

## **Spiraling with Nikos Kazantzakis**

by

*Jo-Anne Green*

December 19, 2024

*If the shape of your life is a circle you have not yet lived. Had you it would be a spiral, circling, ascending and widening simultaneously.*

Forty-one ago I found myself in Boston, Massachusetts, while still immersed in a Nikos Kazantzakis reading marathon — “Report to Greco,” “The Fratricides,” “The Saviors of God,” “Spain” — I began a series of small watercolor paintings and silkscreen prints that became “Book One.” Each was inspired by poetry or prose, likely discovered in a Kazantzakis book. I was simultaneously enthralled with Robert Motherwell’s “Spanish Elegy” paintings which I perceived as both abstract *and* political. Before arriving in the United States, I’d been trying to find a way to express what was happening to my body, which was already spiraling into what was to become a life-long cycle of chronic pain.

In retrospect, I was an intellectually naive twenty-three-year-old painter exploring how words and images create feedback loops of meaning and transformation. In 1983, looking over my shoulder and across the Atlantic Ocean, my country, South Africa, seemed headed for civil war as it smoldered in the detritus of decades of Apartheid. I needed to find a visual language that was both somatically expressive and conceptually constrained. How does one reconcile pure emotion with narrative intent in a single artwork? A single sentence or image no longer sufficed to contain my “message.” The individual watercolors were combined with verbal snippets to become a book; my individual paintings became series which then became installations. “Book 1” concluded with several silkscreen prints of spirals. This is the text that brought me there:

“Pain is not the only essence of our God, nor is hope in a future life or a life on this earth, neither joy nor victory. Every religion that holds up to worship one of these primordial aspects of God narrows our hearts and our minds ... The essence of our God is struggle. Pain, joy, and hope unfold and labor within this struggle, world without end. From every joy and pain a hope leaps out eternally to escape this pain and to widen joy... And again the ascent begins — which is pain — and joy is reborn and new hope springs up once more. The circle never closes. It is not a circle, but a spiral which ascends eternally, ever widening, enfolding and unfolding the triune struggle.” Nikos Kazantzakis

*Despite being an atheist for most of my adult life, I still find truths in Kazantzakis’ metaphors.*