

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

Spring / Fall 2025

Vol. 16



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The Eco-Heroine Path to Support Unacknowledged Miscarriage in Ireland

This article is written in response to current research surrounding miscarriage trauma, which largely excludes women’s voices and lived experiences. It explores the mythical framework of the eco-heroine as useful for supporting those living with unacknowledged miscarriage trauma in complementarity with eco-arts practices. Motivated by a personal journey to healing from miscarriage through ecopsychology, eco-arts and Celtic mythology, this article is part of a wider exploration that aims to restore reproductive rituals and reimagine myths for pregnancy loss. The article discusses native Irish woodlands’ healing potential for miscarriage and how these may be placed in an expressive eco-arts practice, such as papermaking.



Figure 1. *Dreaming the Field* (Author’s own photograph, 2024)

Introduction

November 2024 marked a new chapter in my life where I would begin a profound journey into healing from repressed miscarriage trauma. Old friends commented that I was a shadow of myself, and it was indeed a banished shadow that needed to be faced in the deepest recesses of the cave. Reverie may be described as a dreamlike meditation, and practising reverie in nature, coupled with participation in eco-arts, cultivated an ecological awakening, which contributed to my healing from the complicated loss of an unacknowledged miscarriage.

Inspired by Sharon Blackie's work with the eco-heroine, I explore how acts of reverie in nature support the creation of new rituals and artistic practices that could be therapeutic for women following miscarriage and how they might inspire contemporary women struggling with feelings of maternal failure.

Ecological Awakening for Personal and Collective Healing

Beneath the outer layers of our neocortex and what we learnt in school,
the story is in us—the story of deep kinship with all life, bringing
strengths that we never imagined.

When we claim this story as our innermost sense of who we are,
a gladness comes that will help us to survive.

—Joanna Macy 245

Blackie describes the eco-heroine journey as a “call to life” (86). In Blackie's call to life, we rise above the feeling of stasis to “take up our part in the great unfolding of the world” (86). I would add to Blackie's call that the eco-heroine also integrates and transcends above hiraeth—the deep, long mourning for something that never was.

It was not until I experienced the initiations of childbirth and miscarriage at midlife that I rediscovered myself as part of our animate planet. Reverie in native woodlands and rewilding sites, coupled with reciprocal eco-art making, enabled me to reconnect to nature and the value of archetypes and myths associated with it. Archetypes and myths cannot be categorized into neat little files. Rather, they embrace ambiguity and remind us that our wounds help us to heal others. As Macy shares, “The sorrow, grief, and rage you feel are a measure of your own humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open, you create room for the world to heal” (241). With nature and mythology as useful to addressing ambiguous loss in mind, an eco-heroine framework may support women through the complicated grief of miscarriage.

Fostering Native Woodlands for Personal and Collective Ensouled Regeneration

A tree climbed there. O pure uprising!
 O Orpheus sings! O towering tree of hearing!
 And all was still. Yet even in that hush
 a new beginning, hint, and change, was there.
 —Rainer Maria Rilke (166)

On the rugged plains of West Clare, in one of Ireland's native woodlands, I learned that birch, my favourite tree, is associated with birch in folkloric medicine. The first letter of the Ogham alphabet, Beith, is named after the birch tree and is a symbol of healing and fertility in Irish Celtic mythology.

In these woods, I sat with a dying birch in a state of reverie. In this interconnected state of reciprocity, it was not clear whether I was helping the tree or the tree was helping me. I was reminded of Carl Jung's quote: "At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons" (252). Later that day, I discovered that I had synchronistically used birch leaves in a representation of self (as shown in Figure 2, which depicts the use of natural materials, such as clay, sand, and birch leaves) during a truth mandala art therapy exercise. The instinctive and mythological aspects of human nature had expressed themselves through creative imagination, offering new perspectives on how ecology, reverie, and imagination could culminate in therapeutic arts for fertility-related traumas in contemporary Ireland.

With Ireland's commitment to preserving ancient woodlands and rejuvenating the land through rewilding initiatives, such practices could support women through their fertility journey, evidenced by the emergence of tree symbolism in clinical art therapy with women and families grieving from miscarriage. One project, titled *Me as Tree*, invited grieving mothers to participate in art therapy, imagining themselves as trees. The lead researcher on this project explains its objective: "The metaphor of Nature and her enduring, cyclical ebb and flow seems to offer reassurance to women in the context of their pregnancy disturbance, even whilst they experience fragility and undoingness" (Sophia Xeros-Constantinides 143).

In *Lost and Found: Locating Meaning*, art therapist Claire Flahavan says a willow tree supported a lamenting father, Richard, after the loss of his unborn child: "Richard described this daily encounter with the willow tree as an invitation to be in contact, even for brief moments, with his feelings about the lost baby, whom he and Christine imagined to have been a girl, Poppy" (65). The willow tree is a frequent symbol that arises following miscarriage, and its

cleansing properties lead back to the Celtic creation myth, placing the willow's location in wetlands as a bond between the psychic and the physical through a contemplative, liminal space that offers a symbol of hope, healing, and new growth.



Figure 2. *Birch Truth Mandala* (Author's work, 2024)

Shortly after my first pregnancy loss, in which I feared for my life and was left without any information, help, or support as to what to do with the remains, I moved to a smallholding in West Kerry. We had one good field, as the farmers told us, and the rest was a mess. The land was never suitable for agriculture; it was destroyed by heavy machinery, which left the ground too dangerous to walk on. One willow stood in the corner of the garden, and on one bright and chilly morning, we buried our loss underneath it. For the time we lived in that house, I hated the fields, and I was convinced the fields hated me. I was haunted by the thick wetness of the land. It felt hostile, as if it did not want me there.

In recalling his field experience, which explored emotional relationships with land, terrapsychological researcher Kevin Filocamo shares, “My body was responding to something that has life. More: that this ‘something’—this tree—was not only alive but ... we were ‘waking each other up’ to each other’s existence” (89).



Figure 3. *Willow Rewilding at Home* (Author's image, 2024)

A few years passed, and things changed. The land became covered in willows (as shown in Figure 3), and cows kept breaking out of their gates to eat our trees for their antibacterial properties. The willows decontaminated the soil and water, enhanced biodiversity, and laid the groundwork for native woodlands to emerge. I like to think that the lost dreams we buried under the willow tree found their lifetime in the willow. The willows were a natural painkiller for the land, the cows, and me. I see now that I was living in communication with the land; my neglected internal landscape mirrored the disregard for the natural landscape.

Perhaps the phenomenon of trees that appear in the art of women recovering from miscarriage is part of the eco-heroine's call to life. Nevertheless, understanding the uniqueness of tree symbolism as significant to miscarriage might illuminate new approaches to ambiguous grief that reenvision rituals as pertinent to our times. And in line with the eco-heroine, personal stories placed in nature could help reroot us during fertility adversity. As ecopsychologist Linda Buzzell explains, to "be healthy and happy, we need to be embedded in and bond deeply with our human tribe, our animal and plant neighbors, and our place" (51).

At a time when we have forgotten many of our ancient rituals, reverie in nature could provide the humble container for transpersonal experience,

where our identity suddenly feels part of something much bigger than us. The eco-heroine's reciprocal relationship with nature offers personal and collective growth, and coupled with ecopsychology, it might offer an opportunity for healthy shadow integration by joining our dream images to the planet's wonder and distress.

Bringing Ecology and Reverie to a Developing Participatory Arts Practice

Benig Mauger explains that "Transformation starts in the heart of the wound ... it is the wounded healer who heals the wound" (141). Thinking of the wounded healer as an eco-heroine, Blackie describes a heroine as someone who returns from a long, dark, and difficult journey, which provides deep introspection, humility, newly birthed wisdom, and hard-won gifts. In the spirit of healing, the job of the heroine is to pass on these gifts in service to her community. Explaining the traits of the eco-heroine archetype, Blackie shares, "Her gifts are the gifts of the land to which she completely belongs; her voice is the voice of the Otherworld which echoes from the depths of the wells" (278).

Practising reverie in nature led me to develop the accessible craft of papermaking (as shown in Figure 4), a process that could be applied in a community setting, where paper could be made, written on, kept, or planted by those struggling with miscarriage. Despite being in my infancy with the papermaking process, I have noticed many therapeutic aspects. Aligned with the eco-heroine who faces the elements and nurtures the environment, making paper out of recycled materials seems a healthy remedy to consumerism, technology, and left-brain dominance by working in relationship with the land.

Working with a bucket, jug, and ladle feels like an age-old custom linked to the wisdom of cauldrons and kettles in myth, but it also stands out as an accessible ritual for community arts settings. The process recognizes that while women want to acknowledge their loss, they do not always want to speak about their pregnancy trauma. As such, reciprocal papermaking offers a tactile platform to create freely from conceptions of elite art while ingraining feminine stories in the landscape through native tree planting.



Figure 4. *Life and Death*, papermaking in progress. (Author's image, 2025)

Miscarriage as a Cultural Complex

Being labelled a failed or bad mother may be one of the most stigmatising
and shaming attacks on a woman.

—Bridget Grant 211

In writing to restore women's autonomy in birth, Mauger explains that a woman's unconscious is a storehouse of myths regarding pregnancy and labor that have been inherited by her mother, family, and ancestors. Both conscious and unconscious concepts of motherhood, together with the fetal footprints of her own birth, affect how a woman adjusts to motherhood. But what happens when our severely ingrained assumptions and predictions for fertility, birth, and miscarriage are not met? What happens when our profound personal accounts encompassing these complexes are repressed?

Health researcher and cofounder of the Irish Birth Movement, Su Hushcke reports that the existing perinatal mental health services in Ireland are generally inadequate, as they focus on quantitative approaches and a medicalization of perinatal mental health, resulting in an absence of women's voices. Meanwhile, the *UK and Ireland Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths and Morbidity* (Knight et al.) discovered that the leading cause of

maternal death in Ireland is suicide. In a literature review by maternal health researcher Natalene Séjourné and colleagues, they note women's dissatisfaction with the lack of psychological support following miscarriage from health professionals, stressing that "lack of emotional support, sensitivity, structure, and information" (404) was critical to their traumatic experiences. Fertility counsellor Rayna Markin, with fellow researcher and psychologist Sigal Zilcha-Mano (20–21), discovered that societies stigmatize and isolate women who have experienced miscarriage, preventing them from being able to heal, transform, and live with their grief. Art therapist Laura Seftel explains that pregnancy loss "is a unique and complex form of loss, as there is no physical body to bury and grieve" (39). As such, there are typically no public gatherings or social practices to acknowledge the often life-changing event and support women during this time.

Psychotherapist Joan Raphael-Leff explains that for pregnant women, dreams are experienced as visions in connection with the baby in utero (18–19), and obstetrics professor Irving G. Leon describes pregnancy loss as the shedding of dreams about "one who could have been but never was" (35). To improve support for grieving women, Laura Seftel calls for a "systematic review of symbolic imagery that emerges following pregnancy loss 'to help witness' and validate their experience" (37). Highlighting the demand for more holistic reproductive approaches, Markin and Zilcha-Mano found that to decrease the rates of depression, poor mental health, suicidal thoughts, and numerous psychophysical problems caused by the mental and physical trauma of miscarriage in the Western medicalized setting, women's stories of miscarriage need to be shared in a supportive space. Could this space be the reimagining and reintroduction of miscarriage rituals in popular culture?

Psychologist and artist Denise McMorow presents an innovative method, involving image-based responses to women's testimonies of miscarriage. Participants share that the images McMorow created through drawing resonated with their experiences of miscarriage, depicting the unspeakable emotions that they could not articulate. Proving the need for artistic complementary methods, midwifery and medical researcher, Masumeh Zahmatkesh et al. report that art therapy can improve quality of life after miscarriage. Although there is limited peer-reviewed literature on art therapy and eco-arts therapy as a singular healing modality for miscarriage trauma, miscarriage and expressive arts research by Amanda McKernan (2020) highlights that writing, music, movement, and visual arts help address the complicated feelings related to miscarriage, whereas medical researcher Adina Smith et al. have found that art-based teaching for doctors cultivates empathy towards the multitude of complex emotions experienced following miscarriage. Mauger affirms that hyper dependence on medicalization, in opposition to holistic approaches to women's reproductive health, creates the narrative that

life is something to be anesthetized, that we are unfit to endure the bruises life brings and, tragically, that no one else will be capable of containing our pain when we are defenceless.

When a mother cannot mourn a loss, the thought of moving on can feel hopeless. Ambiguous, hidden anguish is carried in the womb of her psyche, making it seem impossible to dream again. A nurturing place to mourn is critical for the strength to rebuild. The elimination of ritual has assailed the hinterlands of our hearts, bodies, and minds, synonymously with our planet, leaving mothers and Mother Nature overwhelmed. Psychologist James Hillman claims, "In place of ritual and taboo, we are given commandments; in place of ancestor spirits, personal parents" (158), subsequently creating a modernized maternal expectation that is too large for the psyche to maintain.

But what happens if we cannot live up to this maternal expectation? What if becoming a godlike parent is getting harder, if not impossible? What does this do to our souls, and what are we willing to do to make meaning of our lives? In *The Serpent and the Goddess*, Mary Condren speaks about the "myth of objectivity," which "serves to conceal the hidden agenda of those in power" (xxiii). Regarding reproductive technology, Condren reminds us: "The moral questions are usually only raised, if at all, after the fact" (xxiii).

If reproductive technology advances before our wisdom, what will be the outcome? Will these technologies be attainable, and if not, will they make our ability to mourn even worse? Importantly, might eradicating nature's shadow inform a new darkness? In *Gaia, Psyche, and Deep Ecology*, Andrew Fellows writes: "Transhumanism appears to extrapolate our separation from Gaia and exacerbate our disenchantment to a degree I could never have imagined and, as far as I can tell, altogether ignores ... the vast majority of humanity who cannot have, or do not want, such a future" (164). Evidence suggests that to support grieving mothers and decrease the rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and numerous psycho-physical problems caused by the mental and physical trauma of miscarriage, women's accounts of miscarriage need to be shared.

The unifying narrative through women's stories of miscarriage is the loss of a dream and a dismemberment of the self, environment, and community. Thankfully, the goal of the eco-heroine is to reconnect to the self, environment, and community through facing our darkest times and integrating our shadow for personal transformation and myth. Supporting this idea, the author of *Art Therapy and Pregnancy Loss*, Laura Seftel, shares, "A renewed sense of wholeness or integration is possible—but only if it takes into account that which has been lost or broken" (37).

In support of the eco-heroine who fosters imagination in the domestic and creativity for the community, with evidence in support of art and ritual for miscarriage in mind, could socially engaged art and participatory eco-art

align with the eco-heroine to reenvision our approach to changing the onerous and diminutive myths of motherhood?



Figure 5. *Shadow to Place*, reconnecting to the land after miscarriage (Author's image, 2022)

Cultural Complex to Participatory Eco-Arts as Therapeutic

Art therapist Bridget Grant shares that nonverbal processes can offer a way to heal fractured feelings of “maternal failure” (211). Socially engaged, participatory arts surrounding fertility, birth, and loss might be a useful tool for miscarriage, but such practices are commonly restricted to individual psychotherapy, hindering insight into the collective psyche as a whole.

Corresponding with the eco-heroine and participatory eco-arts, could ancient sites in the Celtic world, whose folklore is embedded in fertility and healing, help mothers today? Irish psychotherapist Marion Dunlea explains that activating the right brain hemisphere through orienting to the outside allows us to “receive new information and make new connections” (8), highlighting time in nature as useful to therapeutic practices for miscarriage.

An example of nature-based creative practices in a community setting for individual and group healing is a sixteen-acre woodland in County Clare, Ireland, called *The Forest That Won't Forget*, which honors women wrongly diagnosed in cervical checks. In this initiative, funded by the Government of Ireland, artists and participants alike command a spiritual mapping of loss through nature and creativity for future generations. Raphael Leff explains

that during pregnancy, women tend to question “one’s place in the natural cycle of life and death” (18). Perhaps helping women process the unfinished, introspective journey of pregnancy using ecopsychological approaches and eco-arts as a source of complementarity, like *The Forest That Won’t Forget*, may be an ethical principle for miscarriage recovery and an example of holistic applications for reproductive health in clinical and community settings.



Figure 6. *Empty Nest* (Claire Flahavan, 2021). An example of the circumambulating nature of eco-arts from art therapy participants.

Much like the ever-evolving eco-heroine journey, Seftel writes that choosing open-ended art processes (as shown in Figure 6) is a recurring pattern in participants longing to express their experience of loss through art (34). Artist and grieving mother Stephanie Paige Cole—encapsulated the fluid form of artmaking for healing following loss: “I can’t even explain how good it feels to release those toxic feelings from my body and spread them all over the canvas” (qtd. in Seftel 34).

Relating this to my exploration of creative practice, eco-arts may add another dimension to artistic expression following pregnancy loss by reflecting the dark messiness of nature, which is in line with the eco-heroine, who meets the unknown with openness and resilience. Papermaking may provide an accessible container for those intimidated by the notion of conventional art by removing technical and written barriers that exclude women yearning to

express their pain. More profoundly, these eco-art materials foster agency restoration in grieving mothers, who can choose to hold onto their eco-art or give it back to nature in a cyclical ritual. Psychoanalyst Marion Dunlea is “interested in the connection between the inner landscape of the psyche and the geography of some of the megalithic sites in Ireland” (11) (illustrated by my personal experience of this, as shown in Figure 7). Participating in eco-arts and reverie in nature may reconnect us to ancient mythologies, which can be useful guides for difficult life transitions if reimagined for our times and may plausibly exist in a clinical and community setting. Building on the opportunities for healing through eco-arts and nature’s connection to myth led me to evaluate the framework of the eco-heroine as valuable to developing practices and rituals for miscarriage.



Figure 7. Ardgroom Stone Circle, Kerry (Author’s own, 2023)

The Eco-Heroine Path and Its Offering for Miscarriage

Campbell’s work has examined Western perceptions of the myth as mainly being concerned with the hero’s journey, which usually focusses on hierarchical quests through patriarchal right-brain rationalism and masculine efforts, which often encompass acts of war, rape, terror, and killing.

In this model, male archetypes, such as the sage, trickster, and smith, are subjugated, as well as the feminine. The nuance of local myths, having sprung from specific features in the land, is conflated into one mass, which historically

denigrates goddess belief and leaves us with a simplistic, patriarchal set of rules by which to live. But life, in particular the initiations of childbirth and miscarriage, is not linear and has little place in the hero's myth. Like the petals of the lotus flower in Buddhist belief, women experiencing childbirth and miscarriage rise from the water to bloom before withering and falling back to the water, where the seeds of the next lotus might swim. In miscarriage, where there is often nothing physical to mourn, opening ourselves to the cycles and hardships of nature could offer pathways to healing. For this reason, the eco-heroine model may offer a more resilient structure. Intuition, compassion, emotional intelligence, and grace signify the eco-heroine model and should not be mistaken for passivity. Strength, resilience, and protection play a part, too, but not through violence.

The eco-heroine model is not linear but circular, where a quest for wholeness is continuous and ever-growing through participation mystique and the lessons it offers us. Birth and miscarriage trauma cannot be conquered or fixed; rather, they are woven into a tapestry as a story for those who follow in our footsteps. In his seminal work on the hero's journey, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell argues that women in mythology encapsulate the all-knowing. The point of the hero's quest is to gain this knowledge. But this has little relevance for women experiencing fertility, birth, and miscarriage trauma today, where patriarchal overmedicalized practices have violated women's experience in the name of medical progress and the catch-all ultimatum of saving lives, which shames women into feeling grateful even when they have felt desecrated. Women's experiences of obstetric violence and uninformed consent in the medical sphere seem fortuitously in line with Campbell's oversight of the rape and sexualization of the feminine in amalgamated mythology, such as the abduction of the daughter of Demeter (goddess of childbirth and fertility) or the hounding persecution of the mother of Artemis (goddess of wilderness and fertility). Blackie builds on Maureen Murdock's heroine's journey by discussing the eco-heroine as a call to create a new journey that "leads us back to our own sense of grounded belonging to this Earth and asks us what we have to offer to the places and communities in which we live" (*If Women* 382).

In Ireland, in March 2024, reporters and politicians were shocked when a proposal to change the constitution, specifically regarding language around the role of mothers in the home, was not voted for by 67 per cent of voters. Some news coverage insisted that the public had not been made aware of the vote, resulting in low voter turnout. On the other hand, perhaps this turnout demonstrated a social feminine astuteness that understands that changing words in patriarchal institutions to sound progressive tacitly encourages women to take yet another hero's journey. Perhaps women in Ireland spotted patterns of oppressive behaviour behind the vote and understand all too well

that true change starts in valuing the role of women and mothers in the first place, whether they have children or not. This is a potent message, one perhaps fueled by the history of the Magdalene laundries and the rise in matriarchal goddess appreciation as evidenced in the new public holiday for St. Brigit.

While the hero's journey may serve some in adolescence, by focusing on ego development and individualism, it is unhelpful to life as a whole, where facing obstacles and weaving our struggles into the web of life experience are integral to transformation, health, and soul retrieval. For many women, miscarriage is a profound voyage into midlife. In this chaos and trauma, the eco-heroine journey can support women and their families to find their unique calling in the community.

The eco-heroine model embraces the mystery of our planet, in contrast to Campbell's focus on the mystery of man. The eco-heroine is taken on a feminine descent into the eco-cosmological and the underworld. Here, in the dense, claggy rot of the undergrowth, where hubris has no place, we meet our shadow, the aspect of ourselves or lived experience that is hardest to face. Through this humility and surrender, we open our souls to the power and awe of nature, and through this awareness, we can meet our enemies with embodied knowing and, most precious, ourselves with forgiveness and love.

When my son was two, we sat together making collages out of newspaper and magazine cuttings (as shown in Figure 8). He randomly chose four words for his picture. The words were "Define tomorrow with love."

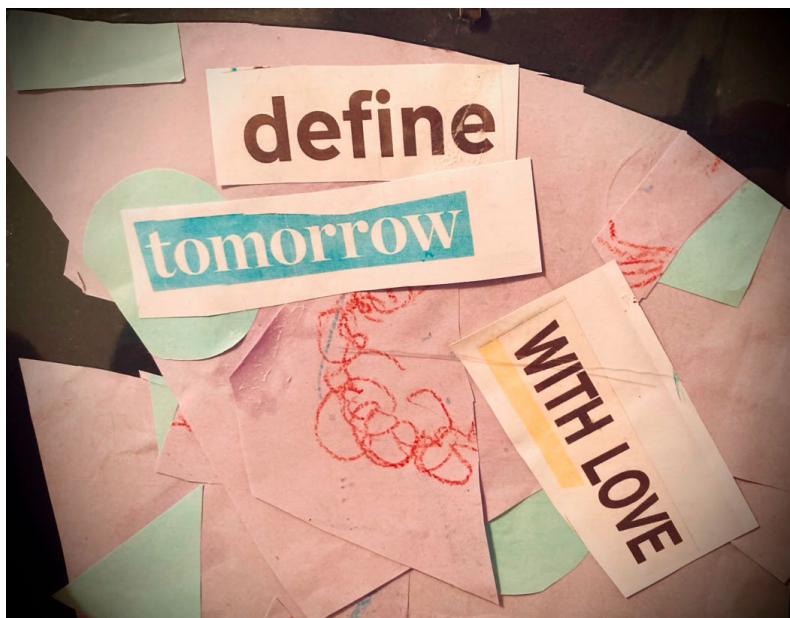


Figure 8. *Define Tomorrow with Love* (Enda Flannery, 2020)

Love, starting with self-love, whether we have children or not, and in turn love for our planet, is perhaps the only lasting way to make positive changes in the way we treat Earth. In the essay *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*, ecopsychologist Arne Naess shares Gandhi's mothering analogy for eco-philosophy and environmental ethics: "There is nothing more conducive to giving a child the experience of what love, joy, and happiness are than being loved by a mother who loves herself" (35). Not only can we learn to mother ourselves, but we can also connect to those around us. As psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes: 'You are born to one mother, but if you are lucky, you will have more than one. And among them all you will find most of what you need' (132).

To support the planet by discovering our ecological self, society might address our ethical shortcomings through community therapy as opposed to community science. Focusing on community therapeutics for grieving mothers following the trials of invasive fertility treatment, medicalized birth trauma, and lack of spiritual recognition in miscarriage, eco-heroine rituals and reimagined myths could be used as a watercourse for renewal and resilience on the journey of modern motherhood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a therapeutic practice that combines reverie in nature alongside participatory eco-arts could be of value to women in contemporary Ireland living with miscarriage trauma. Cultivated by an eco-heroine mindset, creative and soulful approaches to miscarriage that honour women's stories of complicated loss might foster a healthier community for us all. As Blackie argues: "In these times it's not enough to awaken ourselves, to find our community. The world is in need of restoration, and each one of us is challenged to do the work of collective change. The day of the Heroic Quest is over.... The journey we need now ... is a journey of collective re-enchantment—a re-animation of the Earth" (*If Women* 375).

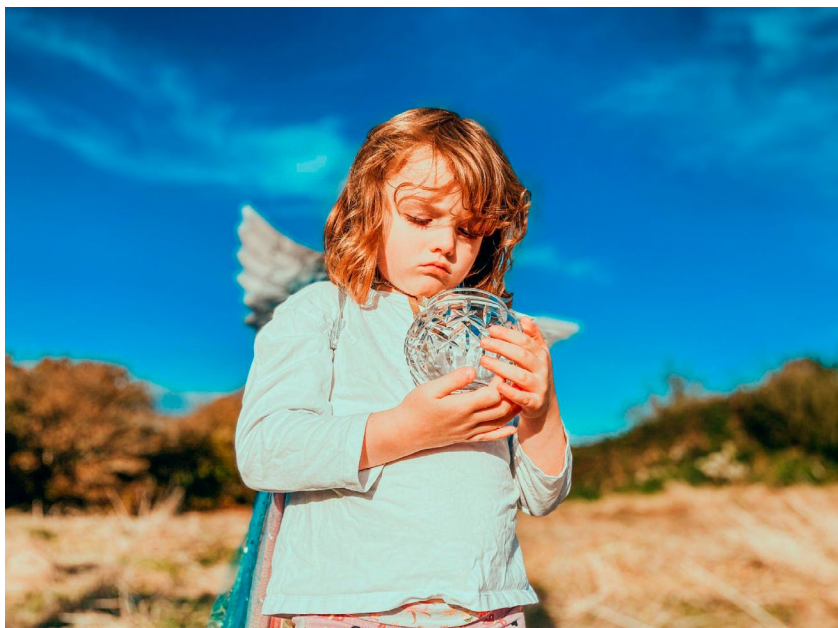


Figure 9. *Tending Within* (Author's image, 2024)

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Journal of the Motherhood Initiative