lot more self-confidence. I dared to do more things. Dared to take chances, more chances. In a positive way". For Peter, another Windjammer, the sailing adventure also represented a profound turning point. Struggling with addiction, Peter deeply wanted to change his life. He explained how he actively used the moments of solitude and silence to engage in loud self-talk. He stated: "I say to myself Why not start a conversation to enjoy myself?' So I start a conversation with myself about the first thing that comes to mind" (Peter). He continues: "Then I try to have that conversation going ´till I either see something or the duty is over". During the sailing adventure, Peter was able to shift his mindset to become very solution oriented. Participating in the Windjammer programme was invaluable to him, and he called the tall ship his "second home". Being at sea aroused an existential feeling of liminality to him, related to the ship itself and to nature. But most importantly, it provided a place for Peter to build trust and develop friendships.

Boredom as a birthplace for creative singing

Interestingly, many of the interviewed Windjammers would describe the hour at lookout or rudder duty as "boring", or even "scary". Particularly in the beginning, the anxiety when left alone on deck could be daunting. Yet, over time as the Windjammers experienced the routines on board, their fear and mistrust diminished as they grew to trust that others would not cause them harm and that they would not fall overboard. Despite feelings

of boredom and dullness, having one hour alone in their own company engaged a process of creativity that took many forms. Fred started singing during his hours of solitude: “I try to practice singing when I´m on lookout duty because out there, no one can hear me. And I have to make time pass. I remember lyrics that I used to know” (Fred). This was a creative moment for Fred: “I have discovered that this is my new thing here”. For Fred, the moments of solitude became an opportunity to experiment with his own voice where nobody could hear him. He could use this space to bring old lyrics to mind through no other means than his own memory. Through this experience he discovered that singing contributed to his overall wellbeing.

Silence, emptiness, and the monkey mind

Eric described his experiences during lookout as emptiness. When asked what he was thinking, he said: “A little of everything. No specific direction of thoughts or movement. It can be everything and nothing, but on land and at home I rarely notice this” (Eric). He continues: “It is pretty nice to just stand there without thinking about anything in particular”. What Eric pointed to was that silence and space are necessary to be able to fully notice what is going on. Silence is both a phenomenon and an experience that has been studied in many disciplines. In a review on silence by Valle (2019), silence is described as both terrifying and pleasurable, being within us as well as representing something outside of us, silence allows for exploring the experience of “being”, and it is used in communication where pauses can send strong messages. As described by Eric, silence also allows one to notice a natural stream of thoughts and feelings, and this “everything and nothing” of mental activity is rarely noticed in the busyness of daily life. As our minds are always active, recognising our mind´s tendency to be restless, jumping from one thing to another, is commonly referred to as the “monkey mind” (e.g. Vago & Zeidan, 2016). The experience of just being requires an opportunity for silence where thinking is not needed, such as on the lookout and steering duty. Time is also needed for creative processes to arise, as these processes are slow to initiate. Sadly, for many, daily life is so full that we often miss these opportunities for boredom and stillness where experiencing our inner life is possible.

On the tall ship, lookout is one of the few places of silence and solitude that allows for thinking and contemplation. Or just letting the mind go blank. Peter described that “at lookout you are mostly alone. Same at the rudder. And then you just stand there and look straight ahead all the time”. When Paul rested his eyes on the horizon, he found it fascinating, “It is like an inner peace one can find”. To Paul, these encounters defined the experience at lookout duty, and may point to experiencing one´s essence, that place of inner peace, as mentioned by Valle (2019).

Aesthetic experiences

Peter was acutely aware of details, such as the colour of the ocean, and the particularity of the waves, which were always changing. He was enthusiastic about the opportunity to be a Windjammer, stating that: "I think it is magical. I think it is truly magical. How it is... just this ship, and then the vast ocean around us. Nothing else. I think it is truly magical" (Peter). He continues: "You have so much space, where there isn´t another single person, except those who are on the ship. I think it is totally gorgeous. Really". Even though the living quarters were crowded, the open space experienced at lookout and rudder duty allowed for a sense of vastness, of space, allowing an expansion and openness to experiences.

Being on the tall ship, at a distance from land, also invited a special state of consciousness. The smell of the sea became the familiar feeling of being home. The movement of the ship made the wide-legged walking a habit. The sound on board the ship informed about the direction and strength of the wind, and if no wind, the engine made shaking sensations and noise. Slowly, one became part of the tall ship and attuned to its movements, the horizon, the sky, and the open space of the ocean.

During the sailing adventure, watching the sea and birdlife was a captivating experience. Once, large whales were seen in the distance. Dolphins regularly played around the ship. They seemed to enjoy crossing the bow of the ship just microseconds before the ship would hit them, as a kind of game. Dolphins were colourful, with green and brown colours shining as they exited the water, jumping and playing alongside the ship. Sea birds also surfed on winds alongside the ship, like they were playing with it. It was amazing to watch their spectacular diving from high altitudes, hunting for fish. Sailing at night was a magical experience, seeing the ship with white sails in the darkness, under a starry heaven. The ship itself was an object of beauty, elegance, and majesty having been carefully restored. The woodwork over and under the deck gave the impression of the ship having been made with passion and creativity. Original brass detailing was carefully polished. All ropes looked like traditional hemp ropes but were, in fact, careful modern reproductions made of synthetic material. Altogether, being on the ship was itself a pleasure and an invitation to attune to sensory experiences and exhibit respectful behaviour.

The young Windjammers were also captivated by the beauty of the ship and the experience of sailing her. Robert described his lookout duty like this: "I like it a little, actually. When I am at lookout, I look up more than I look forward (laugh)". Here, Robert refers to the aesthetic or spiritual aspects of being at sea. He is enthralled by the beauty of the sky seen during the day and the bright stars appearing in the sky at night. When sailing there was no light pollution at all to be seen from the outlook post, while the top lantern was the only external light provided when going by motor. Thus, especially

on a clear night, observing the starry heaven during lookout duty was a spectacular experience. For youth living in the city, this sight is rare, and some had never in their life seen stars before. Experiencing the dark sky lit up by thousands of stars was an unprecedented and magical sight.

Personal identity transformation through creative wellbeing processes

When on the ocean, immersion in the horizon and the vastness of the sea seems to stimulate the unfolding of creative processes. Participating Windjammers conveyed how their experience of silence led to personal discovery, and how moments alone in silence were a necessary ingredient for personal growth and change. These descriptions align with other accounts of eudaimonic wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Vittersø, 2016; Waterman, 2013). Inspired by the New-Aristotelian philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre (1984), life stories can help us understand personal identity. These Windjammers´ experiences illustrate insights and virtues that were discovered and nourished in silence through a process of creative wellbeing. Even though the moments of silence – experienced particularly when on lookout and rudder duty – were part of the daily rhythm on board the ship and not freely chosen, these moments seem to have been essential for the participating Windjammers' experiences and insights. Sailing adventures during adolescence are character building (Marshall et al., 2020), and participating in sailing adventures during these formative years can contribute to the formation of life stories and personal identities that will have long-lasting implications for life. However, since humans can develop and change throughout life, even at later stages in life, such experiences can have transformative effects.

The transformational moments of creative wellbeing were particularly evident during the working shifts when youths were alone at the rudder or the outlook post. Experienced as challenging and even frightening in the beginning, these situations transitioned into cherished moments. They allowed for quietitude, for participants to be with themselves offering them a finite period of time to find inner resources that the noise of everyday life tended to suppress. The presence and awareness seem essential for the initiation of creative wellbeing processes, and the strong sensory experiences activated while at sea were found to facilitate this process.

Standing at the lookout post on the vast ocean, with a few lanterns shining in the far distance, following the rolling movement of the ship, noticing the smell of the sea, presented the Windjammers with an opportunity to turn inward. They reported gaining new perspectives about themselves, experiencing gratitude, and reflecting on their lives during these solitary moments. The experience of time was sometimes altered, and the one hour could sometimes feel very fleeting or like an eternity.

Creative wellbeing: from mindless attention to present awareness

Research has found that people are rarely fully involved in any activity. Shockingly, Killingsworth and Gilbert found that almost 47% of time, people's attention wanders rather than focusing on what they are actually doing (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Hence, we tend to function with unfocused attention almost half of our waking time. On the tall ship, in the silence during lookout, the Windjammers came face to face with themselves, fully, without distractions other than the task at hand. In everyday life, there are people to talk to, tasks to complete, and social media platforms to escape to if feelings of boredom and discomfort become too great. At sea, with no digital media access or other people around during these solitary duties, one is forced to face oneself. This situation of being forced to meet the boredom that emerges when "nothing happens" can be an invitation for mindful awareness, for being fully present, in each moment while also experiencing the discomfort of boredom. Being present and fully aware is sometimes difficult, requiring patience, determination, and focus. As Peter stated, "it is very difficult to keep focus so it's a good mental exercise".

All seven young people who were interviewed valued highly the experiences gained during the sailing adventure. Participant interviews, as well as observations made during the adventure, indicated that silence was a rare experience, whether in the young person's daily life at home, or on the crowded ship. When silence was tolerated and endured, creative processes spontaneously emerged. Some interviewees reported engaging in conversations with themselves, others singing, while others imagined another possible future for themselves. Silence allowed the participant to notice the sensory experience of nature, and for some, these sensory experiences took centre stage: smell, sound, and sights. For young urbanites used to the light pollution of a major city, experiencing the night sky sprinkled with bright shining stars was a breathtaking experience. Such attention to sensory experiences is central in theories of mindfulness (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 2013), and in aesthetic experiences, such as awe (Keltner, 2023). Here, the senses are predominant, and awareness is centred on present-moment experiences. Seeing the majestic and starry heaven also invited an awareness of there being something more "out there", transcending our ontological understanding of who we are as human beings. From this perspective, daily problems receded into the background allowing the participants to propose questions of purpose and possibilities, inviting these youth to imagine alternate possible futures for themselves.

Ecological awareness and expansion of self: humans in relationships

To function well, we need to acknowledge that we need others and that we are not separate from the natural world. This awareness of the spiritual nature

of our world encompasses an ecological awareness and an expansion of the self (Næss, 2005; Ryff, 2021), which can allow a feeling of connectedness, of belonging to something more profound. At sea, this connectedness is directly experienced through the senses. Being familiarized with the rhythm and work on the tall ship allowed attention to be drawn to the present moment, the here and now. The experience of vastness came from being far out on the ocean, seeing nothing but water in all directions. This is peaceful, although waves from the sea could also be dramatic and powerful. At sea, the sensory experiences could be overwhelming. Coming from the sleeping area and entering the main deck, the smell of sea engulfs one's attention. When sailing, the ship tilts by the wind pressure, and walking and standing require conscious attention. Although the movement of the ship through waves was smoother when sailing than by engine, the silence during sailing allowed the attention to be directed to the rhythms of the sea and the sound of waves splashing at the keel. While the movements of the ship induced seasickness during the first days of sailing, once habituated, falling asleep to the feeling and rhythm of the waves became a valued and comforting experience. Gradually, the Windjammers became accustomed to life on the tall ship. They came to feel safe and at home, familiar with the ship, the people, and the sea, which became part of their ecological selves.

One of the most important factors for our overall wellbeing is relationships (Diener et al., 2018). Humans do not exist in a vacuum but are formed by their close relationships. On board a tall ship, one is completely dependent on others for successful navigation and the operation of the ropes and sails. The personal growth facilitated by being part of a group of like-minded individuals can be particularly important for vulnerable youths who struggle to find and create meaning and purpose in life. How we think about and present ourselves to the world is affected by the personal narratives we create, and these narratives form our identity, affecting how we come to view ourselves – whether as happy or unhappy, satisfied or dissatisfied, able or unable, or successful or unsuccessful (e.g. Bauer et al., 2008). The Windjammer experience enabled the youth to redefine their self-stories and identities. As mentioned by both Peter and Robert, they deliberately tested out new behaviour, became more sociable, and made new friends, which altered their self-identity and the view they had of themselves.

As humans, we are very adaptable. Becoming familiar with life at sea takes relatively short time. The rhythm of shift work, of day and night, of meals and free time, and of social engagement and silent alone-time represents a predictability that can allow for creative wellbeing processes to occur. Positive creative processes are embedded in a social setting and require a safe and trusting social environment to fully emerge and open. At sea, in a crowded tall ship, the social environment is particularly important for stimulating or retarding creative wellbeing processes. Hence, to facilitate for positive creative processes, positive social group processes need to be facilitated, which

additionally can positively affect personal development and self-transcending processes. While this pertains to creative processes at sea, it is equally valid for other creative wellbeing processes to occur also on land, in schools, and at workplaces.

Conclusion

Despite many Windjammers' initial challenges adjusting to life at sea, the sensory experiences, silence, and time alone during the month-long adventure made profound impact. The context for these experiences, away from social media, phones, and certain self-sabotaging habits of daily life offered a new way of being, in the "here and now". For many, with nowhere to go and nothing else to do other than performing the shift work tasks, this represented a "detox" experience and a place to reimagine and retell the story of who they were, and who they wanted to be. Importantly, this retelling embraced an ethical dimension as the participants became aware of the virtues of living a good life. Slowly, over a few days, the attunement to sensory experiences developed. The emerging existential experience of being at sea created an opportunity for imagination and personal transformation, inviting a mindshift involving seeing oneself from a larger ecologic perspective. This initiated creative wellbeing processes, immersed in nature, surrounded by new people, and the vast ocean.

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Chapter 7

Relaxed performance

Promoting creative wellbeing for all

Wenche Torrissen and Anita Salamonsen

Prologue

Emanuel and Victor are on their way to the theatre when Emanuel exclaims: “We thought this was something that might be possible in the future, but now, now it is actually happening!”. Victor, equally excited, replies: “Yes, and I am really looking forward to it!”. Both Emanuel and Victor have disabilities that previously excluded them from attending the theatre. But this was in the past. Today, they are heading to a relaxed performance of the *Pussycats* at Hålogaland Teater (HT) in Tromsø, Norway. When they enter the theatre, the auditorium is bustling with noise and excitement. Some of the audience make high-pitched sounds, some rock back and forth in their chairs, while others look around in wonder, talk to their neighbours or greet old friends. As the performance is about to start, the artistic director steps onto the stage, warmly welcoming everyone. He reminds the audience that this is a “shush-free zone” and that they are free to move in and out of the theatre auditorium as they please. The announcement is met with enthusiastic applause, opening the show on a note of high energy.

In this performance, the audience is asked to act as the fan club of the band Pussycats, a rock band from Tromsø that gained international fame in the 1960s. And what a fan club they became! We, the researchers, are seated in the middle of a passionate “mob” of fans, bursting into rapturous applause and vocal support throughout the performance, both spontaneously and on cues from the actors. A few of the audience members, including us, are rather hesitant at first, as if questioning whether such displays are permissible. However, by the end of the show, virtually everyone is waving their hands, joyfully jumping up and down, jubilant at the success of the Pussycats. It is a communal celebration. After the performance, the atmosphere feels electric. The woman sitting next to us looks visibly touched. Wiping tears from her eyes she says: “I cannot believe that this is not common practice. I cannot believe that so many have been excluded from experiences like this. It is not right”. On our way out of the theatre, we speak to Emanuel and Victor again. They are overjoyed by the experience.

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The relaxed performance has given them access to new experiences in their city, where they, as Victor says, “can be themselves”, without the fear of being “shushed at”.

Introduction: accessing creative wellbeing

The research vignette presented above is based on observations and interviews conducted as part of a research project integrated into the planning and delivery of the first relaxed performance initiative in Norway, at HT. Branded locally as RELÆXT, this initiative aim to make theatre more accessible. We, the authors of this chapter, a sociologist (Salamonsen), and a theatre scholar (Torrissen) were commissioned by HT, who sought a research-based approach to the development of RELÆXT. We planned and conducted research on the project in the period 2020–2023, in close cooperation with user representatives, health institutions, and employees from HT. The design can be categorised as participatory action research (et al., 1998). The knowledge gathered was brought back to the theatre between the performances and used to develop RELÆXT in accordance with the experiences and perspectives of the RELÆXT audience and HT employees. From the start, user involvement was a key part of the process, and one of the outcomes of the research project was the creation of a guideline that summed up what audiences could expect when attending a RELÆXT performance at HT (Benestad et al., 2023).

In the project period, we observed four RELÆXT performances and conducted 54 qualitative in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including members of the RELÆXT audience (children, adolescents, parents, and caretakers), representatives from user organisations and health institutions, and employees at HT. This chapter primarily focuses on interviews with the audience, most of whom we interviewed both before and after the RELÆXT experience. In total, we conducted 22 in-depth interviews, speaking with ten people living with disabilities, seventeen parents, four caretakers in health institutions, and two representatives of user organisations. In addition, we had informal conversations with many audience members on the day of RELÆXT performances. We also briefly refer to interviews with the actors at the end of this chapter. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, study number 708386. All names of participants in this chapter are fictitious.

In this chapter, we place audience voices centre stage to assess the value of RELÆXT in terms of eudaimonia and creative wellbeing. Through a thematic analysis of interviews and observation data, we sought to understand how initiatives like RELÆXT might contribute to promoting eudaimonia which translates as: “happiness, prosperity, and flourishing” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 148). Our overall aim is to discuss and reflect on how access to theatre experiences, and the theatre experiences in themselves, can support human and community flourishing, moving us towards creative wellbeing for all.

Eudaimonia

Drawing on insights from Aristotle and philosophical eudaimonism, we argue that flourishing and wellbeing depend on individuals realising their truest and best selves (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Ruini and Ryff (2016) assert that "eudaimonia is meaningful living conditioned upon self-truth and personal responsibility. As such, it embodies the two great Greek imperatives, to 'know thyself' and to 'become what you are'" (p. 154). In line with Vittersø, we also believe that experiences and activities promoting the "development of valuable individual potentials and social relations" are essential to a good life (2016, p. 19). According to Ryff (2019), art experiences and activities are particularly well suited to guide us towards self-realisation which has significant moral and relational implications. These experiences support us in the lifelong project of "knowing ourselves" and "becoming who we are". Therefore, participating in activities and experiences that facilitate meaning, engagement, self-realisation, and growth is an essential part of a good and meaningful life. However, for some people, particularly those with disabilities, significant barriers hinder access to eudaimonic experiences. Before discussing how RELÆXT might contribute to eudaimonic and creative wellbeing, it is, therefore, important to contextualise RELÆXT in relation to relaxed performance internationally. Additionally, we must consider the barriers disabled audiences and their families often face in accessing the arts and cultural venues.

Relaxed performance and RELÆXT at HT

Relaxed performances are designed to make the theatre experience more accessible and enjoyable for audiences who might feel excluded due to strict theatre etiquette and other barriers. Notably, the UK has offered relaxed performance at several theatres since 2013, with this practice adopted more recently in other countries, including Canada and France (e.g., Dupagne, 2020; Hammouni et al., 2021; LaMarre, et al., 2021, Collins et al., 2023). It is important to acknowledge that two approaches to relaxed performance have coexisted from the beginning. The first approach, referred to as "non-inclusive Relaxed Performances", primarily caters to a "target audience" identified as people who are neurodivergent or on the autism spectrum (Dupagne, 2020). Although mainstream audiences can attend these performances, they are not actively encouraged to do so. The second approach has been referred to as "inclusive Relaxed Performances", and here theatres invite the target audience to performances open to all, ensuring individual needs are addressed, but disabled members are generally in a minority (Dupagne, 2020). The overall goal of both approaches is to secure human and cultural rights for everyone by making professional, high-quality theatre experiences accessible and enjoyable, with specific accommodations for audiences with

disabilities who might otherwise experience barriers to access. To achieve these goals in practice, theatres implement various measures to accommodate different disabilities, whether the physical adaptation for wheelchair users, adjustment of sound and lighting, provision of information before and during the performances and, most importantly, fostering a permissive, welcoming, and inclusive environment around the performances (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Kempe, 2015a, 2015b; Simpson, 2018). HT established RELÆXT as part of their long-term work to promote access and inclusion for disabled members of the community in 2020. RELÆXT is marketed as performances open to everyone seeking a more relaxed experience in the theatre, specifically catering to those who find traditional theatre etiquette oppressive. Currently, HT offers RELÆXT performances for all its in-house productions.

Rights and barriers

In Norway, people's rights to participate in cultural activities are safeguarded by the Norwegian Culture Act, Kulturlova (2007), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2008). Despite these legislative protections, individuals with disabilities have historically had limited opportunities to engage in cultural activities in Norway (Arnhøy, 2019; Molden et al., 2009; Røde kors, 2021). International studies conducted in Europe and Canada concerning the development of inclusive theatre practices reveal that individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum diagnoses, dementia, or other disabilities often feel excluded from theatre experiences (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Hammouni et al., 2021; Kempe, 2015a; Lamarre et al., 2021; Pasquier, 2015; Simpson, 2018). Many individuals report feeling excluded because their behaviour does not conform to accepted audience etiquette.

Theatre etiquette

Because live theatre performances depend on the embodied co-presence of audiences and actors, and the feedback loop between them is an important part of experiencing a performance, unpredictability and spontaneity are always to some degree an ingredient in live performances. This dynamic spontaneity has historically been a concern for authorities and theatres, leading to systematic "policing" of theatre audiences. The objective was to mould audiences into silent and compliant bodies to tightly regulate and control the interaction between the auditorium and the stage (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 39). This policing took the form of laws prohibiting unwanted behaviour and interactions, fines, and penalties for those breaking them and developments within the theatre, such as the introduction of darkened auditoriums at the end of the nineteenth century (Brockett & Hildy, 2010; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Simpson, 2018).

Another significant factor was the self-policing exercised by the audiences themselves. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson vividly captures this self-policing in the novel *The Fisher Girl* (1868). During Petra's first visit to the theatre, she defies nearly all the norms of theatre etiquette observed today. She becomes deeply involved in the theatre production, screaming aloud, falling to the floor, and even engaging in direct conversation with the actors. In response, the audience reacts fiercely, crying out "sit down" and "silence" in unison. This overwhelming reaction leaves Petra feeling distressed and unwelcome in the theatre. "A sea of angry threatening faces met her gaze, 'there's something wrong here', she thought, and she wanted to escape" (1868, p. 81; our translation). Petra's experience leads to introspection, and she is left feeling that it is something wrong with her. Despite fierce attempts to discipline audiences, it is, however, important to remember that theatre audiences have expressed themselves more freely than they do today until quite recently (Brockett & Hildy, 2010; Sedgman, 2018; Simpson, 2018).

Today, established theatre etiquette dictates that audiences should maintain silence and remain inconspicuous, refraining from talking or moving during the play, and only responding with applause or laughter at designated times (Pasquier, 2015; Simpson 2018). When these norms are violated, there are typically consequences. Audience members who disrupt theatre etiquette by speaking loudly or behaving "inappropriately" are often shushed, publicly admonished, or removed from the theatre (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Kempe, 2015; Pasquier, 2015; Simpson, 2018). A mother of an autistic child describes the challenge: "I don't think you can underestimate how excluding it can be to do things and just worry about people disapproving of your child" (Kempe and Gregson, 2019, p. 292). This sense of exclusion underscores why many individuals living with disabilities, along with their families, refrain from participating in cultural activities and avoid going to the theatre (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018; Hadley & McDonald, 2018; Kempe & Shah, 2015; Simpson, 2018; Unge funkskonshemmede, 2014). With our research, we assessed the situation in Tromsø to explore how the disabled community in this city had experienced going to the theatre both prior to and after the introduction of RELÆXT. Our overarching aim in this chapter is to explore and discuss what the provision of RELÆXT meant for the audience and how the experiences of attending the theatre can be understood in relation to its potential value for flourishing and happiness. This discussion not only encompasses the audience living with disabilities but also considers the broader impact on everyone involved in the theatrical experience.

The possible value of RELÆXT for eudaimonic wellbeing

All the participants we interviewed expressed support of RELÆXT. While two adolescents and their parents said that the initiative did not suit their

needs, particularly because the adolescents did not want to identify with the rest of the audience, the parents, nevertheless, welcomed the initiative as an important step in creating a more inclusive cultural environment. In our analysis, we identified three particularly strong narratives that highlight the value of RELÆXT for eudaimonic wellbeing. These narratives partially overlap but presenting them separately allows us to grasp the complex dynamics underscoring the significance of providing accessible theatre experiences where people can relax and freely express themselves.

Opportunities to express oneself: "We can be ourselves"

Many of the audiences we spoke with shared experiences where they or their children had felt that they were unable to be themselves or were judged for expressing themselves spontaneously, whether vocally or physically, during previous theatre visits. Karen, a mother we interviewed, recounted how she had learned to endure and ignore the scornful looks of disapproving audience members who often judged her for not controlling her son's "unruly" behaviour. Nils, her son, has autism and cannot always regulate his behaviour, but he loves the theatre and often expresses his enjoyment and pleasure loudly during performances. Consequently, Karen had resigned herself to enduring shame and criticism as part of the experience if she was to give her son the opportunity to enjoy theatre, an activity that she knows he loves and cherishes.

Eli, another mother we interviewed, expressed that she never took her daughter Camilla to the theatre anymore because she felt overwhelmed by the multitude of "rules in relation to norms and expectations about how to behave, in everything from dress codes to when to be silent or not". Eli explained that in her experience, these rules and expectations made it challenging and stressful for her to attend the theatre. According to Eli, the "theatre norm" is particularly exclusionary because it often leads to "shushes" and internalised stress for the parents. Eli shared that when she took her daughter to the theatre, she silently pleaded: "oh, please, be so kind as to behave yourself". She did not want to draw attention or highlight what she calls the "difference that they represent". For Eli, attending the theatre was associated with constant worry about potentially disturbing other audience members. Indeed, this was a concern expressed by everyone we interviewed.

Many of the parents and carers we interviewed explained that they avoided going to the theatre because individuals in their care often vocalised and expressed themselves in loud, enthusiastic, and excited ways. According to Siri, the head of a care institution in Tromsø, they had attempted to take the children to the theatre prior to RELÆXT because "we know that many of our children are very interested in theatre and love music". However, each time they had to leave midway because the children laughed too loudly or

expressed themselves in unexpected ways. Reflecting on this she says: "It was a shame because, uh, it was really about the excitement being so great, that there was so much noise because they were so excited".

With previous experiences of having to suppress excitement, joy, laughter, and other spontaneous responses to fit rigid theatre norms, most interviewees shared that it was such a relief to be part of RELÆXT. For many in the RELÆXT audience, the fact that they could be themselves without having to suppress their needs or moderate their behaviour was the most positive aspect of the RELÆXT experience. Victor explained: "The good thing about RELÆXT is that you can cry, laugh, tic. There are some people who have tics and various diagnoses, that they shout. [...] It's good that you can be yourself, simply". Many parents echoed similar sentiments, emphasising that not having to conform to the norms allowed them to relax and fully enjoy the theatre experience. As an example, Eli said that she "had a resting pulse the whole time", exclaiming: "I didn't let myself stress, normally I think a lot about appearance in a way, that you don't want to stand out too much [...] But here I didn't give a damn". For her, this absence of stress made it a "totally, totally amazing experience". Similarly, Peter, the father of a girl who sings most of her waking hours and who loves the theatre and music, said that RELÆXT had made a world of difference: "Going to the theatre is no longer a social experiment. Now I can really enjoy being there. I think we will visit all available RELÆXT performances in the future!".

For families with disabled children, the logistics involved in exposing their child to a new experience often feel overwhelming. For Jo's parents, it could feel so stressful that "it boils over in the end". For many parents of neurodiverse children, RELÆXT makes the experience of going to the theatre easier to plan and follow through, even on a challenging day. One family described RELÆXT as a "gift packet" precisely because it made the experience more predictable and easier to navigate once there. Knowing that it is possible to leave the auditorium during the performance without fear of disturbing others is reassuring for parents, giving them the confidence to proceed with a theatre visit they might otherwise have avoided. Sara highlighted the significance of coming to the theatre, despite her daughter, Sofie, having a difficult day. Normally, they would have stayed at home, but because Sara had read about relaxed performances and their accommodations, she took the chance and went to the theatre. As they entered the theatre auditorium, they needed to leave almost immediately to get something to eat and use the toilet, but they were made to feel that this was entirely acceptable. Reflecting afterwards, Sara shared that the experience had been amazing, emphasising how welcomed they felt throughout their time in the theatre. Summing up the experience, she said that RELÆXT was like "having a four-wheel drive during wintertime"; it made it easier to manoeuvre the difficult road to a successful theatre visit for the family.

Opportunities to participate: "It means that you become part of society"

As we have seen, prior to RELÆXT, many audience members felt limited in their access to the theatre. For some, this meant complete exclusion. For others, the prospect of attending cultural events was associated with overwhelming stress. During our interviews with employees at a care institution for disabled children and adolescents, we learned about the profound sense of exclusion experienced by many in the disabled community. With many years working in this community, John's first reaction was: "I don't think you fully realize how high the threshold is". For these caregivers, even the possibility of taking the children to the theatre was unimaginable. Laura, another employee added: "It's actually the first time any of them have been to the theatre because with previous experiences and all, it has not been an option". She emphasised that this inclusion of children and adolescents living with disabilities also extended to their parents and caregivers. This inclusive approach fostered a sense of belonging and positive change for them all as citizens of Tromsø.

Vivian, the mother of Heidi, shared that she used to take her daughter to the theatre when she was a small child. Vivian found it easier back then because of the assumption that young children generally make noise. Now, however, Heidi is an adult, and Vivian regretted that attending the theatre, which they both loved, was no longer an option for them and they had "not been able to attend theatre performances at all". She explained that: "[Heidi] is the one who makes a bit of noise, who can be restless and who does not sit still". With the introduction of RELÆXT, Vivian and Heidi regained the opportunity to participate, something that brought them both great joy and happiness: "We are very happy now to be able to attend, we have actually been to three performances. It's been so great to see, because this is a setting that she [Heidi] really likes". Reflecting on this, Vivian offered that RELÆXT had provided many with the opportunity to experience the "happiness" of being "allowed to participate in a theatre performance". She found it deeply moving, noting "very many of [the audience] have not been allowed to participate in this type of cultural event before. And that means that you simply get to be part of society. So that means a lot".

Lea and Kai, the parents of Jo, highlighted that the experience was particularly significant for Jo because he had the opportunity to meet many people from his school. They shared that this made a strong impression on him as he typically did not interact with his peers in social or cultural contexts outside school: "Our boy got a very positive experience by meeting the people he knew". Reflecting on the event, the parents realised the importance of community for Jo and acknowledged that, unintentionally, they had shielded him from these experiences:"We protect ourselves, so we protect a person

who may need to have a […] larger contact network. We protect him so much because he is not A4, so that he doesn't get the contact network he wants or needs". With the REÆXT experience, Jo's parents came to realise how important feeling part of a community was for their son. Seeing and feeling a connection with other parents in the same situation was also an important experience for Lea and Kai. Likewise, Eli explained that RELÆXT provided a unique opportunity for people with similar experiences to come together: "The problem is that we who have children with different needs, we rarely or ever meet. There are no arenas for us to come together". For her, just "seeing each other, and knowing that there are more of us in the same situation", was an important step to build a community. Many of the people we spoke to also said that RELÆXT enabled families and carers to share positive experiences together, both within their families and residential communities. They noted that these experiences strengthened bonds among all participants.

All the parents and carers we interviewed described RELÆXT as an initiative that significantly enhanced the accessibility of the theatre. They consistently emphasised that RELÆXT provided people with disabilities and their families invaluable opportunities to experience the joys and beauty of live performances. In recognition of the impact of the initiative, HT received the Equality-award 2023 from a local disability organisation. The award recognised that by instituting various access arrangements and making accommodations, the theatre had made a significant difference in the lives of the disabled community in Tromsø:"The reason why we gave the Equality-award to RELÆXT was that this is the first time that it has been opened up to this special group […]. Many can see that there is a need, but not everyone acts on it" (Rafaelsen, 2023).

Opportunities to experience positive emotions: "Theatre becomes so positive"

Observing the audiences at four RELÆXT performances, we witnessed firsthand how engaged and emotionally invested the audiences were. Lea and Kai told us that the RELÆXT experience drew Jo into the action on stage in a way that non-RELÆXT performances had not. They typically spent a lot of effort urging him to be quiet during regular performances. However, liberated from this pressure, Jo became so engrossed in the performance that he was genuinely upset when the curtain fell for the intermission, mistakenly thinking the show had ended. Similarly, Eli noted that Camilla, who has a short attention span, showed interest and enthusiasm for the action on stage, laughing and responding with alertness and joy: "She was drawn into it […] she really managed to keep up with it [….] and thought they were funny too". Eli ascribed this to the stimulation of the visual spectacle on stage, something she identified as typical for the theatre: "that is theatre, right? Here it is big gestures, big emotions, colours, and speed". Seeing her daughter so alert and

engaged, Eli remarked: "She was really in her ace". Similarly, the parents of Jo and Heidi saw their children thriving in response to the performance.

For Laura and her colleagues at the care institution in Tromsø, the opportunity to participate in RELÆXT provided a positive contrast to the seriousness of their everyday work caring for "seriously ill children and adolescents". She explained: "we work with life and death all the time and the gravity of the situation lies heavy on us". Laura, who knows the children well, says that they reacted wholeheartedly to the performance, responding nonverbally with "great joy and enthusiasm". For her, experiencing theatre is "positively different" than watching TV or cinema for these children. Trying to capture what made the difference, she surmised that the reason was the liveness of the spectacle, the music and the captivating sound that engaged the children. Overall, Laura described that the experience was very positive for the children. She noted that this group rarely got the opportunity to attend live performances, so seeing how joyful the experience was for the children was significant for both the staff and the parents. Laura found it deeply moving to witness how enthusiastic the parents became upon learning that their children had participated in the show: "Finally, there is an offer for our children". Significantly, the children themselves also shared their positive experiences with their parents after the show.

For many in the audience, the theatre experience became something that they talked about and reflected on for a long time afterwards. For Emanuel and Victor, these experiences became a catalyst for contemplating existential and moral themes. For instance, after watching *Panikk i kulissene* [Noises off], they engaged in deep discussions about how we should relate to and treat others. Similarly, for some families, the theatre provided an opportunity to discuss themes or characters from the performances. For others, it provided an opportunity to connect nonverbally. One child, who was unable to communicate verbally and was typically difficult to reach, hummed a song from the theatre for days afterward. The staff noted that the performance had made a positive impression on this child, offering her a way of communicating without words.

Observing RELÆXT, we noticed that this audience is livelier and more vocal than audiences at "ordinary" performances, engaging more openly with the action on stage. Indeed, the term "extra live" has also been suggested to describe relaxed performances (Thom, 2015). As the opening vignette shows, the audience at *Pussycats* transformed into a lively fan club, participating exuberant energy as co-creators of the performance. At the Christmas show, *Snøfall* [Snowfall], the relaxed performance audiences vocally expressed their disapproval of the villain's evil behaviour, and the entry of Santa Clause's sledge was accompanied by a collective, excited gasp from the auditorium. Afterwards, the audience members we spoke to describe this moment and the whole experience as magical. Families and carers emphasised that they found it "touching", "amazing", "nice", and "fun" to see the engagement and happiness of the audience members so clearly expressed, especially since this was

a novel experience for most. As researchers, we were also deeply moved by the experience of taking part in RELÆXT performances. Experiencing and observing the joy these performances brought makes it the more disconcerting that people in the disabled community have been denied access to theatre for so long. Every time we heard Heidi or other members of the audience making joyful high-pitched and unselfconscious noises, we were reminded that if not for relaxed performances, these children would have been denied this experience. Like the woman sitting next to us at the performance of *Pussycats,* we likewise believe that this is outrageous: "it is not right"!

Opportunities to flourish: promoting creative wellbeing for all?

As we have seen from the experiences shared by the RELÆXT audiences, this initiative has profoundly enriched the lives of many who were previously excluded from the theatre. In the following, we argue that the initiative has impacted the audience members in at least three interrelated ways, all crucial to wellbeing: (1) enabling people to authentically be themselves and realise their full potential as human beings, (2) empowering citizenship and fostering participation in society, and (3) facilitating opportunities to experience positive emotions through theatre.

Within the framework of eudaimonic wellbeing, being allowed to authentically be ourselves and finding pathways to flourish as human beings is one of the most consequential aspects of wellbeing and happiness (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Vittersø underscores the importance of "development of valuable individual potentials and social relations" (2016, p. 19). Being denied the opportunity to express oneself in cultural settings and being excluded from cultural experiences based on our identities and modes of expression are significant obstacles to eudaimonic wellbeing. Such exclusion deprives us of opportunities to grow, self-discover, determine our preferences, and explore what makes us thrive. Providing a space like RELÆXT where audiences can be themselves without the fear of judgement or sanction creates opportunities for children and adolescents living with various disabilities and their families to learn more about themselves and discover ways of thriving as a path to a good life. As we have seen, RELÆXT has enabled Heidi, Anna, Camilla, Jo, Emanuel, and Victor to develop and realise their potential as human beings. They all love the theatre and through RELÆXT they have been able to nurture this passion.

Participation in society is an important aspect of what constitutes citizenship for all people (Morris, 2005; Wise, 2014). Families, carers, and representatives from user organisations perceived the ability to participate in RELÆXT as being "part of society", and thus an expression of citizenship. According to UNESCO, there is a close link between cultural rights and cultural citizenship, which includes participation in the community: "Accessing

and enjoying culture is an important part of being a citizen, a member of a community and, more widely, a member of society" (Thomson et al., 2019, p. 177). Cultural citizenship and participation in society are important in and of itself, but being connected to a community, as active citizens, are is also closely connected to wellbeing and flourishing (Barber, 2009; Vittersø, 2016; Wise, 2014).

Participating in activities is often associated with positive affect, including a sense of belonging, positive relationships, and emotional connection (Barber, 2009; Gürgens, 2004; Vittersø, 2016). Like for other groups, people with disabilities depend on participating in communities to flourish. As Tollefsen argues, "a flourishing human life is necessarily communal in various aspects. It requires families, networks of friends, and cooperative social structures for the pursuit of goods" (2010, p. 215). This also relates to "aesthetic experience" that "will suffer in the absence of cooperation and the generation through time" (p. 215). For Tollefsen, "friendship, play, and aesthetic experience are real goods for the disabled" (p. 217) and pursuing these goods together with others is thus an important part of a good life. As we have seen, the parents of Nils, Jo, Heidi, Camilla, and Anna all say that attending the theatre is part of what constitutes a good and happy life for their children. In other words, providing cooperative social structures like RELÆXT can help create the conditions where wellbeing and flourishing are promoted.

Opportunities to experience positive emotions are important for wellbeing and growth (Fredrickson, 2004). According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, "uplifting emotional states are likely to broaden people's awareness, enabling them to see the bigger picture, connect the dots, or otherwise transcend the self or the moment" (Fredrickson, 2016, p. 188). Moreover, Fredrickson suggests that these "expanded mindsets" help us see and understand the many ways in which we are connected to others (2016, p. 188). As we have seen, many in the RELÆXT audience expressed positive emotions at the theatre, including joy, enthusiasm, engagement, and interest. These emotions – interest, engagement, and enthusiasm – are directly linked to eudaimonic wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016) and flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2020). Experiencing these emotions is thus particularly conducive for promoting growth.

It can be argued that relaxed performances are more likely than ordinary performances to stimulate eudaimonic emotions because here the audience are permitted to respond freely and authentically. Returning to the opening narrative, the actors shared that the RELÆXT audience at *Pussycats* was the liveliest and most enthusiastic "fan club" they had experienced throughout the entire run. They added that this affected their own enthusiasm and energy, making their performance more rewarding and meaningful. In short, we argue that relaxing theatre etiquette, for both disabled and nondisabled audiences, enables greater opportunities for co-creation and immersion. Speaking for ourselves, after initially feeling inhibition, it was fulfilling to co-create,

engage collectively and communally, and play along unselfconsciously. We can also confirm Fredrickson's claim that in this "uplifting emotional state", we transcend ourselves and feel a greater connection with both fellow theatregoers and actors. This insight was shared by many of the parents and by the scholar Hannah Simpson (2018), who argues that "tics in the theatre" and the presence of neurodivergent spectator's "offer a new perspective on the value of theatre as a live, embodied, collective event that permits felt communion with other individuals – spectators as well as performers" (p. 233). Experiencing these feelings, becoming immersed, and engaging in imaginative play should not be dismissed as mere amusement. Indeed, as Nussbaum argues, a life in dignity involves being able to develop our capabilities to sense, feel, use our imagination, and play. Significantly, she argues that "what play and the free expansion of the imaginative capacities contribute to a human life is not merely instrumental but partly constitutive of a worthwhile human life" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 36). In essence, exploring and developing our imaginative abilities through play and free expression is integral to being well.

Concluding remarks

People with disabilities, along with their families and carers, have equal rights to access cultural venues and experiences as the general population. However, the continued exclusion of many individuals from the theatre and other cultural activities in Norway (and indeed, globally) underscores the disparity between statutory rights guaranteeing cultural participation for all and the actual opportunities accessible to disabled audiences. Addressing this gap is urgently needed for several reasons: to ensure cultural rights, promote human rights and social justice, and guarantee that the entire population can access the wellbeing benefits of live theatre.

It is important to acknowledge that RELÆXT is not for all, and that a minority said that they rather would attend regular performances in the future. For the majority, however, the RELÆXT initiative at HT has successfully provided a platform for people to thrive, flourish, and cultivate their interests and sense of identity. Moreover, RELÆXT fostered personal development in terms of self-expression, imagination, creativity, and social interaction, all essential for achieving flourishing, happy lives. Based on the material we collected, we cannot definitively conclude that the experiences resulted in transformative and significant mindset shifts. We can assert, nevertheless, that RELÆXT provided disabled audiences and their families with opportunities to share powerful positive and eudaimonic emotions such as enthusiasm, interest, wonder, and joy with others. These emotions are crucial for personal growth, prompting us to speculate that when Camilla "is in her ace" and Jo enthusiastically interacts with the action on stage among his peers beyond school, they may undergo significance shifts in how they perceive themselves and their place in

the world, both in relation to family, friends, and their broader community. We can also speculate that the deep resonance experienced by many, including parents, carers, actors, other staff at HT and researchers during RELÆXT performances, was due to the "extra-liveness" that enhances eudaimonic feelings and fosters a profound sense of unity and belonging, which are crucial for wellbeing. Perhaps, it also resonates with unconscious and primordial feelings that live performances represent collective celebrations of ritual significance, experiences from which no one should be excluded.

A central message of this chapter underscores the importance of prioritising efforts to facilitate meaningful engagement, self-realisation, and growth for disabled members of the community who have historically been marginalised and excluded. Establishing policy frameworks to guide such accommodations and inclusivity not only enhances cultural participation but also promotes a more equitable society. As demonstrated in this chapter, the implementation of relaxed performances serves as a proactive measure to ensure broader access to cultural life. This represents a significant step towards fostering creative wellbeing for all.

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Chapter 8

Creative wellbeing in higher education

The use of theatre in the education of social workers

Vibeke Preus, Borghild Otelie Aasebøstøl and Wenche Torrissen

Prologue

For over 15 years, the authors of this chapter have taught a course titled "Power, Communication and Forum Theatre" to social work students at a higher education institution in Norway. The course runs for five days and is grounded on the theatre methods of Augusto Boal, a renowned Brazilian theatre director, writer, and educator. In essence, the course aims to provide insights into the embodied, emotional, and interpersonal skills necessary to foster individual and professional development and growth. In this context, it can be argued that the course supports both eudaimonic and creative wellbeing. The two concepts are closely interconnected, yet they differ in focus: While eudaimonic wellbeing emphasises personal growth, self-realisation, and pursuing activities aligned with one's own values that benefit society (Ryff & Singer, 2008, Vittersø, 2016), creative wellbeing pertains to how involvement in creative pursuits (such as theatre) can challenge our comfort zone and awaken our senses and emotions in ways that inspire growth (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, see pp. 17–35 for more details). This engagement has the potential to catalyse transformation, leading to deeper insights and inspiring meaningful action. In fact, every year we are profoundly struck by the power of theatre in promoting transcendent growth within groups. Importantly, the ensemble dynamic is a fundamental prerequisite for creating an impactful theatre experiences

The aim of this chapter is to share and discuss some of the experiences the authors have had while teaching this course to shed some light on how theatre can be used to promote creative wellbeing. We begin by inviting the reader into the University's theatre space, the black box, where we attempt to capture the growth process experienced by many of the students. We then explore how the pedagogies and dramaturgies of the course support the personal and social development of the students. Our hope is to inspire others to incorporate theatre, risk, dramaturgy, imagination, and play into higher education classrooms.

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Exposition

It is eight o'clock on a Monday morning, early in the first semester of a Bachelor's programme in Social Work in Norway. Students pour into the university's theatre space, huddling in groups as they await the start of a weeklong course in theatre and communication. This room is unlike any other learning space they have encountered. There are no chairs and no tables to hide behind, no blackboards, no power points, no shoes, and none of the usual hierarchies. The students appear visibly nervous, their raised and tense shoulders, hard-wired bodies, nervous chuckles, and flickering eyes betraying their desire to escape this unfamiliar situation. The teacher has many years of experience teaching this group of students, but she too is nervous. She knows she must work hard to win over these sceptical students who every year question the relevance of drama to their social work degree and are cynical about anything a drama teacher might teach them. After all, they have signed up for a "serious" degree. Illusion, imagination, playing, and impersonating others have nothing to do with this!

As the teacher invites the students to the floor, asking them to form a circle, the energy in the room is desperately low. However, she knows that introducing very simple games will change the atmosphere. This strategy works every time. After the first game of the day, the students no longer appear as though they want to escape. Instead, they laugh, joke, and talk to people they do not know. With a few more games, the atmosphere and energy in the room transform and the students are alert and engaged. This playful atmosphere sets the tone, and students become increasingly invested in participating in more complex games and exercises, until they, by the end of the weeklong course, are devising theatre scenes to perform for the whole class.

On the last day of the course, the room is buzzing with energy and nervousness as the first group takes the stage, acting out a couple of scenes at a social welfare office. In the first scene, the male social worker is new to the job. The office is understaffed, so his colleagues burden him with too much work and too much responsibility. When he tries to speak up, he is belittled and scorned, and his professionalism is undermined. In the second scene, acting out of desperation and pressed for time, he rejects a client without taking the time to listen to his story. This culminates in a loud and violent outburst from the client and more scorn from his colleagues in the third scene. When the scene ends, the social worker is disillusioned, depressed, and uncertain about his future. These simple scenes make a deep impression on the rest of the class. Following Forum Theatre methodology, the scene is then replayed. The other students are encouraged to shout STOP, enter the stage, take the role of the newly employed social worker, and through improvisation, try to change the outcome of the scene. There are many suggestions as to how the situation can be resolved, including changing the words used, becoming more aware of body language, involving trade unions, etc. All the suggestions are debated at length, with some causing disagreement among the group.

Nonetheless, the activity and engagement in the class are remarkable, and the discussion only ends because the time is up.

As the students leave the theatre space, a few students linger behind. They want to share how significant the experience has been for them. One student reveals that this is the first time he has spoken aloud in front of an entire class. Another says that she has never been pushed so far outside her comfort zone, but that she now truly understands how vulnerable clients might feel and how easy it is to oppress others. A third student expresses how the experience has changed her view of substance users, gaining insights into the complexities of their situation and their lived experiences.

Rising action

As we see it, the vignette presented above captures and exemplifies what creative wellbeing can be in higher education, demonstrating how creative engagement can enable personal, social, and moral growth. It illustrates how creative wellbeing can increase our capacity to imagine different (and better) ways of being and acting in the world. The vignette and the arguments constructed in this chapter are based on material drawn from over 15 years of experience teaching social work students theatre and role-playing techniques. The material presented is constructed from memory, field notes, discussions, student responses, and student's anonymous course evaluations. As such, the narratives do not represent "data but offer variations of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, the embodied, sensory and affective experiences" (Pink, 2013, p. 35). Through the vignette, we aim to share some of our knowledge about creative wellbeing as it can be practised and promoted in higher education, captured in a style and tone that acknowledges "multiple ways of knowing, such as [the] sensory, kinaesthetic, and imaginary" (Leavy, 2022, p. 210).

Through this chapter, we delve into how the values and pedagogies of our course can promote creative wellbeing, and how students' growth can be understood as a result of integrating Augusto Boal's philosophy of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* and the pedagogy of discomfort within a structured theatre course. We believe that through this complex process, teachers guide students out of their comfort zones and into a place of discomfort, ultimately leading them to "a call to action" conducive of creative wellbeing (Boler, 1999, p. 202).

The pedagogy of discomfort

Through our theatre course, we aim to enhance the student's understanding of how creative and imaginative processes can strengthen their understanding both of themselves and the people they will encounter as part of their work. As future social workers, they will engage with people from diverse cultures and social backgrounds. Our goal is to prepare students by cultivating

empathy for their future clients and by critically examining their own and society's established biases. This is why the theatre course is grounded in "The pedagogy of discomfort". In her book *Feeling power: emotions and* education, Megan Boler (1999) challenges traditional norms and conventions by encouraging students to confront discomfort and uncertainty as integral aspects of the learning process. The pedagogy of discomfort emphasises the importance of having difficult conversations, recognising diverse perspectives, and questioning society's norms and power dynamics.

Witnessing, a concept Boler explores, involves emotionally engaging with and acknowledging the experiences and narratives of marginalised or silenced individuals. In the context of our theatre course, the students must actively listen to – and validate the stories of those who have experienced trauma, injustice, or discrimination. By bearing witness to the stories of others, students can forge connections and deepen their understanding of others (Boler, 1999, pp. 196–198). For our students, studying to become social workers, these skills are crucial for understanding their future clients and the broader societal issues at play. In her book *Theatre of witness*, Teya Sepinuck defines bearing witness as "to 'be with' fully and compassionately" (2013, p. 228). As we see it, Boal's Forum Theatre is a particularly suitable theatre form for such witnessing. Here, students are given the opportunity to "be with" individuals, gaining insights into their marginalised position. It offers us lived experiences that allow us to reflect on the complexities typical of social work cases, positioning ourselves as active subjects at play in a fictional setting. Moreover, Boal's pedagogy is rooted in risk since according to him, "theatre is not safe", underscoring the necessity of risk for fostering transformation (Landy & Montgomery, 2012, p. xxiv). Social risk-taking can be seen as a predictor of a creative thinker (Beghetto et al., 2020). This perspective values risk as necessary in human growth processes.

However, taking the students through a mandatory course that addresses difficult themes using new and challenging methods raises questions about the ethical responsibility of the teachers. Can being compelled out of their comfort zones lead to excessive discomfort for the students? Michalinos Zembylas (2015) reminds us that there is an important distinction here between "discomfort" and "pain and suffering". In Zembylas's words, discomfort "is linked to one's comfort zones, the feeling of uneasiness that is disturbing someone's comfort", whereas "pain and suffering" are linked to "injury and harm" (2015, p. 173). The task of the teachers on the course is thus to navigate this delicate balance, steering students towards discomfort and risk while trying to protect them from experiencing pain and suffering because as Gert Biesta states: "without the risk, education in itself disappears and social reproduction […] takes over" (Biesta, 2013, p. 140). We believe that while it is impossible to completely eliminate the risk of pain and suffering, we can mitigate this risk through the defence of fiction and the carefully structured dramaturgy of the course.

Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal is best known for his development of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), a form of interactive theatre used as a tool for individual, social, and political change. Inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Boal sought to initiate a "praxis" that could enhance individuals' abilities to reflect and act "upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1993, p. 52). According to Freire, the world should not only be studied. Rather, people also have a responsibility to act to create a fairer and more democratic society.

For Boal, the verb "to act" holds a double meaning, where acting is both a theatrical art and a process of doing or taking action to transform the world (Babbage, 2010, p. 305). For Boal and Freire, "praxis" represents an ongoing and creative process aimed at personal and social transformation. Indeed, creativity is central to Boal's praxis, suggesting that individuals discover themselves and their values through creative engagement with theatre. Boal illustrates this by arguing that the theatre provides ample opportunities for personal growth: "Observing itself, the human being perceives what it is, discovers what it is not and imagines what it could become. It perceives where it is and where it is not, and imagines where it could go" (Boal, 1995, p. 13). The theatre also helps us to imagine new worlds by enabling us to say: "OK that's the way things are but not the way things could be, and now I am going to create an image of how I want the world to be" (Boal, 1996, p. 49). It can, thus, be argued that Theatre of the Oppressed can be interpreted as a creative wellbeing practice, allowing people to enhance their creative capacities, supporting greater self-insight, self-knowledge, and understanding of others, through theatrical play.

Augusto Boal viewed play as a fundamental aspect of human nature. He believed that through play, people explore, experiment, and understand the world around them. In our context, play becomes a tool for breaking down barriers, encouraging creativity, and fostering a sense of community (Boal, 1974). Through play and Forum Theatre, Boal aimed to promote dialogue, critical thinking, and, ultimately, social transformation (Boal, 1974, 2002).

Climax

Over the last decade, the incorporation of dramaturgy in the planning of lessons across various subjects has emerged as a significant element in didactic thinking in Norway (Østern, 2021; Bakke & Lindstøl, 2023). In our theatre course, the teachers have deliberately used dramaturgy as the framework for the course delivery. We believe that this approach is an important factor contributing to the growth and development experienced by the students.

From Aristotle, through Gustav Freytag, to the Hollywood movie model, the dramaturgy of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action,

and denouement has been tried and tested as a formula for telling stories throughout the centuries (Romanska, 2016). The goal is to impact the audience by depicting a character's journey through perils and tribulations, culminating in greater wisdom and the fulfilment of potential. The parallel to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia is striking. Even though Aristotle does not mention eudaimonia in his treatise on dramaturgy, the *Poetics*, it can be argued that his notion of eudaimonia and his theory of storytelling embrace some of the same elements: personal growth, self-realisation, and the pursuit of meaningful goals and activities. This parallel makes the Aristotelian dramaturgy an interesting tool for educational planning. If we characterise the discomfort that the students experience during this course as perils and tribulations, we can use the exposition and rising action of the dramaturgic model to prepare and equip them with the skills they will need to endure and evolve. In the following section, we explain and discuss the dramaturgy of the course and how it might contribute to creative wellbeing.

The dramaturgy of creative wellbeing

Exposition: knowing the body and making the body expressive

As the opening vignette shows, we spend the first day of the course in a playful *warm-up mode*. We deliberately plan simple games and exercises that enable students to let their guards down and their laughs out. We argue that making students laugh and accept a playful mode of being is the first step towards creative wellbeing. Paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott contends that being playful is perhaps the only road to creativity (1971), and many studies associate creativity and play with greater wellbeing and health (Cropley, 1990; Cameron et al., 2013). In an educational context like ours, playing is thus essential. It gives students the opportunity to develop their individual and collective creativity while also starting to reflect on why playing might be important for their future work.

According to Boal, games and exercises can help us to "liberate" or "free" our bodies and minds, preparing us to act. In the words of Helen Nicholson, "Boal sees a direct link between freeing the body, freeing the mind and social change, and spect-actors are encouraged to 'know' their bodies as part of this process of liberation" (2005, p. 118). Following Boal's methodology, the exposition stage of our course thus helps students "knowing the body" through a series of games and exercises, the purpose of which is to understand the body's "limitation and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation" (Boal, 1974, p. 102). Starting with the simple exercises that everyone easily can join in, we ask students to explore how their bodies might limit the ways we perceive and interact with the world, before we

explore how games and exercises can make us aware of how posture, gaze, status, and body language communicate in intricate power relations.

Throughout the day, the students engage in exercises and games that challenge them to make their bodies expressive (Boal, 1974, p. 102). According to Boal, this phase aims to move beyond habitual ways of communication, fostering creativity and enhancing understanding of how our bodily expressions impact ourselves and others. Many students express that they find this challenging because they must make the suggestions themselves. The "Yes Game" illustrates this dynamic. Here, each student must propose a simple action, i.e., "shall we jump up and down". Everyone must answer "yes" to this, proceeding to jump up and down, until another suggestion is made. During the first day, students tend to propose safe actions like clapping or sitting down. It is our role as teachers to gauge the group's readiness and adjust the pace accordingly. As teachers, we can see and feel the uneasiness of the students, noticing that many only participate minimally. Our task is to attune ourselves to the group dynamics to proceed at a pace that suits the group. In our experience, different groups have different needs. Although all groups are students of social work, our teaching experience shows us that feeling our way into the group's particular dynamics is essential to help us avoid pain and suffering in the progress of the course.

Games and exercises are crucial in "forging a 'group' out of a bunch of people" where collective actions help them to "become a real group, rather than a mere juxtaposition of individuals" (Boal, 2002, p. 264). For us, achieving this group cohesion is vital for two closely connected reasons: Firstly, fostering a group identity enhances emotional connections between the students, enabling greater empathy and mutual understanding (Boal, 2002, p. 39). This emotional bond contributes to create a supportive environment for the students to step out of their comfort zones, which is essential for their growth. Secondly, creating a cohesive group is important because the students perform in front of each other on the last day of the course. By then, they need to feel sufficiently "liberated" and uninhibited to engage fully with their roles, both literally and metaphorically.

Rising action: learning the theatre as language

During the next three days, we continue our playful approach, helping students get to know their bodies and to express themselves through their bodies. The emphasis during these days is to introduce students to "the theatre as language", offering them a more playful way to communicate than they are accustomed to (Boal, 1974, p. 102). Every year, something magic happens either on day three or day four. We are constantly amazed at how far students have come in such a short time, and how liberated and creative they appear. For example, students show a remarkable transformation in their responses to the "Yes game" on day three and day four compared to day one.

Rather than playing safe, students now often take creative risks, proposing actions like: “shall we roar like a lion”, “shall we roll around the floor laughing”, or “shall we impersonate the teacher”, to mention a few. This release of creativity, as we see it, results from the prolonged time spent in the playful and creative atmosphere, gradually pushing the students increasingly out of their comfort zone as they learn to express themselves dramatically through the languages of Image Theatre and Forum Theatre. In Image Theatre, performers form tableaux representing an oppressive situation, and spectators are invited to interpret and suggest changes to the tableaux. This method encourages active participation and critical thinking, allowing students to explore different perspectives and solutions to real-world issues.

Image Theatre

On day two of the course, our first exercise is based on Boal’s “image of transition” (2002, p. 185). In this exercise, as in Image Theatre generally, students are first asked to make an “image” or *tableaux* with their bodies representing an oppressive situation that is relevant to their future professions. The tableau should depict an uneven power balance between the characters portrayed. Most often, the students initially impose a single interpretation on the tableaux they see. From this moment and throughout the course, we systematically invite the students to widen their interpretive perspectives, a skill we consider crucial to developing creative wellbeing. In the next part of the assignment, the students are invited to recreate an “ideal”, non-oppressive tableaux where everyone has reached “a state of affairs which is not oppressive for any of the characters” (Boal, 2002, p. 185). Their task is then to find ways of transitioning from the oppressive tableaux to the non-oppressive one, by creatively altering the oppressive tableaux into achieving the ideal. In this process, everyone in the group participates, making necessary changes to reach the ideal vision of the situation under discussion.

Afterwards, the groups show their “image of transition” to their classmates. Our aim here is to transform passive spectators into active “spect-actors” who participate in the creative process. A play-leader called the Joker, in our case the teacher, facilitates this transformation by initiating discussions about the necessary steps to transition from the actual situation to the ideal situation. She asks questions such as: Is the transition realistic or magic? What must change to make the ideal situation possible? Who is responsible for making these changes? This exercise constantly engages the students and often leads them to realise how difficult it is to effect change both for the privileged social workers and the so-called marginalised clients. As one student noted, the greatest value of the course was that it gave her an opportunity to “really feel[ing] in my whole body how difficult it is to break out of and change a situation when the ‘baggage’ is so heavy, and the system is so rigid”. We use Image Theatre as a stepping stone to

move into Forum Theatre, and in our experience, Image Theatre works well because while it requires students to communicate in a dramatic language, they don't yet have to use words to communicate, and many express that this feels safe.

Forum Theatre

On the third and fourth days of the course, we transition into making Forum Theatre. As we see it, Forum Theatre embodies the essence of the pedagogy of discomfort. Students must now transform more obviously into spectators, individuals who both observe and participate in the theatrical performance. As a first step, we give students simple scenarios relevant to their future work to test out the Forum Theatre form. These scenarios include a client who is being discharged from a rehabilitation unit too early against his will, the pressure experienced when a newly discharged client from the rehabilitation clinic meets her old friends for the first time, and a newly employed care assistant with lived experiences of substance use being overlooked by the other employees in a social work office. These scenes are then staged, and the Forum Theatre form is tested. Now, the spectactors are invited to physically step into the shoes of characters facing oppressive or challenging situations, trying to understand the struggles others endure, and proposing possible solutions to improve the situation. The teacher/Joker facilitates this process and initiates a debate about the various ways change can be initiated. This approach allows students to reflect from both an insider and outsider perspective. Augusto Boal (1995) calls this dual perspective "metaxis", which is "the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (1995, p. 43). In this state, students begin to reflect on how the interplay between the imagined and the actual can enable us to see things anew and in ways that can make a difference. As one student said: "Trying things out in the theatre can change how we see things in the real world".

Many students expressed being pushed far out of their comfort zone during the Forum Theatre experience. They noted the particular difficulty of portraying the role of the antagonist who oppresses the clients. As future social workers, they typically see themselves as compassionate helpers, so embodying the oppressor challenges this identity. A logbook entry by one of the teachers captures this discomfort, recounting an instance during rehearsal when a student abruptly stopped. When the teacher asked why, the student replied: "I was so into the role that I thought of something really mean to say as the oppressor. But then my *real me* stopped me!" It is not uncommon for the students to self-censor themselves while playing the roles as oppressors. As teachers, our part is to remind the students of Boal's fundamental concepts for actors: it's not about "being" the character, but about embodying their "will" (Boal, 2002, p. 40). Therefore, we encourage students to push

beyond their comfort zones to explore the motivations and intentions of the characters they are portraying.

To create Forum Theatre plays that compel their peers to intervene by shouting STOP and entering the stage, the students need to develop characters with clear motivation for their actions. The students must address the question: "What does my character want?". In Boal's words, this question reveals something "dynamic, dialectical, conflictual, and consequently theatrical" (Boal, 2002, p. 40). When pondering "why the oppressors do what they do?", we delve into fundamental questions about the nature of power and its manifestations. The essence of theatricality lies in the conflict of wills (Boal, 2002, p. 42). By examining will, both in the oppressed and the oppressor, one uncovers impulses that compel us to answer the question: What can we do to prevent this from occurring? Starting from this point, we urge the students to fully engage in examining the dynamics of oppression both emotionally and intellectually.

In the next phase of their coursework, students create a Forum Theatre play where they depict scenarios in which social workers are oppressed and disempowered within their professional settings or institutional structures. Following Boal's lead, we define oppression as a situation where dialogue is replaced by monologue, and where the oppressed are disregarded and silenced (Boal, 2006; Paterson, 2011). We guide students to explore various facets of oppression, portraying different contexts and situations faced by the oppressed. Most importantly, we ask the students to create and rehearse scenes based on the group's collective experiences. These plays are then performed on the last day of the course, with students taking on the roles of both actors in their plays and spectators in the plays of their classmates.

Climax, falling action, and denouement: theatre as discourse

The climax is reached on day five when students must confront their fears and perform the Forum Theatre play for their fellow students. This is the moment they are called to action. Here, they are required to show resilience in the face of discomfort and engage in a performance in front of the rest of the class. Following a short warm-up, the group settles in to watch the Forum plays created by the students. The scenarios vary, but most depict social workers grappling with challenging and problematic cases, ultimately facing defeat and disempowerment. Some cases illustrate systematic oppression while others focus on individual experiences, albeit indirectly commenting on systemic issues as well. Not all Forum plays engage the students equally, but generally, the scenes evoke strong emotional reactions, leaving the students feeling angry, frustrated, astonished, shocked, and emphatically inclined towards the disempowered characters.

In Forum Theatre, the main goal is not to find a single solution to a situation. Rather, the goal is to explore, try out, and discuss various options "to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists" (Boal, 2002, p. 275). In our experience, this has certainly been the case. Every year, we are astonished by the collective creativity of the group, as well as their willingness to engage in the process. Nearly all students participate in the Forum plays, suggesting innovative solutions to the problems they see and initiating dialogues about the many ways in which the protagonist can be empowered. This might involve changes in posture, body language, spatial rearrangements, new arguments, introduction of allies, and so forth. On the final day after the performances, students discuss the complex cases and reflect on them, culminating in an evaluation of the course through a questionnaire. It is through this feedback that we gain clearer insights into how creative wellbeing might have been promoted in the course.

Falling action

From the course evaluations, we learned that many students found the experience of creating a Forum Theatre play particularly rewarding. Three strong narratives emerged from the feedback. First, aligning with Boal's idea that theatre should help us envision a different future and train us "for action" (1974, p. 122), many students shared that they found the course relevant to their future profession. One student remarked, "The Forum plays have a potential to let people see different sides of a case and let them try out scenarios that could happen in real life". Many expressed that the Forum Theatre work helped them to examine structures of power and modes of communication in their future work, making them more prepared to act in real life. This is closely linked to what Zembylas describes as one of the goals of the pedagogy of discomfort: "Such a pedagogy has as its aim to uncover and question the deeply embedded emotional dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony" (Zembylas, 2015, p. 166)

Secondly, many students found collective creativity rewarding, emphasising the importance of collaboration and exploring different scenarios. One student expressed it like this: "Through Forum Theatre we got to test out many solutions to difficult scenarios and we learned a lot from these tests. I have learnt a lot from my fellow students". This is closely linked to Boler's (1999) view on how engaging with discomfort in a group setting can amplify the transformative potential. Interactions and discussions within a group create a supportive environment where members feel safe to express their thoughts and emotions. Another student said: "We can learn so much from others who see things differently. An unexpected proposition can really change how we see the whole case". Theatre director Chris Vine also highlights these merits of Forum Theatre, noting that it "objectifies a complete

experience (as portrayed through the play) and asks how we can generalize from the particular, learning from the experience of others" (Vine, 1993, p. 119).

Third, many students reported that enacting other characters and trying out different situations and scenarios was rewarding. According to one student, it was painful to stand in the shoes of the protagonist, to feel the ridicule in my body. It really affected me". The student continues "they [the other actors] were really good at making me feel bad. […] I could feel how it must be. That is good". This highlights how individuals build resilience through theatre processes as they collectively work through uncomfortable feelings (Boler, 1999). Martha Nussbaum argues that art, and specifically theatre, has a unique potential to cultivate sympathy and compassion (2010). She asserts that to truly understand inequality and stigmatisation "a democratic citizen needs […] a participatory experience of the stigmatized position, which theatre […] enable[s]" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 107). Another student said: "I thought that I had a good solution to the problem, but trying it out, it made things worse. Yes. Well. It shows that things might be more difficult than we think. Trying it out, made me realise this". Indeed, according to Boal, one of the key functions of Forum Theatre is to compel the spectator to leave "the comfort of his seat" and "realizes that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he suggests" (1974, p. 117).

Moving beyond the Forum Theatre experience to capture the overall impact of the course, many students shared that the course helped them to "dare to be more assertive", "to dare to utter personal opinions in public", and "to dare to say things that they otherwise might not have". Many also admitted to surprising themselves during the course, discovering the ability to be more vulnerable and to understand themselves and others in new ways. Some students even shared that engaging in the course gave them the courage to break oppressive patterns in their lives.

Epilogue: Denouement

In this chapter, we have examined how a course grounded in Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and the pedagogy of discomfort can foster creative wellbeing in higher education. As demonstrated in this case, the integration of these theories and practices offers didactic possibilities that challenge students to develop self-knowledge and insights about others that they otherwise would have been denied. Therefore, we advocate that employing theatre in the education of social workers holds significant promise for nurturing students' creativity and spontaneity, thereby enhancing both individual and collective creative wellbeing. While there is no guarantee that every student will experience creative growth, the case presented here suggests that conditions for fostering creative wellbeing are enhanced through a dramaturgical framework. This framework emphasises playfulness, possibilities, and

opportunities for students to engage with and navigate feelings of discomfort within a supportive environment.

When summarising the overall experience, many students described the course as "demanding", "tough", "challenging", and "uncomfortable", and, at the same time as "good", "instructive", and "rewarding". One student captured this duality succinctly by describing the course as "unpleasant, but also very nice". Despite experiencing discomfort, students demonstrated resilience by not retreating to their comfort zones, ultimately achieving a sense of accomplishment. Significantly, this reflects the growth process that unfolded during the course. According to Boal, we should "all do theatre, to discover who we are and find out who we could become" (2006, p. 62). The open and explorative nature of both the Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre allows students to enhance their self-knowledge and envision how they can evolve into "better" versions of themselves. This encapsulates the essence of eudaimonic wellbeing. According to bell hooks, "the function of art is" precisely "to imagine what is possible" (2006, p. 281), a sentiment echoed by Boal, who urges us to actively reshape the world as it manifests on stage, striving to envision improved versions of society and ourselves. As we have seen, students find this rewarding both because it underscores the potential for change and offers insights into our thoughts, emotions, and actions within intricate social dynamics.

It can be argued that Forum Theatre aims to promote eudaimonic wellbeing through fostering action-oriented dialogues about our identities, values, and aspirations. However, we contend that the term creative wellbeing better encapsulates the transformative growth facilitated by Forum Theatre. In our experience, students realise this level of personal growth by fully engaging in playful and creative processes with their peers. A playful atmosphere is crucial because modern society often judges mistakes, causing anxiety and fear of missteps. In response, fostering opportunities for play can serve as an antidote to the fear-inducing attitudes prevalent in society. This approach helps students to unleash their imagination, allowing them to express themselves and explore their identities. Significantly, many students shared that they discovered "new" versions of themselves during the course, feeling more empowered to express their thoughts and take action in social contexts. Through engaging in artistic creation, embodied experiences of play, and reflective practices, students undergo significant personal evolution and growth.

Growth is undoubtedly a challenging journey. Growth frequently involves discomfort, struggle, challenge, and a capacity to endure. Our short course does not offer a definitive road map to creative wellbeing, yet by encouraging students to confront discomfort and embrace the vulnerability inherent in the creative process, we aim to cultivate resilience, empathy, and autonomy. As we have seen, this can prepare them to confront and address issues and challenges both in their personal lives and in their professional careers.

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Chapter 9

Creative wellbeing and formative processes in teacher education and school

Student teachers' perceptions

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Creative wellbeing and formative processes in education and school

This chapter investigates how student teachers perceive practices for creative and eudaimonic wellbeing in initial teacher education (ITE) and during practical teacher training in elementary school. More narrowly, we study student teachers' perceptions of creative wellbeing. We study how creative wellbeing can be used in their own teacher training, and later by them, as future teachers. Education and schools deal with both creativity and wellbeing at various levels. Barnes and Shirley (2007) argue that dimensions of human characteristics such as creativity, empathy, relationship, and sensitivity should be included in education, and that teacher education should consciously strive to identify and develop essentially these. In the Norwegian National Guidelines for the ITE programmes for elementary and lower secondary schools, the overarching goals for competencies to be developed by the student teachers for aesthetic learning processes are that: "The student must develop creativity, the ability to create, interact, reflect, and communicate using aesthetic means and tools" (UHR, 2017, p. 10). They continue: "The student shall be able to facilitate creative learning through different forms of aesthetic expression, dissemination, and presentation, which help to develop the students' self-confidence and identity".

Thus, it is emphasised that the student teachers are obliged to develop competencies that will make them able to create inclusive and health-promoting learning environments that contribute to effective social and aesthetic learning processes.

The concepts of creativity and wellbeing

For both our own research and to quickly engage our student teacher participants, we needed to fully understand the term creative wellbeing and consider the relationship between these twinned terms, reflecting on the potential role of creativity in cultivating and supporting wellbeing. As already discussed

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elsewhere, there exist multiple definitions of creativity in various disciplines. Some have defined creativity by its process-oriented aspects, while others have defined it as novelty and rupture (Celik & Lubart, 2016; Kiernan et al., 2020). Acar et al. (2020) argue that all humans inherently possess creativity and that, with varying degrees, they demonstrate creativity to benefit all regardless of the context or problems.

Creativity is becoming increasingly important and contributes to better personal and civic life (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019). Creativity, along with other skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration have long been valued, they "are particular salient today, and education officials are beginning to focus on them" (National Research Council, 2012, p. 16). Most curricula in The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries include creativity among students' expected learning outcomes. However, teachers find it unclear what creativity means in their daily teaching practices (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019). Understandably, with such conceptual and practical vagueness, it can be challenging to develop practices that are rooted in creative wellbeing.

The term wellbeing, on the other hand, is more easily accessible and is defined as both individual and collective experiences of life satisfaction and self-realisation. As we have seen, wellbeing also defines the collective experiences of social groups and interrelationships between people, land, culture, and spirituality (Kiernan et al., 2020; Oades & Heazlewood, 2017). As a working definition, "'creative wellbeing' involves engaging in the creation of something new (such as a new perspective, a human-nature relationship, an artwork, etc.), fostering transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual" (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2025, p. 5).

Future existential challenges cannot be understated. If we are to equip the adults of tomorrow to deal effectively both personally and collectively with global issues like climate change, global inequalities, cultural antagonism, and environmental degradation, these students (and their teachers) will need to have built significant reserves of resilience, care, creativity, and hope (Humes, 2011). However, the current systemic focus in schools fails to meet these needs. As Sternberg (1997, p. 127) notes, the demand on teachers in schools sets a pattern for their work and role as teachers, where "teachers in the upper grades are forced to follow a more rigidly prescribed curriculum than are teachers in the lower grades". With an increase in these performance evaluations in schools championed by education authorities, schools, and policymakers, teaching methods have concomitantly become highly structured, and teacher directed (Sternberg, 1997). As such, there is less space for a student-centred pedagogy that employs creative formative processes. The greater regimentation of learning and thinking in the upper grades, and in the universities, is an undesirable characteristic of a school system that needs to prepare students with the skills and competencies for a future likely filled with unknown existential challenges. Sternberg (1997) claims with alarm that this

set education pattern follows students as they progress through school and manifests in gradually reduced spontaneous creativity in their thinking. Students' learning through practical classroom activities in a learning environment that inculcates, and values self-confidence, autonomy, self-efficacy, and agentic self-regulation has been subsumed by a structured, teacher-directed approach (Martin, 2004; Smith et al., 2016).

Future-ready students in elementary, upper secondary school, and universities will need to exercise agency in their own education and throughout life. Agency is the capability of individuals to make choices and to act on those choices in ways that make a difference in their lives (Martin, 2004). Importantly, agency implies a sense of responsibility to participate in the world and, in so doing, to influence people, events, and circumstances for society and education for the better. Agency is activated only when individuals self-reflect and identify external influences that are most nurturing to the self. Within a school context, students enact their agency by managing their cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes as they interact with environment factors (Code, 2020; Martin, 2004). Moreover, student agency requires the ability to frame a guiding purpose and identify actions necessary to achieve a goal (OECD, 2018; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019).

Agency and growth are allied concepts in the research. We found that in psychological wellbeing research, the notion of agency corresponds with growth as a core aspect of a "good life" (Vittersø, 2016). Conversely, the lack of agency is associated with stagnation and contains destructive elements (Keyes et al., 2002). The concept of "on-going growth, personal development and transcendence" as described by Richards (1999, p. 684) is closely related to Eudaimonia. This is a core aspect of activities and experiences that emerge from or contribute to the enhancement of valuable individual potentials and social relationships, as noted by Vittersø (2016).

Creative wellbeing is an emerging construct across multiple disciplines. New ways of looking at education, as well as teachers' and students' actions, are essential to promote creativity in educational contexts (Elisondo et al., 2013), and feelings of wellbeing. Thus, we explored: *What were student teachers' perceptions of creative wellbeing, and how could creative wellbeing facilitate learning for the student teachers and students in elementary school?*

Creative wellbeing in education

The experience of being creative, inventive, and imaginative is connected to positive emotions (Schmid, 2005). Schmid (2005) states that creativity promotes feelings of self-confidence, content, self, interests, curiosity, joy, hope, and enthusiasm. Further, creative cognitive processes are important for psychological wellbeing and life quality and include learning, convergent thinking, motivation, problem-solving, tolerance for perspectives, and

the volition to take risks (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022). However, in an action research project using the arts, Barnes and Shirley (2007) found that there are major challenges to teacher education. There is a need to support student teachers in discovering their own creativity while enhancing those of the students they teach. In addition, teachers need to be enabled to become more confident in making their own curricular contributions. Barnes and Shirley (2007) explored the effects and effectiveness of the arts in making meaning and relevance for both elementary students and student teachers in universities through challenging, outdoor experiences to generate creative thinking. They found that the researched schools and student teachers recognised both the great potential of shifting the locus of control towards students in elementary school, and the power of the arts as motivators for learning across all curriculum subjects (Barnes & Shirley, 2007). Paradoxically, despite this recognition, Barnes and Shirely found that nonetheless, student teachers made little attempt to harness high levels of motivation among students to realise their goals. Neither did the student teachers recognise, without direct guidance from tutors in ITE, the point at which they could use questioning, support, and application of their own specialist knowledge. This revealed an unexploited potential to strengthen student teachers' creativity-wellbeing-learning dynamics (Barnes & Shirley, 2007; Hughes & Wilson, 2017) in their teaching and the students' learning processes.

Relations between aesthetic experiences and formativity

Humes (2011) acknowledges that creativity and wellbeing are both highly elusive concepts, neither of which is conducive to a simple, single interpretation. Historically, the terms creativity and wellbeing were connected in the seventeenth-century writings. The philosopher scientists, Bacon and Descartes both understood the term creativity as involving the harnessing of the forces of nature for the betterment of the human condition (Kiernan et al., 2020). Similarly, the conceptual twinning of creativity and wellbeing is also in both the pedagogical theories of the philosopher and educator Dewey (1934/1980) as well as the philosophy of Pareyson (2019). While there are differences between Dewey's pragmatism and Pareyson's hermeneutics, there are also important similarities (Fiore, 2022). Fiore (2022) underscores the connection between aesthetic experiences and wellbeing in the works of Dewey and Pareyson where these connections can be understood as "experiencing the world aesthetically is a way to make human life full and satisfying" (Fiore, 2022, p.7). For both philosophers, however, this fulfilment through aesthetic experience is connected to an activity or a process rather than a finished object. Put differently, fulfilment is not realised in the created object itself, but in the creative process. Pareyson's term *formativity* is central to understanding this process since it focuses on aesthetic experience as a *specific kind of doing* (Pareyson, 2019, p. 73). Pareyson foregrounds *the way of doing* (Pareyson, 2019,

p. 73), while the product or the aesthetic object is secondary while underlining a close connection between formativity and what he calls the accomplishment of a work of art. An operation is formative to the degree to which a work is well done. The criterion for a well-done work is not to follow a pregiven rule but is met when it has "discovered its own rule instead of following a prefixed rule". If so, we can deem a work is "accomplished" (Pareyson, 2019, p. 73). The topic of rules for evaluation is a question of our relation to the world, or more specifically a question of hermeneutics and the importance of interpretation (Fiore, 2022). As Pareyson states, "there is no knowledge for the human being other than as interpretative" (Pareyson, 2019, p. 191). The process of creating implies an interpretation of the world in the sense of establishing a relation between the subject or person, on the one hand, and the world or a field of knowledge, on the other. This relationship is characterised by both receptivity and activity (Pareyson, 2019). Being receptive means that we are willing and able to receive input from the world, and being active means that we interpret and shape this input and transform it into knowledge. This knowledge is – as in all human endeavours – "always personal" (Pareyson, 2019, p. 191). Thus, when formativity means to discover one's own rules of interpretation and creating, this is intimately connected and grounded in the person. Further, Pareyson (2019) sees an intimate relation between creative processes as in art, life, and wellbeing. Aesthetic experiences are connected to life itself and may awaken deep and vital interest for the world that occupies and satisfies the whole human being. Furthermore, the questions of rules and personal knowledge is related to an experience of freedom and autonomy since the creative act does not entail applying rules successfully, but "the invention of a way of doing" (Chiurazzi, 2018, p. 414). Thus, creative work presents opportunities for freedom that might be connected to self-realisation and wellbeing.

In the pedagogical theories of Dewey (1934/1980), the concept of *play* resonates with the hermeneutical perspective of Pareyson (Fiore, 2022, p. 5). Just as interpretation involves an active engagement with the world, play can be a transformative experience where objects and situations are constructed and reconstructed "giving them new meanings and eliciting an emotional response" (Dewey, 1934/1980 in Fiore, 2022, p. 5). To create something new that has value requires both flexibility and an openness for new opportunities, as is the case with play and playful attitudes. Winnicott (1971/2005, p. 53) states that: "In playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative". Interpretation is, therefore, not only about knowledge but also about developing the self. This resonates with the psychological perspective of Storr (1997) who concurs that, "[T]he creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates" (p. xiv). This is why Humes (2011) sees art as important in education as it recognises the unique character of every human being.

Finally, aesthetic experience and play also have a social dimension that may be associated with wellbeing. An aesthetic experience or play is always *situated* (Graham & Kirby, 2016; Romagnoli, 2022) meaning that it is shaped by its interaction with the environment (Romagnoli, 2022). The creative work is presented in a context where perceivers experience and contribute to the understanding and development of the work. This interaction makes the aesthetic experience or play a dialogic experience where meaning is created through interpretation. This experience enhances both our understanding of others and the world and is, from a hermeneutical perspective, a chance to build authentic relationships between people (Romagnoli, 2022). Pareyson underlines this social aspect when he writes that: "in art occurs what happens in human experience in general, that one learns to be himself only discovering himself in others" (Pareyson, 2019 in Fiore, 2022, p.2). The hermeneutic perspective aligns with Ryff's (1989) psychological perspective where she introduces a six-factor model of psychological wellbeing: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy. In our study, we take a hermeneutical perspective, viewing creativity, and aesthetic experience(s) as related to *formativity*, interpretation, and play.

Student teachers' experiences and perceptions of creative wellbeing: a case study

To study how student teachers perceive practices for creative wellbeing in teacher education, one of the authors facilitated creative learning activities as part of the formal university curriculum. As part of a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009), the researcher introduced the student teachers to learning activities with the use of Lego© bricks, and another researcher of our team invited them to participate in follow-up individual interviews.

The participating student teachers were in the second year of a five-year undergraduate program to become elementary and lower secondary school teachers at a university college in Norway. An invitation was extended to all student teachers enrolled in the formal course (N = 9), and six student teachers volunteered to participate. Student teacher's average age was 21 years (min = 20, max = 23), and the gender distribution was one male and five female student teachers. All were informed about our research work and consented to the voluntary nature of participation. We ensured ethical compliance by informing the student teachers about their rights to anonymity, confidentiality, and the option of withdrawal at any time without any consequences other than the destruction of the research data (NESH, 2021). Moreover, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Sikt, u.a) also approved the study since investigating student teachers' perception and its impact on

learning inevitably involves questions regarding both researcher ethics and work ethics.

The learning activity was conducted in a formal course in Religion and Philosophy. The purpose of the activity was to stimulate the student teachers' reflections on how creative forms of learning activities in relation to Bible stories give opportunities for both creative wellbeing and dialogue-based learning in an educational context. The learning activity was conducted in lessons at the very beginning of the semester and did not require extensive prior knowledge from the participants. The assignment consisted of using Lego© bricks to recreate a scene from a Bible story. The student teachers worked in pairs and selected one or two scenes of their own choice. They were then instructed to construct the chosen scenes themselves by using a collection of available random bricks. Although the task was to represent a given story, and in this sense (it was) not a construction based on "free imagination", the activity was, nevertheless, characterised and informed by the student teachers' own understanding and choices. Throughout the construction of the scenes, the student teachers highlighted details and sometimes added unexpected elements that, in a way, gave a different perspective on the scene they were depicting. These "mistakes", anachronisms, conscious choices, and so forth opened opportunities for dialogues in the stories.

In their model, the student teachers placed a map in Noah's hand. The map is not originally part of the narrative and would be of no help to Noah, since according to the Biblical text, everything was covered in water. Nonetheless, the fact that Noah did not have a map to guide him created an opportunity for a more philosophical conversation about not having a specific goal for where one is going, the uncertainty in life, and of the Jewish diaspora. This diasporic theme links to the Lego© model of another group representing Moses parting the Red Sea in the Book of Exodus where the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before they could enter the Promised Land.

During the building process, the lecturer used the models as a stimulus for reflective dialogues and plenary discussions. Here, the lecturer's role was to grasp and highlight the unexpected or distinctive angles of the story, as well as initiate a dialogue about what kind of insights this offered regarding the content or theme of the story. Although the level of reflection behind the choices in the models varied, the point was, nonetheless, to initiate a dialogue based on the student teachers' own models, knowledge, and creative thinking. Furthermore, the lecturer also initiated group discussions based on comparing and evaluating the models. For example, several groups had created scenes from stories involving water or the sea (Moses parting the Red Sea, Noah's Ark, Jesus walking on water). The models formed a specific point of departure for understanding how the sea is an important symbol in the Bible and for discussing what the sea symbolises in the various stories.

The process of analysing student teachers' views of creative wellbeing based on our case study

As a second stage in the research, researchers met with student teachers for individual interviews after the Lego© session to further explore how they perceive and experience creative wellbeing in teacher education and schooling. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), and an interview guide was provided. The student teachers were asked to elaborate on several key issues. This included how they perceived creative wellbeing, how the use of creativity might provide wellbeing and learning, and what barriers they saw for creative wellbeing in teacher education and schooling. The individual interviews lasted for approximately 24 minutes (min = 20, max = 29). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed immediately by the interviewer creating a detailed transcript that re-created the verbal material of each interview for further analysis.

By using a thematic analysis, text data from the interviews was analysed, which included several phases of condensation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the text data was analysed horizontally, with the research questions as a point of departure. Throughout this stage, principles of comparison were applied, and categories were compared across all the student teachers' reflections. The categories were then condensed into subthemes in the vertical analyses. The vertical analysis allowed for comparison of the different student teacher's reflections. Finally, subthemes were cross-compared and categorised into main themes and core findings.

The main themes for student teachers' perceptions of creative wellbeing were *play, engagement, motivation, learning strategies,* and *coping*. Analysis of student teachers' perceptions of how creative wellbeing could facilitate learning resulted in the following themes: *autonomy, motivation, learning processes, collaboration, learning strategies, play,* and *self-efficacy*.

Student teachers' perceptions and experiences of creative wellbeing

In the first instance, we found that the participating student teachers had challenges defining the construct creative wellbeing. The student teachers explained it by distinguishing the components into two separate parts: creativity and wellbeing. Student teachers collectively understood that creativity "allows you to think a little outside the box" (ST2).[1] Several student teachers stated that creativity was also associated of having autonomy in how a performance or task should be managed or completed. One student teacher says: "Creativity is when your brain is used to see various aspects of a topic, or new approaches to find solutions to a question" (ST3). For the construct of wellbeing, they argued that this is a construct associated with joy, happiness, and a feeling of coping. One student teacher opined:

"Wellbeing is to me associated with coping. That you experience a challenge and must use your skills and competencies" (ST3). Several of the student teachers argued that engagement, motivation, and the use of learning strategies were essential when they tried to define the construct of creative wellbeing.

Student teachers´ perceptions of how creative wellbeing can facilitate learning

When the student teachers were asked to elaborate on how creative wellbeing could facilitate learning, most talked about their personal experiences as students in elementary school. They described the extent to which creative wellbeing was integrated in their ITE, and how they could and should use creative wellbeing in their role as student teachers, as well as future teachers. One of the student teachers emphasised the motivational and playful aspects of using Lego© in their teacher training class at the ITE:

> It made me use more of my own creativity. It is like I become a child again, and it makes me use more creativity by applying different methods. If you are having fun doing this, your students will also have fun. Yes, that is the best.
>
> (ST1)

Further, the student teacher referred to her own experiences during practical sessions as a teacher in elementary school: "It is satisfying to watch the students thrive and you know that you have done a good job, so I will continue planning to do these tasks" (ST1).

Student teacher 2 stated that the use of Lego© in the formal class at the ITE made it easier to reflect on the assignment afterwards, and to discuss the learning task, which she found to be fun. Several of the student teachers agreed that they enjoyed doing "something else than reading and writing" in exploring Bible stories modelled by Lego© bricks. In the interviews, the student teachers also mentioned the use of creativity in different subjects and through a variety of tasks. Several of the student teachers described the joy of drawing. In their teaching, the student teachers shared that they appreciated opportunities to use a variety of learning strategies and tasks, e.g., creating a cartoon, a video, or a poem in their English as a foreign language class at ITE. The student teachers explained that they were inspired with new ideas that could be used their own learning and teaching from their learning activity using Lego© bricks in their ITE. The student teachers said that they would use these ideas when they were practising as teachers in elementary school. One student teacher explained that "it was fun to experiment with existing knowledge and apply this to novel approaches to learning" (ST3).

Further, the student teachers elaborated on the motivational experiences in ITE by doing creative tasks in collaboration with peers. In addition, their experiences of creative wellbeing in ITE were subsequently applied in elementary school by giving their own students creative tasks to perform in collaboration with others. Student teacher 3 stated that "my experience is that students become incredibly happy when I give them a more creative task because they get to use other parts of themselves, and they get to use their cognition in new, and other ways". In addition, the student teachers experienced that creative task in elementary school seemed to invite the students "to collaborate with each other, which emphasizes and builds peer relationships" (ST3).

Few student teachers felt that creativity was integrated as an overarching goal for the competencies to be developed by the student teachers in their ITE. Although student teacher 4 reported that she experienced a loss of creativity in ITE. She said that some lecturers seemed to be exhausted, or afraid of giving tasks that were regarded as "outside the box", and that this was likely a barrier to learning. "If learning lacks creativity, it will not be a good learning experience" (ST4). Further, she elaborated on a need for playfulness and creativity in school: "Creativity is doing something different than reading a text and doing a task. We should use creativity in different tasks and bring play into it" (ST4). Several of the student teachers concluded that creative wellbeing "is about daring to go outside your own comfort zone and getting to know yourself and others in a different context" (ST1).

The student teachers mentioned that using a variety of learning strategies in new, creative approaches was both motivating and helped their learning process. Several student teachers mentioned that they used drawing as a learning strategy to remember words. Student teacher 2 mentioned that she learned better when she used artefacts like Lego©, she loved practical work and learned better when using her fingers. Interviewees perceived as valuable working with a concept in different ways (e.g., drawing, writing, explaining, using artefacts), and by using a variety of genres, since it revealed what knowledge they lacked: "(…) then you suddenly notice that you do not necessarily know what the concept means, which may be useful for your own learning" (ST2).

To facilitate creative wellbeing in ITE, many of the student teachers commended a variety of non-traditional and collaborative learning activities with an emphasis on student teacher involvement. An example of such a collaborative activity was the use of Lego© to create a story.

> We had to collaborate to agree on how to present the story, and how to find solutions when Lego© bricks were missing to design the story. Then, we got to know each other better as peers and learned to collaborate. This was a valuable experience.
>
> (ST3)

The student teachers emphasised double-edged assessments were when it comes to how creativity can be understood and practised in school. On the one hand, the student teachers explained that they experienced creative assignments as challenging to assess, and as limiting learning processes, as well as the desire and opportunity to be creative. On the other, assessment provided direction and structure for appraisal. One interview excerpt exemplifies how the student teachers perceived this: "I believe teachers have to be cautious about assessment criteria when giving a creative assignment since the framework for what is accepted might be a barrier to the performance and the creativity" (ST2). The student teachers underscored the need for their lecturers to share clear information about the learning task, what to expect regarding its learning aim, and how they could be creative. They argued too that these tasks and their assessment – should not be too narrow. Rather, they should be designed as an open task within certain requirements where creativity is valued.

The construct of creative wellbeing – student teachers' perceptions

The participating student teachers had challenges defining creative wellbeing and preferred to define the concept as two separate constructs. Historically, there have been connections between the terms creativity and wellbeing (Dewey, 1934/1980; Kiernan et al., 2020; Pareyson, 2019). Still, the concept of creative wellbeing is rarely referred to in the educational settings of today.

Most curricula in OECD countries include creativity among the expected learning outcomes of students (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019). Creativity is also an overarching goal for the ITE in Norway (UHR, 2017). The student teachers noted that creativity was sporadically found in some courses at their ITE and explained that it was unclear what creative wellbeing means in their daily teaching practices at the ITE. Nonetheless, the student teachers expressed a desire for more creative assignments. Even though the concept creative wellbeing was not explicitly part of the curriculum, these student teachers talked about their experiences of creative wellbeing in ITE and during practical sessions as teachers in elementary schools. They explained how wellbeing was important for their cooping, learning, motivation, and self-efficacy beliefs as student teachers. We found that these student teachers were able to talk about their perception of creative wellbeing from experience despite lacking theoretical argumentations and a deeper reflection based on philosophy or pedagogical practice. Regardless, in their discussion, the student teachers referred to factors that can be found in Ryff's (1989) work, mentioning aspects from the six-factor model of psychological wellbeing. They asserted that constructs such as personal growth, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy were important for creative wellbeing. The lack of student teachers' theoretical argumentations aligns Barnes and Shirley (2007) who explored approaches to creativity

in teaching, and they found a lack of specialist knowledge regarding using creativity among student teachers. Barnes and Shirley (2007) argued that [formal] education should address human traits such as creativity, empathy, relationships, and sensitivity. In our study, the student teachers argued creative wellbeing was an important element of a curriculum. However, they did not feel well enough prepared to use it or argue for its need as teachers, since they have not learned much about it in the ITE. Nevertheless, they believed that their positive experiences underscored arguments for building awareness of the importance of creative wellbeing in ITE and in schooling. Their arguments were based on experiences that creative wellbeing might strengthen engagement, joy, happiness, motivation, and feeling of coping in learning activities – arguments also found in Schmid (2005). In addition, the student teachers claimed that autonomy is essential for creative wellbeing, a point emphasised by Ryff (1989).

For the student teachers, an important dimension in creative wellbeing was play, the feeling of joy, and motivation. These findings echo Schmid (2005) who emphasised that creativity promotes the feeling of self-confidence, content, interests, curiosity, joy, and enthusiasm. Some of the student teachers defined creativity as working with a topic from different points of view describing it as finding "new approaches to find solutions to a question", "finding various aspects of a topic" and "thinking outside the box". Creative cognitive processes are important for psychological wellbeing and quality of life, as learning, convergent thinking, motivation, problem-solving, and tolerance for perspectives, and the volition to take risks (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022). Being creative is, therefore, connected to a certain degree of freedom or autonomy within a given subject, an argument that can be found in Sternberg's (1997) and Ryff's (1989) work. This also resonates with the idea of play understood as an interpretative and transformational process that advances human understanding and involves an active engagement with the world and discovery of one's own "rule" or "way of doing" (Dewey, 1934/1980; Fiore, 2022; Pareyson, 2019). The student teachers also connected the creative work to feelings of joy and happiness. Again, seen in relation to pragmatism and hermeneutics, play is understood as giving new meanings and eliciting an emotional response (e.g., Dewey, 1934/1980; Fiore, 2022).

Creative wellbeing in education and schooling

The student teachers emphasise that they experienced a kind of motivation while doing creative tasks with peers in the ITE. They reported that these collaborative tasks subsequently inspired them in learning activities and during practical sessions as teachers in elementary school. The student teachers noted that they had occasionally participated in various creative, collaborative tasks using a variety of learning strategies throughout their schooling and tertiary education. They emphasised autonomy in teacher-student

and lecturer-student teacher interactions to strengthen self-efficacy and self-regulated learning. They elaborated about how the use of a variety of learning strategies and activities, like using different approaches to solve a problem, enhanced learning in new and creative ways that seemed to enhance wellbeing. With agency and a repertoire of different learning strategies, they could choose and decide what strategies were useful for the task to accomplish the learning goal. Thus, their creativity could also come into play, a learning process that enhanced wellbeing, as well as equipping them for future life and personal growth. In accordance with Vittersø (2016), growth can be understood as core aspects of a "good life" which privilege as central activities and experiences included in, or resulting from, the development of valuable individual potentials and social relations. These arguments are central to the notion of agency and align closely with eudaimonia (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022; Vittersø, 2016). There is a need to give students and student teachers agency, autonomy, and to open for creativity on learning processes in education and schoolwork to equip them for future life and personal growth. However, participating student teachers expressed concerns about failing assignments when being creative and describing this as barriers for how creative they dared to be – and how this also affected their wellbeing.

Most of the interviewed student teachers argued that engagement, motivation, and the use of learning strategies, whether writing, explaining, drawing, using artefacts as examples, become essential for how they perceive creative wellbeing. In addition, they stated that several of these learning activities and strategies were applied positively and effectively through dialogic interaction with the lecturer(s) or peers. These positive social aspects correspond to Pareyson (Pareyson, 2019 in Fiore, 2022, p. 2) who underlines the value of collaboration. Indeed, creative wellbeing involves participation in activity and experiences that goes beyond the individual (Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022).

The student teachers claimed that the learning activities involving Lego© bricks improved their performance, learning, and feelings of wellbeing. By recreating Bible stories from Lego© using dialogic interactions, the student teachers developed clarity and deeper understanding of the task in tandem with their lecturer and peers. This collaborative and dialogic strategy through mutual relationships is characterised by both receptivity and activity (Pareyson, 2019). The process of using Lego© bricks implies an active and relational interpretation of the world between the student teachers (the learner), on the one hand, and Bible stories (task), on the other. In addition, the student teachers claimed, that both through collaboration and using a creative task that invited playfulness, their peer relationships were strengthened. They collaborated actively in learning activities in a constructive process, in which they were able to set goals, monitor, self-regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, emotions, and behaviour in a specific context and environment. The student teachers' positive experiences while performing the creative task raise pedagogical questions and connect to eudaimonic wellbeing, joyfulness,

and their sense of improving their performance and learning in collaboration. Based on our findings, we believe that there is a need for new and more creative approaches to education, as well as teachers' and students' engagement and interaction to promote agency (Martin, 2004) and creativity in educational contexts (Elisondo et al., 2013). Importantly, we found that creative wellbeing is linked to certain hermeneutic aspects, such as receptivity, and psychological perspectives including personal growth, positive relations with others, and autonomy (Ryff, 1989).

The interviews revealed that student teachers experienced the assessment aspect as a barrier in relation to creative wellbeing. The student teachers said that creative wellbeing could be a challenge in educational practices when high-stakes assessments were conducted. Some of the student teachers shared that the very nature of classroom assessment was an impediment to using creativity in formative classroom work, both in school and ITE. This finding is compatible with Sternberg (1997). Here, the nature of assessment imposed on a creative activity created a difficult balance for the student teachers since they felt that assessments constrained both the willingness and opportunities to be creative and, moreover, impacted negatively on their wellbeing. Thus, assessment of creative tasks or learners' creativity might be an obstacle for lecturers, student teachers, and teachers in elementary and secondary schools due to the balance of giving/getting autonomy, the control of what to assess, and the risk of failing when taking creative risks. The student teachers also explained that assessments impeded their sense of self-efficacy, freedom and autonomy, and the joy of taking part in learning activities.

Our study revealed that creative wellbeing is an unfamiliar concept in ITE, but that student teachers see an alignment between the constituent constructs, creativity, and wellbeing. The participating student teachers claimed that creative wellbeing should be highlighted in ITE as well as in schools, since it allows novel approaches in learning, seeing, and exploring a topic, building relationships, and promoting both creative and eudaimonic wellbeing.

Note

1 In this study, the student teachers' responses are identified with personal tags (i.e., ST1–ST6) to make their reflections more transparent for readers while protecting their right to anonymity from an early stage.

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Chapter 10

Creative wellbeing in school

Nurturing human growth and happiness through drama in education

Eleanor Dodson and Wenche Torrissen

Introduction: the potential of drama in education

Schools in Norway face multiple challenges, not least the increase in mental health issues among young people over the last ten years and current high levels of bullying and lack of enjoyment at school (Bakken, 2024). These challenges emphasise the need for education that not only prepares young people for the world of work, but also fosters their ability to flourish and be well. *Human flourishing* in education involves creating conditions where a "child can mature into a fully developed, well-rounded adult" (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 5). The hope is for children to grow into adults who can enjoy their lives and fulfil their potential. This process of growth and maturation also relates to the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, which has been variously translated into English as "happiness, prosperity, and flourishing" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 148). Eudaimonia has been connected to wellbeing through the concept of *eudaimonic wellbeing*, which is focused on realising the "best that is within us" and living a meaningful life (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 17). Meaning is important because it adds a sense of coherence and significance to our lives (Steger, 2012). Eudaimonic wellbeing has also been shown to have physical health benefits (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Ryff, 2013) and is considered "critical for good mental health throughout the life course" (Ruini & Ryff, 2016, p. 157).

According to the psychologist Carol Ryff, the arts and humanities might offer "the realms of learning most consequential for achieving self-realization and continued development", which is the essence of eudaimonia (2019, p. 12). The philosopher Kristján Kristjánsson (2020) also notes the "indispensable role of *art* in education for flourishing" (p. 189), while education theorists Tania Clarke and Ros McLellan (2022) highlight the performing arts as having positive effects on both eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing. Despite the important role that the arts can play in human flourishing, wellbeing and health, the arts remain marginalised in Norwegian schools. The situation is particularly severe regarding drama/theatre, which has never existed as a school subject in Norway (Sæbø, 1998; Olberg, 2014). In the

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new Norwegian national curriculum, Kunnskapsløftet 2020 (LK20) drama has also disappeared as a didactic method used in other subjects.

The situation presents a paradox. If the arts have such potential for the promotion of wellbeing and flourishing, especially in a time of significant mental ill-health among young people, why are these subjects not more present and accessible in schools? Is it simply that the arts do not fit well into increasingly marketised models of education, a trend now also seen in the Nordic countries (Dovemark et al., 2018)? Whatever the reason, this raises larger questions about what the consequences are of neglecting the arts in schools, and in particular drama/theatre, for children's flourishing and wellbeing.

We contend that links between the arts, flourishing, and wellbeing are not fully understood, and that this might contribute to exacerbating the marginalised position of the arts in schools. We see a latent potential in the work of Norwegian drama pedagogues to help reveal connections between drama/theatre and eudaimonic and creative wellbeing. In the context of this chapter, creative wellbeing is defined as creative engagement in drama/theatre that fosters transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual (see Introduction for full definition). The creative aspects of drama/theatre have to our knowledge not been fully explored in relation to eudaimonic wellbeing. To address this knowledge gap, we examine how the arts are linked to growth, development, and wellbeing in education policy, how drama in education can nurture growth beyond the individual, and what implications this might have for the promotion of wellbeing in schools. We start with a brief analysis of Norwegian education policies and identify how these policies conceptualise education's role in promoting growth and wellbeing. We then analyse how Norwegian drama pedagogues present the potential of drama in education as a source of growth and wellbeing. A hermeneutic approach is taken to explore these questions.

The arts, growth, and wellbeing in Norwegian education policy

The Norwegian core curriculum (LK20) has a section outlining "Principles for education and all-round development". In this section, growth is explicitly connected to education through the Norwegian concept of *danning,* which is translated into English as "all-round development". All-round development encompasses one's broader development as a human being, it relates to concepts such as self-knowledge and interpersonal awareness, and can include aspects of moral, physical and aesthetic development (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017; Wen, 2022). In this section, breadth and variety in education are highlighted as important to all-round development. It is clarified that this type of development "occurs when the pupils acquire knowledge about and insight into nature and the environment, language and history,

society and working life, art and culture, and religion and worldviews" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 11). This statement asserts that all-round development comes from a wide variety of sources, including arts and culture.

The section of the core curriculum titled "Creative joy, engagement and a desire to explore" provides more detail about possible connections between practical/aesthetic forms of expression and human growth (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). It stresses that "pupils must learn and develop through sensory perceptions and thinking, aesthetic forms of expressions and practical activities" (Ministry of Education and Research, p. 8). This statement recognises value not only in cognitive forms of thinking and perception, but also in more instinctual ways of knowing led by the body and senses. The policy also states that art and culture have an "impact on our physical environment and social development" (Ministry of Education and Research, p. 8) and are "important for individual personal development" (Ministry of Education and Research, p. 8). Creative learning processes are described as "a necessary part of the pupils' development as human beings and in the development of their identity" (Ministry of Education and Research, p. 8). Play is also highlighted as contributing to the "well-being and development" of children (Ministry of Education and Research, p. 8).

Wellbeing is only mentioned once in this section of the curriculum, specifically in connection to play. We view this as a missed opportunity, especially since development through the arts could specifically promote eudaimonic forms of wellbeing. In the Norwegian version of the curriculum, the word "wellbeing" is translated as *trivsel*. Translating the word "wellbeing" into Norwegian can be challenging, and there are multiple different words that can be used (see Helsedirektoratet, 2015a). Trivsel in a school context can be understood as how "included a student feels in the psychosocial environment at school and the pupil's happiness and general assessment of their own experiences at school" (Helsedirektoratet, 2015b, p. 8; our translation). This understanding of wellbeing seems more aligned with the concept of satisfaction (associated with hedonic wellbeing) compared to the growth-centred perspective of eudaimonic wellbeing. The challenges of translation and ambiguity surrounding these discussions likely lead to important aspects of wellbeing being overlooked.

Our findings emphasise that, at least at an overarching policy level, there is recognition of the potential that aesthetic and creative learning processes have in terms of human growth. These connections are encapsulated in the term "estetisk danning" (we have chosen to use the English translation aesthetic Bildung[1]), a term that has gained prominence among Norwegian theorists in recent years (for example, Heggstad, et al., 2013; Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014; Haslund, 2023). The use of *aesthetic Bildung* acknowledges the crucial role that arts can play in growth and development. However, it is also important to make sure that discussions surrounding aesthetic Bildung

include active, creative and not just receptive art experiences (aesthetic Bildung has previously most commonly been understood in relation to receptive arts experiences). This acknowledgement is key to making more widely understood the contribution that theatre processes can make to Bildung (Heggstad et al., 2013; Rasmussen, 2013).

We also see deep connections between Bildung and eudaimonia. While arguments linking these two ideas are not common, some theorists are starting to make connections. Chapman articulates this development, arguing that Bildung can be linked to the Aristotelian eudaimonic tradition because Bildung focuses "on self-development through the cultivation of knowledge, ethics and personal character" and that this "provides the path to achieving eudaimonia" (2015, p. 154). Moreover, Chapman suggests that Bildung shares many similarities with wellbeing, particularly in the tradition of positive psychology. In the Norwegian educational context, eudaimonia does not have a central place. However, we believe that the development of these connections could establish a platform for better understanding how wellbeing can be promoted through the arts in school contexts. In the remainder of this chapter, we will develop these connections. Firstly, we will explore links between aesthetic Bildung and creative wellbeing.

Aesthetic Bildung and creative wellbeing

Rasmussen and Kristoffersen (2014) define *aesthetic Bildung* as encompassing "sensory, bodily, cognitive and ethical Bildung including sensory experience, reflection, thinking and discursivity" (p. 27; our translation). This definition highlights that aesthetic Bildung relates to how the arts or aesthetic experiences can facilitate growth by leveraging not only our cognitive, but also our sensory, bodily, and ethical resources. Significantly, theories of aesthetic Bildung often portray this process as having a transcendent or transformative dimension (Heggstad et al., 2013; Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014; Haslund, 2023). Therefore, we contend that aesthetic Bildung aligns with creative wellbeing and provides insight into how engagement in the arts can foster transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual.

Aesthetic Bildung is closely tied to aesthetic experience in recent theoretical developments (Rasmussen, 2013; Haslund, 2023). Haslund (2023) draws on Immanuel Kant, while Rasmussen (2013) draws on John Dewey to explain the transformative potential of arts engagement and aesthetic experiences. For both Kant and Dewey, an aesthetic experience is a completed sensory and emotional experience that leaves an impact on us, and which changes us or our perspective in subtle or significant ways (Rasmussen, 2013; Haslund, 2023). According to Haslund (2023), aesthetic Bildung revolves around the potential of art experiences to illuminate the relationship between self and world. It enables playful exploration of our self-understanding and fosters the development of interconnectedness and closer social bonds within

communities. These conditions may also inspire us to envision a “different and better world” (Haslund, 2023, p. 141) as we reshape ourselves in relation to the world through encounters with art. Drawing on the ideas of John Dewey, Rasmussen describes art experiences as “transformation of the existing, and something that provides the foundation for new experiences” (2013, p. 30; our translation). The potential of aesthetic Bildung is linked to the opportunities in art experiences where individuals not only theorise new possibilities but also physically enact them or give them material form. Art experiences foster new understandings and also nurture a clearer sense of one’s own agency, which can lead to future growth and transformation.

Aesthetic Bildung has been explicitly connected to wellbeing only to a limited extent. However, we believe that there are implicit links here that can help us understand how arts education can promote creative wellbeing. This connection can perhaps best be understood through the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, which has been central to the theoretical development of aesthetic Bildung in a Norwegian context (Heggstad et al., 2013; Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014). Although Dewey does not explicitly refer to wellbeing in *Art as experience* (1934), parallels can be drawn between the growth he describes as integral to arts-based aesthetic experiences and creative wellbeing. The essence lies in the emotional impact of art experiences which can facilitate creative movement beyond perceived barriers or negative self-perceptions, opening up new possibilities (Jensen & Torrissen, 2019). Dewey describes an aesthetic experience as a transformative experience wherein we perceive both ourselves and the world anew because “we are carried beyond ourselves to find ourselves” (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 202). According to Dewey, the aesthetic art experience can transform us by offering “a way of seeing and feeling that in its interaction with old material creates something new, something previously not existing in experience” (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 113). Philip W. Jackson characterises this transformation as occurring when “the experiencer changes by undergoing a transformation of the self, gaining a broader perspective, a shift of attitude, an increase in knowledge, or any of a host of other enduring alterations of a psychological nature” (1998, p. 5). Our own research leans heavily on these ideas and aims to explore how drama/theatre can contribute to creative wellbeing or transcendent growth that extends beyond the individual.

Drama in education as a source of growth and wellbeing

In the Norwegian context, certain features of drama and theatre have frequently been highlighted in terms of its potential for education and personal growth. This includes, for example, the potential of drama/theatre to enhance the development of social skills (Rasmussen, 2013; Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014) or foster holistic engagement that utilises the senses and emotions more fully (Sæbø, 1998). Norwegian theorists have also

highlighted similarities between play and drama (Sæbø, 1998; Heggstad, 1998), emphasising practical exploration and play as essential for personal growth in childhood and beyond. The potential for personal growth through drama in educational contexts also relates to the complex interplay between reality and fiction in drama/theatre (Rasmussen, 2013; Heggstad & Heggstad, 2022). To elucidate this complex relationship, Szatkowski came up with the term "aesthetic doubling", describing how theatre allows individuals to simultaneously have an experience in fiction as a character, and an experience of the fiction as a spectator (1985). It is this state of doubleness that creates the possibility for insight and new understanding by enabling deep emotional, sensuous, and bodily involvement alongside reflective contemplation (Sæbø, 1998; Heggstad & Heggstad, 2022).

In summary, drama in education has long been associated with human growth, although different terms and concepts have been used to describe the nature and purpose of this growth (Braanaas, 2008). Developments in education policy have also played a significant role in shaping how these benefits are articulated and have influenced the content and focus of drama in education in Norway. This focus has shifted from an emphasis on personal development to aesthetic learning processes (Heggstad, 2003; Sæbø, 2016). Today, there is a heightened emphasis on Bildung as a crucial aspect of drama in education (Heggstad et al., 2013; Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014; Heggstad & Heggstad, 2022). However, the emphasis on the potential of drama for learning has been equally strong, if not stronger (Sæbø, 2016). There exists a complex relationship between Bildung and learning that is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore. Nevertheless, we see potential in the lens of drama as aesthetic Bildung to enhance our understanding of its capacity to foster eudaimonic and creative wellbeing.

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on how drama can contribute to health and wellbeing in educational settings (Cahill, 2019; Alfonso-Benlliure & Motos Teruel, 2023; Bruun & Bakken Steigum, 2023). However, references to wellbeing and health are sparse in key sources on drama in education in Norway, and as far as we are aware, discourses on flourishing and eudaimonia are notably absent. An exception is Bjørn Rassmussen, who as early as 1990 suggested that drama in education should be open to insights from drama therapy. He emphasised the importance of overcoming "the drama teacher's fear of the therapeutic dimension which sometimes prevents us from reaching turning points" (Rasmussen, 1990, p. 3). Rasmussen identified a need for an integrated (and interdisciplinary) model of how drama could support personal growth and development.

Rasmussen has collaborated extensively with Børge Kristoffersen, both of whom have backgrounds in psychodrama. Together they have made significant contributions through their publications, in highlighting the various ways in which drama can contribute to health and development (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2011, 2014). Rasmussen and Kristoffersen's work provides essential insights into how drama/theatre can support creative wellbeing and

flourishing in schools. To illustrate this value, we analyse *Mye på Spill* (MPS), a significant research project conducted by Rasmussen and Kristoffersen in the period 2000–2004 (2014).

The MPS Programme

The MPS Programme (in English "a lot at stake") offered theatre workshops for upper secondary students in schools in the county of Trøndelag in Norway. The programme was introduced as an "alternative form of 'supplementary teaching'" that aimed to reengage and remotivate students (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 14; our translation). The goal was for the MPS Programme to bridge the gap between the students' home and school lives, offering constructive ways for students to address their "dissatisfaction and problems at school" (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 47; our translation). The MPS Programme illustrates the key role that drama/theatre can play in addressing aspects of students' lives and wellbeing that are often not addressed in other subjects or areas of school. It also illustrates some of the challenges that can be faced when taking an arts project into schools, with the MPS project team often encountering scepticism and resistance from different parts of the school community (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014). These reactions seem characteristic of the challenging structural conditions of the Norwegian school system, which can shape difficulties for activities associated with less-prioritised subject areas such as drama/theatre.

The structure of the MPS workshops followed many well-established conventions for theatre workshops, particularly the balance between opportunities for active exploration and moments of quiet reflection and discussion. Typically, workshops began with participants in a circle and a check-in with group members. Open-ended questions such as "'which themes would you like us to bring up with the group?' […] 'how are you today?'" were used to prompt responses (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 59). Workshop leaders would begin with simple group games as icebreakers or lead relaxation exercises aimed at encouraging group cohesion, increasing energy, or focusing attention. Following the warm-up, the group would engage in individual, pair, or small group exercises. The workshop would then progress to a staged section where students explored different stories or characters often relating to their own life experiences, through performance. Throughout the workshop, participants shared personal reflections in group discussions and more formally at the end of each workshop (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, pp. 57–85; our translation).

Drama in education and eudaimonic wellbeing

The outcomes observed among students in the MPS Programme underscore the potential of drama in education to foster personal growth, by stimulating "new motivation and a new course in life and school" (Rasmussen &

Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 150; our translation). These findings also offer insights into how drama in education can contribute to a eudaimonic vision of wellbeing. To illustrate this potential, we initially draw parallels between Rasmussen and Kristoffersen's findings and eudaimonic wellbeing. Eudaimonia or eudaimonic wellbeing is rooted in two Greek maxims: "'know thyself' […] and second, 'to choose yourself' or 'become what you are'" (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 18). These two states of knowing and becoming are relevant to many of Rasmussen and Kristoffersen's findings. For example, they observe that the programme contributed to help the students "to see resources in themselves and in others" (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 129; our translation) and to "feel safe as a part of a community: To know oneself and the other" (2014, p. 132; our translation). These developments are linked to increased self-knowledge, which runs parallel with heightened awareness of others. As Rasmussen and Kristoffersen also comment the programme helped to encourage "strengthened self-image, courage and priorities" (p. 134; our translation), as well as "renewed motivation and presentation" (p. 139; our translation) in the students. These capabilities contribute to personal growth and resilience, supporting one's ongoing process of self-discovery, the dynamic process of becoming oneself. These outcomes among students highlight the connections between drama/theatre and the two central maxims fundamental to eudaimonic wellbeing. Moreover, many of the findings are also relevant to promoting good mental health. It is, however, important to also note, as Rasmussen and Kristoffersen do, that not all participants in the programme had positive experiences or a similar growth trajectory, and that experiences were impacted by the particular conditions in each of the different groups.

Drama in education and creative wellbeing

Role-play was a central technique that was used in the MPS programme (Rasmussen & Khachik, 2010). We also argue that it is a crucial part of drama/theatre's wellbeing-promoting potential. When an actor is on stage, they assume a character or a role. Similarly in real life, individuals adopt and perform various roles, whether familial, occupational, or social. In drama and theatre, facilitators use various techniques to assist participants to become more aware of the roles that they play in life. One effective approach involves acting out scenarios, where participants explore different ways they could behave in these situations. As Moreno comments, "Role playing is another important surplus reality technique. Here a person may be trained to function more effectively in his reality roles" (1987, p. 10). Surplus reality is a space of opportunity that is opened up in drama/theatre where individuals can enact "unlived lives and unthought-of actions" and, in doing so, can attune to subtler dimensions and new possibilities in one's everyday life (Moreno, 1949, p. 16). In the MPS Programme, students engaged in role-play through different exercises that explored their own roles in life. Theatre techniques such as

role-switching exercises, freeze frames, or tableaus (visual still posed images using actors' bodies), and short or long scenes were used to explore these roles. Role-play was a relatively unfamiliar technique to many of the participants, and initially there was some reluctance due to "preconceived ideas and inexperience with the process" (Rasmussen & Khachik, 2010, p. 57). Through MPS the students were able to experiment and become more confident with role-playing, and we now explore in more detail the potential of role-play for fostering growth and promoting wellbeing, using a specific example from the MPS Programme.

Rasmussen and Kristoffersen documented the impacts of the MPS Programme through a series of detailed student portraits. One of these portraits described Maria's experience. Maria joined MPS because "she is lonely and doesn't have any friends [...] she wishes to have new friends, feel closer to others, have better self-esteem, but also know more about how others are feeling" (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 51; our translation). Rasmussen and Kristoffersen provide an example of an exercise that had a significant impact on Maria. During a role-play exercise, Maria explored a particularly uncomfortable situation that she had experienced at a summer party. She recounted that the experience she had at the party left her feeling excluded and prompted her to want to "go home and hide away" (2014, p. 51; our translation). This was a situation that had elicited negative feelings in Maria. After discussing this experience in a previous exercise, the group leader invited her to explore this situation more deeply through role-play.

In short, role-play served as a tool to explore Maria's experience at the summer party. A similar situation was enacted as a scene, and other group members took on roles of different members of a group of individuals present at the party. The adaptable nature of the artistic environment allowed the scene to be run multiple different times and in multiple different ways. Maria had the opportunity to both play herself in the scene and observe it from a more distanced perspective as an observer while someone else played her role. After watching the scene, Maria was asked to provide constructive feedback on how the character portraying Maria could behave differently to improve the situation. She suggests that Maria (the character) could "speak about things she likes ... could have spoken more to her friend" (2014, p. 51; our translation). Following her feedback, Maria then had the opportunity to revisit the scene and implement her own suggestions. This allowed her to see and experience how altering her behaviour could change the scene's outcome. In the revised scene, Maria took "more initiative and said to her friend that she needed her help" (2014, p. 51; our translation). These behavioural changes ultimately led Maria by the end of the scene to be accepted into the group of friends at a party. This exercise and the opportunity that it gave Maria to share her experience with the group marked a turning point, Rasmussen and Kristoffersen also noted. It allowed Maria to form closer connections and start making friends with other group members in MPS.

We will argue that this opportunity can be interpreted as an experience of creative wellbeing, where Maria gains greater self-insight and knowledge of others through dramatic play. We would like to draw particular attention to some of Maria's comments from her interview at the end of the MPS process. She commented that MPS had helped her learn that "it pays off to be open and honest" and that it had increased her understanding of how to "get into a role, to tackle a conflict and to find solutions" (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 51; our translation). These insights reflect Maria's growing self-knowledge as well as her improved interpersonal awareness. It seems that Maria gained insights into both where she had gone wrong in the past, and how she could change her behaviour to improve future situations. This understanding relates to the importance of knowing our "psychological strengths and vulnerabilities" as a key part of good psychological health (Ruini & Ryff, 2016, p. 153).

Maria also commented that MPS had helped her to "build herself up to be ready to talk to people" (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 128). It is significant that Maria was able to explore her situation in what Moreno termed "surplus reality", or, as the drama educator Dorothy Heathcote described it, the "no-penalty area" of art (Heathcote, 1984, p. 88). During MPS, Maria felt comfortable enough to explore a difficult and very personal issue. We argue that the elements of fiction, role-play, and aesthetic doubling in this theatre setting facilitated a slight distance between Maria and what she was exploring, which allowed her to feel comfortable enough to explore these sensitive issues. The outcome of this theatrical exploration, specifically Maria's readiness to start being more open to those around her in her everyday life, could be transformative for her emotional and social wellness and happiness. As Rasmussen and Khachik suggest, MPS gave participants an opportunity to "recreate themselves and digest experience and fantasies from a range of social arenas, school included" (2010, p. 62).

We argue that this theatre experience allowed Maria to engage with a greater sense of connection, rather than merely a theoretical understanding of the different possibilities available to her in a given situation. This sense of possibility aligns with *subjectification* (Biesta, 2020, 2022). As Biesta comments, subjectification is about "arousing a desire in children and young people to exist as subject of their own life" and challenging them to refuse "the comfort of not being a subject" (2022, pp. 46–47). Subjectification is about awakening someone to their innate potential to keep actively constructing their life (Haslund, 2023). This perspective is very relevant to Maria's experience in MPS where she was given the opportunity to encounter and experience this sense of possibility. Through role-play Maria was able to feel a heightened sense of agency, which we argue enabled her to connect to her "spontaneously creative self" (Moreno in Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 47). Theatre experiences can put individuals in better contact with their spontaneous and creative potential. For example, the possibility to run a

scene multiple times and explore different options within a group setting, where one can see how actions and reactions shape different outcomes. This reinforces the notion that situations, ourselves, and our behaviour are not fixed. These theatrical experiences may help to restore a sense of hope and possibility, even in terms of long-term patterns of behaviour such as Maria's tendency to isolate herself. Moreno (1955) recognised the interrelated concepts of spontaneity and creativity as significant forces in human life. The aesthetic space gave Maria the opportunity, beyond what everyday life typically offers, to enact rather than just imagine different ways of interacting with others. Cultivating a mindset where one is willing to act differently in situations, sees possibilities, and remains open to new perspectives can fuel the "dynamic, continual process of becoming" that fosters personal growth and holds potential for eudaimonia (Ruini & Ryff, 2016, p. 155).

The MPS Programme had a significant impact on many of the students who participated. After the final run of the scene, Maria was observed "beaming" (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2014, p. 51; our translation). We interpret Maria's beaming as a sign of happiness and flourishing. Through the role-play, Maria was able to overcome a challenge and gain greater insight. Despite the fictionalised context, this experience was nonetheless profoundly meaningful in that it helped her to both "know herself" and "to choose herself", which is the essence of eudaimonic wellbeing. Research indicates that emotional events are remembered more "clearly, accurately, and for longer periods of time than neutral events" (Tyng et al., 2017, p. 17). The arts have unique potential for facilitating aesthetic experiences that move or affect us, making them more easily remembered, and creating conducive conditions for future change. The fictional context of theatre gave Maria a space to overcome a challenge she faced in her everyday life. Having overcome this situation in fiction, Maria now has a kind of proof that she can deal with these types of situations, which may help her feel more assured or more able to tolerate discomfort when facing similar situations in her everyday life. This theatre experience offered Maria the chance to not only reflect on a difficult experience, but also to have a way to creatively and practically explore different approaches and different outcomes in the situation. This distinctive way of exploring problematic situations is also representative of the unique contribution that theatre experiences can make to aesthetic Bildung. Aesthetic Bildung and creative wellbeing are closely linked, but we see the value of using the term creative wellbeing to describe the growth potential of theatre experiences as an important way of highlighting the wellbeing potential of these experiences (for example, as was so visible in Maria's case). The creative, affective and sense-based approach that theatre experiences contribute to the examination of existential issues is a key part of the growth potential of these experiences, as illustrated in this chapter. MPS enabled Maria through fiction and role-play to look beyond herself and her habits, and thus to explore a "freer and broader" version of the world (Moreno, 1949, p. 16). Through

MPS, Maria was exposed to the additional possibilities and potential for "new growth" that exist when we become aware of our spontaneous and creative selves (Moreno, 1949, p. 16). Indeed, Moreno perceived the different role-playing techniques as an entrance into "surplus-reality", where reality is enriched through the imagination in ways that "give us courage, return to us our lost unity with the universe, and re-establish the continuity of life" (Moreno, 1972, p. 131). As we have seen, Maria gains courage through her co-creative explorations and she clearly re-establishes herself in relation to school and among peers. We cannot say that she connects to the universe or develops morally based on the available material, but the potential for transcendent growth is clearly expressed in Moreno's theories and philosophy.

Conclusion

Through this chapter and the insights of Norwegian drama pedagogues, we have reflected on the potential of drama in education for fostering growth and promoting wellbeing. We have argued that theatre experiences can help participants feel a heightened sense of possibility, which in turn can inspire future growth. Based on the findings in this chapter we argue that drama/theatre has a crucial role in sustaining ongoing growth, particularly in moments where one feels stuck in a certain pattern of behaviour associated with negative feelings such as Maria's loneliness. Theatre experiences particularly through fiction and role-play enable participants to confront and transcend challenging situations. This encapsulates some of the potential inherent in creative engagement through drama. Drama in education thus serves as a vital resource, especially in contemporary contexts considering current issues associated with youth mental health challenges. It offers a "penalty-free" arena where young people can safely explore and overcome their difficulties at the same time as they can explore who they are and who they want to become. Significantly, this might also have benefits for students' mental health.

Indeed, if eudaimonic development is key to positive mental health, then it is fundamentally important that children and young people are given the space to develop and grow (Ruini & Ryff, 2016). As we observed with MPS, drama in education can provide an important setting for personal and social growth and development. Reflecting back on their work, Rasmussen and Kristoffersen recall a student who after many years claimed: "I remember [it] well. You saved my life that time" (2014, p. 151; our translation). Not all students had an equally strong experience, and it is important to acknowledge that some of the students even expressed clear resistance to the project. The project was also impacted by a number of challenges throughout, but the main message, however, is that the drama workshops helped many young people to flourish and develop into safer, more secure, and more generous versions of themselves. Role-playing in "surplus reality" is inherently linked to explorations of possible selves and thus to the eudaimonic project of becoming the best version of ourselves. With this knowledge, it is worth speculating about the risk we as a

society take by not providing opportunities for engagement in drama/theatre in schools. Might we be contributing to undermine the health and wellbeing of our children this way? We hope that this chapter serves as a reminder of the value of the arts in education for wellbeing. We also encourage further empirical research into the connections between drama/theatre and creative/eudaimonic forms of wellbeing to learn more about the benefits of drama in education, particularly among young people.

Note

1 In the arts subjects, *danning* is often translated into the German Bildung in English (Varkøy, 2015). The term aesthetic Bildung has been used in English language publications by authors who were a part of the “Theatre as Bildung” research project (for example Eriksson, 2014, 2021).

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Afterword

Helga Synnevåg Løvoll and Wenche Torrissen

Creating new visions for the world we live in

In the preface to Sami multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's first major lyrical work, Harald Gaski suggests that "read with an open mind *Trekways of the wind* can bring us back to values the Western world is making us forget" (1994, p. 6). *Trekways of the wind* opens with the greeting "hello my dear friend", inviting the reader into Valkeapää's magical multimedia universe, encouraging them to dream, imagine, see anew, and create new visions of the world. Openness to experience is a crucial component of the creative attitude and throughout this book, we have observed how an open mind is essential for experiencing creative wellbeing.

In Norway, epidemiological studies have found significant positive associations between participating in cultural activities and perceived health, improved life satisfaction, reduced anxiety and depression, and lover risk of overall mortality (Cuypers et al., 2012; Hansen et al., 2015; Løkken et al., 2022). These studies show that people participating in culture activities live longer are healthier, happier, and more satisfied with their lives, but they reveal nothing that can explain or help us understand these positive associations. In numerous studies, Carol Ryff and colleagues have demonstrated that there are significant connections between eudaimonic wellbeing (personal growth, positive relations, purpose, autonomy, etc.) and good physical and mental health (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Ryff, Singer & Love, 2004; Ruini & Ryff, 2016; Ryff & Kim, 2020) Eudaimonic wellbeing has also been linked to lover risk of mortality and greater quality of life (Kim et al., 2022). If we now acknowledge Ryff's argument that arts and nature hold a unique position in the promotion of eudaimonic wellbeing, surely one plausible explanation for the findings in the epidemiological studies must be precisely this, that it promotes eudaimonic wellbeing and awakes eudaimonic feelings like interest, awe, wonder, and love.

In this book, we have shown how arts and nature enable us to tap into these feelings. These feelings are indeed needed for the development of eudaimonic wellbeing and to produce mindshifts towards the Inner Development

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Goals. According to Jordan (2022), to find new ways of living sustainably, we must produce a mindshift in being, thinking, relating, collaborating, and acting. Change is needed from the inside, and eudaimonic wellbeing needs to be felt to make us ready for action. We must allow ourselves to immerse in emotional experiences and set our earlier conceptualisations at play. Most importantly, we must learn to understand how important this is for individuals and communities. In short, when we see children who are eagerly engaged in playing out a role or wonder about the mysteries of a tree, they are engaged in activities that are vital, not only for their development as human beings, but also for the overall health of the population.

In Chapter 1, we asked: what are the conditions for developing feelings of interest, wonder, awe, or love through arts- and nature-based activities that lead to transcendence and possible mindshifts? Across the contributions, several common themes emerge that are essential for building conditions for growth. On speculating on the causal conditions necessary for stimulating eudaimonic emotions through arts- and nature-based activities, we believe there are many causalities working at the same time. Our contribution presents central characteristics to the narrative of creative wellbeing, which through different contexts identifies some of this complexity. We then reflect on how we could facilitate creative wellbeing for others, recognising the diverse starting points individuals have when beginning their journey of engaging in arts- and nature-based practices. The aim of this reflection is not to reduce complexity, but to understand how some people immediately engage in creative wellbeing and start a growth process towards a mindset shift, while others require more familiarisation and a gradual and sustained approach to embrace new challenges.

Themes across the chapters

Creative wellbeing requires **access**. Many people lack the resources to engage with arts and nature independently, making it essential to facilitate opportunities that ensure that everyone can participate. Most of the projects presented in this book provide access to groups with limited exposure to arts and nature, such as people living with disabilities (Chapter 7), individuals with psychosocial challenges (Chapter 5), marginalised youth (Chapter 6), and in settings where arts and nature have limited status, such as in school (Chapter 10) and in higher education (Chapters 8 and 9). The chapters demonstrate that providing access, inviting people to participate, offers numerous benefits to those who don't typically access the arts or nature. The role of the facilitators, artists, and organisations is essential in the process of providing access. Ensuring access for all requires a social and political mindset to recognise and prioritise arts and nature for wellbeing and health. Access to arts- and nature-based activities is a gatekeeper, a necessary starting point for creative wellbeing.

Creative wellbeing occurs within a **social community**. The size of this community is not important and depends on the nature of the activities. While creative processes can manifest in moments of solitude, as observed in the Windjammer programme (Chapter 6), one condition of creative wellbeing practices is to be rooted in a community or in a social group. The empirical chapters provide various examples of social meeting places where the growth occurs in different ways, whether in the black box theatre (Chapters 4 and 7), while hiking (Chapter 5), sailing (Chapter 6), within the classroom setting (Chapters 8–10) or when culture meets nature through artistic vocal expression (Chapter 3). This underscores that creative wellbeing does not appear in a social vacuum. Facilitation for social communities through arts- and nature-based activities is another gatekeeper fostering creative wellbeing.

Playfulness is essential for human growth. How and why play is crucial to individual development is explored in Chapters 8 and 10. Playfulness fosters transcendence and *Bildung* (all-round development), which deserve much more attention in educational debates. The creative process inherent in playfulness is central to several of the empiric al (i.e. empirical) contributions, especially in the theatre contexts (Chapters 4, 7, and 8). The introduction to Lego© bricks in the classroom setting also invites students to start playing (Chapter 9). Playfulness could take many forms, whether in active play with others or through the stimulation of fantasy and imagination. As we have seen, to allow for spontaneity is essential in most contributions. There are also close connections between playfulness, creativity, and flow experiences. In his early exploration of flow experiences, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi studied play where strategies were used to optimise the emotional play experience in an interrelationship between the individuals and the social system (Csikszentm ihalyi & Bennett, 1971).

Moreover, the feeling of **letting go** is an emotional adjustment strongly related to playfulness involving the readiness to try new things without knowing the outcome. Feeling emotionally safe and supported by the group is essential for this process. This “letting go” was typically identified in the theatre context (Chapters 4, 7 and 8) but is also essential to understand transcendence when hiking (Chapter 5) and sailing (Chapter 6). Building situations of psychological safety is fundamental to encouraging the willingness to try new things without the fear of failure dominating the experience. Psychological safety might be a precondition for the growth process. If it is not there from the start, then “icebreaking” and “warming up” are essential, like techniques presented in Chapter 8. “Letting go” is an important condition for creative wellbeing. It describes the inclination to embrace new experiences that challenge our self-images.

Creative wellbeing is often emotionally related to **discomfort**. Learning and growing can be uncomfortable and challenging. This is very evident in the theatre approach for the social work students with the introduction of “the

pedagogy of discomfort" (Chapter 8) and the "How are you?" performance which begins with the confusing blurring of actors and participants (Chapter 4). Physical discomfort, including blisters and fatigued bodies, is also a central part of the experience of pilgrimaging (Chapter 5) and sailors working through the night in all weather conditions (Chapter 6). Assessing students can also be uncomfortable, hampering their willingness to take risks and engage in play (Chapter 9). This challenge needs to be coped with in fostering growth. Both physical and mental pain can be part of a development process that the participants may initially mistrust. Hence, creative wellbeing goes beyond a pleasure-based approach, inviting deeper exploration of feelings, values, and personal possibilities. Discomfort is not necessary for a creative wellbeing process, but it is typical, setting aside hedonic feelings in favour of developing a good life aligned with our best selves – our virtues.

To reach a level of transcendence, changing our lives towards more virtuous and sustainable practices, creative wellbeing takes **time**. The different facilitated activities described in these chapters have required varied temporal commitments from participants. Some chapters studied the impact of being a spectator of a 2-hour performance (Chapters 4 and 7), while others examined active participation sustained over several weeks (Chapters 5 and 6). These processes will not be compared. Both short- and long-term exposures to arts and nature are important and complementary, each making a unique contribution and appealing differently to different participants. Typically, the arts- and nature-based activities are characterised by a start and end of the activity. Between these time points, there could be a development process of re-establishing new perspectives through emotional engagement, moving from frustration to interest, by accepting the situation and being familiar with the new situation (Eckblad, 1981). This time needed to start a creative wellbeing process would be very person and context dependent.

It is essential to develop sensitivity, or **attunement** to the situation. In Chapter 2, attunement to nature is explored through insights from eco-spirituality (place, belonging, and aesthetic experiences) and friluftsliv pedagogy. Nordic contributions to the understanding of eco-philosophy underscore our epistemological and ontological understanding of our dependency on rich ecosystems for our existence and wellbeing. Several contributors explore attunement in different forms such as understanding the nature of yoik (Sami vocal art practice, Chapter 3) or finding the right emotional moment to encounter personal feelings while being part of the sail-ship crew (Chapter 6). The theatre-based contributions (Chapters 4, 7, and 8) also provide significant insights into how we can anchor our own emotions in relation to ourselves and our environments. A fine-grained approach to emotional exploration seems to be essential for a developing awareness. Attunement relates to our emotional development. The ability to attune to the situation depends on personal and cultural learning about how we pay attention to our environments. This ability can be trained.

In the book associations with **aesthetic experiences** are linked to eudaimonic wellbeing. We explore aesthetic experiences from different theoretical points of view, informed by nature, (Chapter 2) and theatre (Chapters 4 and 10). To deepen our understanding of sustainability, integrating perspectives from both nature and culture challenges traditional articulations of the aesthetic experience. The experiences described in this volume vary widely, from being very mindful about one's emotions to being fully present and unselfconscious in the moment. Aesthetic experiences affect us emotionally. Several chapters detail the presence and qualities of these experiences. The aesthetic experience is likely to connect to eudaimonic emotions. The refined understanding of aesthetic experiences and moral emotions can be developed through the conceptual understanding of "awe experiences" in fostering wonder.

However, we have identified several supporting structures for how creative wellbeing is promoted. Here, we describe the whole process of being introduced to arts- and nature-based activities, through the awakening of eudaimonic emotions to the transcendence and the development of moral emotions as creative wellbeing. Transcendence could be a new perspective, human-nature relationship, an artwork etc., which bring us closer to the goal of a mindshift towards the Inner Developmental Goals. Despite its complexity, the contributions to this book underscore transformative experiences that are crucial for society's transition to a sustainable future defined by justice and fairness.

Some critical remarks

In approaching the concept of creative wellbeing, we advocate for a *possibility* to fostering wellbeing that emphasises strong affective components. Typically, emotions of interest, wonder, awe, and love are followed by high arousal. This approach also aligns with the tenets of humanistic psychology which views "transcendence" as a meaningful goal. Through this lens, we aim to foster a developmental process and potential transformation towards psychologically richer and more sustainable ways of living. This idea can, however, be criticised in many ways, and should prompt critical questions: Is transcendence worth striving for? Who decides what kinds of transcendence that are possible and desirable? Is there a political agenda behind these ideas? What kinds of power are involved? The idea of achieving transcendence can, among other things, be critiqued as a romantic fantasy. The pursuit of transcendence may be seen as a Western idea that values change and development over the stoicism of a more mindful approach, which emphasises being present in the moment and accepting emotions as they arise as sufficient for living a virtuous life of meaning and purpose. The possibility for transcendence through the mindful approach aligns with what Abraham Maslow might have envisioned

with his unpublished work of *plateau experiences*, which explores internal dialogues characterised by emotions where less stimuli was envisioned as leading to transcendent insights (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995). These perspectives warrant further exploration. However, we continue to believe that fostering a shift in mindset and motivating change is empowered by an active approach to transcendence, which forms the core of our understanding of creative wellbeing.

We recognise that creative wellbeing does not provide all the answers to sustainable living. Instead of seeking emotional highs, cultivating *acceptance* of the present situation without always aiming for new levels of transcendence may be crucial from a sustainable living perspective. However, further development of this perspective would be appropriate for another book. Significant cultural discourses of power concerning perspectives on nature, including that of colonialism, inform our viewpoint. These discourses contrast nature romanticism, on one hand, and the drivers of economic growth, on the other, both of which challenge Indigenous views of nature. We encourage researchers to interrogate these issues, exploring their implications for creative wellbeing.

We acknowledge that the examples included in this volume do not fully illustrate the potential for integrating of triad of eudaimonia, nature, and culture for creative wellbeing. This area remains to be further developed. Indeed, one avenue could involve identifying "beautiful actions" where multiple virtues are realised simultaneously as demonstrated in outdoor experiences with traditional wooden boats (Tellnes, 2018). Here, sustainability involves handpicking materials from local woods, utilising local and historic knowledge to build boats, as well as incorporating practical knowledge of sailing the boats. This promotes a slow and mindful way of navigating seascapes without pollution, offering possibilities for experiencing awe and fostering supportive communities for growth. As the example above highlights, coastal experiences can integrate nature-based activities, historic skills, sustainability, and transcendent experiences. On the other hand, there are ambivalences related to the "greening" of performing arts (Rodrigues & Ventura, 2024), complicating the full integration of arts and nature-based activities. Again, this remains unexplored in this book.

Our examples are grounded in current practices, shedding light on processes of creative wellbeing within these contexts. The findings must be interpreted with care. There are few persons involved in the cases studied. Studying a larger volume of participants in arts- and nature-based activities would bring more evidence and refine the eight identified characteristics. By encompassing a diverse spectrum of activities, this book's various contributions provide practical and real-life insights into what might otherwise remain abstract concepts and theoretical arguments. Addressing how to live sustainably across all areas of life is a much broader question than we can fully answer here.

Closing thoughts

Overall, the facilitation of arts- and nature-based activities holds potential for virtuous entrepreneurship, fostering experiences that contribute to human growth that potentially can catalyse mindshifts. We need virtuous entrepreneurship to advance nature and culture practices that are regenerative, steering society towards sustainability while enhancing wellbeing, promoting social equality and justice, and adopting practices that restore nature. Through the contributions in this book, there are testimonies of transcendent experiences, each varying in impact. The processes detailed in this volume challenge the traditional hedonic wellbeing approach. Instead of focusing solely on pleasant feelings, they embrace discomfort, social risk, and uncontrollability as pathways to personal growth. Our approach resonates with the eudaimonic wellbeing approach emphasising human flourishing through the cultivation of virtues and the engagement of the soul (Ryff, 2022, 2023; Waterman & Schwartz, 2013; Vittersø, 2016).

Despite an increased interest and focus on the ways in which creativity supports wellbeing, the field is still marginalised and the potentials inherent in nature and culture are not fully acknowledged. Despite policy developments, grassroot initiatives, research activity, and more educational and employment opportunities, the links between creativity, health, and wellbeing is often not acknowledged. When mental health and wellbeing are discussed, creativity is, for instance, rarely mentioned as an important asset, and creativity as a tool for promoting wellbeing in schools is very often limited. It is thus of primary importance to question the provision of arts and nature for everyone in our societies. Who can access culture and nature that promotes creative wellbeing? What opportunities for participation are there locally and regionally? Are there opportunities for people with disabilities? Dementia? Substance users? Mental health survivors?, Or the homeless? How can we best reach those who don't have easy access to creative wellbeing?

The Nordic countries have cultural laws and strong rights perspectives that are supposed to ensure everyone the equal rights to access culture. In practice, many are, however, denied access. The major research initiative ArtsEqual (2015–2021), financed by the Academy of Finland's Strategic Research Council, explored how the arts can meet the social challenges of the 2020s in Finland (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021). A central focus of the research project has been to produce evidence-based knowledge to support political decision-making, covering themes such as prevention of loneliness (Ansio et al., 2016), wellbeing in schools (Anttila, 2018), and enhancing wellbeing in social and health care services by expanding the per cent-for-art principle (Lehikoinen, 2017). The final report of the project concludes that engagement in the creative arts supports wellbeing, but that arts attendance is unequal, reaching only a small percentage of the population (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021). One of the aims of this book is to show that opening the doors for

more people to experience creative encounters in arts and nature can enhance lives, create meaning, and support moral growth. More work is thus needed to provide equal opportunities for everyone to participate in arts and nature activities for creative wellbeing.

Inherent in the perspective of creative wellbeing is a vision for a better future encompassing social, environmental, and economic sustainability. To provide a broader context for creative wellbeing, we align with Goethe, as interpreted by the philosopher Pierre Hadot (2023), suggesting that happiness takes two forms: first, the appreciation of the present moment, where attention is focused on the feeling of existence, cultivating gratitude, and gaining deeper self-awareness and understanding of nature and culture; and second, the value of being a compassionate individual who promotes happiness for others, including nature and culture. To comprehensively grasp creative wellbeing, we recognise the importance of understanding both these dimensions. Moreover, creative wellbeing as a concept is centred on fostering hope and cultivating mindsets conducive of transitioning us towards sustainable futures. For this to happen, policy and practice must change.

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