

A Time to Heal: Using Art as an Aid to Trauma Recovery

The ultimate goal of all art is relief from suffering and the rising above it. Gustav Mahler

Since the beginning of time, the arts have always been indispensable voices for both protest and solace of trauma. In every era artists — be they poets, dancers, musicians, sculptors, painters, cartoonists, filmmakers — have crafted in various forms or media, their responses to tragic events. At the time of this writing, terrorist attacks are rampant all over the world. In explicit detail, television, newspapers and social media report breaking news of disasters man-made and natural. Here in Boston, we endured the marathon bombing, following the trauma connected to the national 9/11 event. (Two of the hijacked flights that slammed into the World Trade Center towers originated in Boston.)

In responses to such events, and as a way to help people cope with what happened, spontaneously conceived art forms were offered to the public. For example, outside their offices in downtown Boston, architects placed wooden blocks, colored markers and other art supplies on the sidewalk inviting passersby to help design and construct the block sculpture memorial evolving in the building's lobby (Figure 1).



Figure 1



Figure 2A

Figure 1. © CBT Architects, Inc., 110 Canal St., Boston, MA 02114. Used with permission. Initially published in “Public Tragedy and the Arts,” in *Living With Grief Coping with Public Tragedy*, Lattanzi-Licht, M, Doka, K, (Eds), NY: Hospice Foundation of America/Brunner Routledge, 2003.

Figures 2A, 2B, 2C. When Words Are Not Enough Project. Photos appear in book *Attunement In Expressive Arts Therapy*. Courtesy Mitchell Kossak and Charles C Thomas. © Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 2015. Used with permission.

In another art event (Figures 2 A, B, C), outside Emmanuel Church just blocks away from the bombing site at the Boston Marathon finish line, students and faculty of Lesley University’s Expressive Therapies program and members of the public produced clotheslines of colorful prayer flags. One hundred of the banners were painted and strung together in a chapel at the church. A few weeks later, at the end of the day, they were delivered to the memorial site at Copley Square by a group of participants singing as they walked, “Nobody’s Gonna Take My Peace From Me.” Reminiscent of the Tibetan prayer flag tradition used to promote peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom, the purpose of this set of banners was not to carry the prayers to gods, whichever faith they be. Rather, the artists’ intention was that these pennants blowing in the wind spread blessings of good will and compassion throughout the surrounding environment and all pervading space. “WE MUST CHANGE the way we think and act in resolving conflicts or we’re ...FINISHED” are words embossed on one banner.



Figure 2B



Figure 2C

The current mayhem happenings in San Bernadino, in Colorado, in Paris, in Boston on April 13, 2013, and in Pennsylvania, Washington, DC, and New York at Ground Zero on 9/11 (September 11, 2001) are unspeakable. We're talking now about the morality of killing—that is to say, murdering—so many unknowing, unprepared, innocent victims including first responders, firemen, police, as well as ambulance emergency medical technicians becoming maimed or losing their lives while rescuing strangers, fellow human beings in the bombed and burning buildings. The examples shown above are but two local illustrations of instant civilized responses to catastrophic events. The arts can approach these horrific happenings with an immediacy not readily achievable in the social sciences or philosophy, at the same time providing relief from emotions and tensions through tears and action. People need to process and make sense of their emotions. One might go so far as to claim that the common ground between healing and the arts is morality.

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”

How dare the arts—normally the purveyors of words, color, sound, joy, wit, and irony—attempt to minister to such dreadfulness and tragedy? The half-Jewish Marxist Theodor Adorno objected to what he thought of as art's glossing over the holocaust and said: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, 1949). Yet the healing power of art is anything but barbaric. Neither escapism nor diversion, art is an attempt to make the present moment less difficult to bear. By facing and depicting unspeakable horrors, by looking squarely at events and their aftermath, we cannot help but contemplate an alternative world. We yearn for counterparts to the madness, panic fear and melancholia inherent in the human situation. The arts have a unique ability to connect human hearts, minds and souls across both time and space. Somehow the pain of loss is reduced as the evidence is preserved and the event is shared. These shared human connections remind us of the fakeries of “clock” time. The past, present, and future are acknowledged and consoling in the world of now (Bertman, 2003, p. 210).

Our creative gene

There is a creative gene in each of us (Bertman, 1999), and we draw on it, particularly in times of perplexity, and sorrow. The youngster's drawing shown below demonstrates the instinct and need to summons this gene for self-soothing, at the same time expressing an essential truth of the human spirit—innate empathy. In the upper right, the child artist Hillary acknowledges the Challenger space shuttle disaster (1986), the stressful event that precipitated her creation. One cannot miss the tears and the size of the grieving self-portrait that occupies most of the paper. Indeed, this drawing might also be seen as a metaphor for the healing trajectory of the grief process (Figure 3). Sandra Fox, Founder of the Good Grief Program in Boston, MA (1988), identified four tasks for bereaved children: (1) Understanding, (2) Grieving, (3) Commemorating, (4) Going on. Further commemorating the event, Hillary signed and sent her drawing to the family of Christa McAuliffe, one of the astronauts who died in the explosion.



Figure 3. Hillary's Drawing. ©Ward Street Studio Archives, 1986. (See also Tommy: Helping Children Cope (AIDS Project) in "Communicating with the Dead: Timeless Insights and Interventions from the Arts, *OMEGA*, Vol. 70(1) 119-132, 2014-2015.

Fox's stage theory of grief's trajectory is not at all meant to be occurring in successive

order for “recovery.” Moving on was never meant to be forgetting. It is finding a place in one’s psyche to store and bring forth memories, when warranted, without the initial agony. Fundamental to this model and to most theories of grieving is recognition of and appreciation for the ongoing oscillation between preoccupation with the loss and reconstructing a new life (Stroebe & Schut 1999, 2010). Most of us seem to agree that there is a trajectory to the grief process—an acclimation of sorts. In her autobiographical book about her husband’s sudden death, *A Year of Magical Thinking*, the American author Joan Didion insists what’s beginning to happen to her at the end of a year is not “resolution.” (2007, p. 225) But, she has “moved on”:

My image of John at the instant of his death will become less immediate, less raw... My sense of John himself, John alive, will become more remote, even “mudgy,” softened, transmuted into whatever best serves my life without him. In fact this is already beginning to happen. I realized today for the first time that my memory of this day a year ago is a memory that does not involve John . . . I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead. Let them become the photograph on the table.

Rose Kennedy wisely disagreed with the popular adage that time heals all wounds. “The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone.” (https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/650866.Rose_Kennedy) Of course, the nature of the loss must be factored in. A personal loss such as losing a husband, children, or a significant other, cannot be equated with a distant news event. Or can it? The poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1883) confesses to comparing the sadness’s of anonymous others’ with her own:

“I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes —
I wonder if It weighs like Mine —
Or has an Easier size.” (n.d.) (Dickinson, 1960)

Dulce et Decorum Est: The Heroism and Horror of World War 1

To this day, red poppies are worn as a lasting tribute to the fallen dead who sacrificed their lives in past wars. The destruction caused by the Napoleonic wars of the early 19th century transformed bare land into fields of flowers growing around the bodies of the dead soldiers. This scarlet red flower seems to have grown naturally throughout Western Europe in conditions of disturbed earth. It was a World War 1 soldier, John McCrae, who penned the famous poem “In Flanders Fields,” honoring the sacrifices of his fellow comrades who died on these barren battlefields. He speaks for them from their graves urging us to be vigilant, never forgetting, lest we disturb their peaceful repose, the lofty patriotic reason for which they died: “Take up our quarrel with the foe/To you from failing hands we throw/The Torch: be yours to hold it high!/ If ye break faith with us who die/ We shall not sleep, though poppies grow/ in Flanders Fields.”

The poet who wrote “In Flanders Fields,” John McCrae was a military doctor. It is believed that the inspiration for this poem was the death of his friend Alexis Helmer gunned down in battle, buried there in a makeshift grave with a simple wooden cross. (<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/john-mccrae-in-flanders-fields-inspiration.htm>) There are varying accounts of how and when he composed the poem—whether he wrote it when he was so upset, drafting it hastily in twenty minutes in an attempt to compose himself on the rear step of an ambulance the next day, or whether he wrote it to help endure the wait between the arrivals of two transports full of the wounded at the first aid station, or after presiding over his friend’s funeral. But no matter which version is correct, clearly this creative act, making use of the structure of a poetic form is an attempt to give meaning to and make sense of a traumatic situation.

After the war ended, Otto Dix, a German artillery gunner who also served in Flanders on the side of the enemy, created *Der Krieg* (1924), a monumental series of fifty etchings exposing graphically the ghastly squalor of war which he had witnessed and sketched from the muddy trenches. Haunted by dismembered decaying bodies, brains oozing from skulls, Dix erodes areas of the plates and prints with acid washes to add to the realism of his recurring nightmarish memories of wounded, dying, and dead soldiers,

intensifying further the revulsion and realism of the scene for himself and the viewer (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Dix, Otto. Dying Soldier. Etching with aquatint on copperplate paper © Otto Dix Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG BILD-KUNST, Bonn. public domain.

“Froth corrupted lungs,” “white eyes writhing in hanging faces,” the well-known First World War poet Wilfred Owens details in words what Dix forces us to see as his comrades retreat from the gas attacks “guttering, choking, drowning.” “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*” a line from the Roman lyric poet Horace's Odes (III.2.13) translated into English as: “It is sweet and glorious to die for one's country,” is a harsh counterpart to McCrae's tribute. Speaking not from the grave, but as a surviving shell-shocked veteran, Owens beseeches us not to tout this patriotic idiom. This “old lie” is not to be told “with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory” (“*Dulce et Decorum Est*,” 1917).

In 1914, two months after Kathe Kollwitz's nineteen-year-old son Peter enlisted in the German army, he was killed in Flanders and buried among the set row graves marked by low wooden crosses. Nine years later, Kollwitz, too, published a series of woodcuts also titled *Krieg* (War.) Her preoccupation was not the dead soldiers that plagued McCrae and Dix's consciousness, but the grief and anguish of those at home, the parents, wives and children whose men fought and died in the war. Her anti-war woodcuts depicted the anxieties, depression and suffering of the civilians. During these years, she sculpted life-size kneeling figures of herself and her husband bowed, virtually prostrate in grief. One of these, the monumental *die Eltern* (The Parents, Figure 5), was eventually moved to the cemetery in Flanders, Belgium to the graveyards at Roggeveld, to watch over not just her son Peter, but all the dead, even the *allemand inconnu*, representing the unknown German soldiers.



Figure 5. Kathe Kollwitz, The Grieving Parents, Vladso, Official German cemetery for German soldiers of World War II. public domain.

In her diary Kollwitz castigated herself for not having attempted to talk her son out of enlisting: "The idea of mere boys going into battle strikes me as senseless. It is all so pointless, so insane." She was an outspoken pacifist; perhaps the most famous antiwar

poster of the time is her charcoal lithograph of a young androgynous figure raising his or her right arm in defiance, crying *Nie wieder Krieg* (War Never Again, Figure 6).



Figure 6. Kathe Kollwitz, "Never again War," 1924, chalk and brush lithograph (transfer), Kn 205 III b (K1 200 III). public domain.

Though not a rabid pacifist, William Butler Yeats wrote four poems eulogizing a man he greatly admired, Major Robert Gregory, whose plane was shot down in action. In "An Irish Airman Forsees his Death," in or out of context there are two lines protesting the justification of lofty patriotic ideal as motivation for war: "Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love" (1918).

The English writer Thomas Hardy never personally faced the reality of combat in World War 1, yet, in the poem "The Man He Killed," he gives voice to the senselessness of war described in unambivalent fashion by Kollwitz. Speaking in the first person, his

protagonist might well have been the soldier who shot young Peter or any of the dead buried in the Flanders Field cemeteries, speculating how at another time and place these “foes” might have met in a bar sharing a few pints of beer or have been friends, were they not “ranged as infantry and staring face to face,” following orders. Hardy wrote this poem at the time of the Boer War (1890s), but like most of the art cited in this chapter, the sentiments in this poem are timeless.

“Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

“But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

“I shot him dead because--
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That’s clear enough; although

“He thought he’d ‘list, perhaps,
Off-hand like--just as I--
Was out of work--had sold his traps--
No other reason why.

“Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You’d treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.” (1902, 1994, p. 260)

I am including the entire poem as evidence of how subtly the artist can prick our consciousness. Hardy does not say anywhere that the soldier enlisted enthusiastically for a patriotic cause. Quite the contrary. By repeating “because—/Because” and inserting the qualifying “although” the poet ensures that the reader cannot miss the doubt the young protagonist’s rationalizations still cause him.

A book in the Old Testament Bible, *Ecclesiastes* tells us there is a time for war and a time for peace, a time for love and a time for hate. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time for trauma and a time for healing. Forcing us to identify with unfamiliar situations and see their points of view, the six artists cited above extended our imaginations and consciousness. They are fortunate, for they are able to express inner angst and rage and to purge some of their grief by figuratively regurgitating it onto canvas or clay or as words on paper. The catharsis function is based on the premise that the expression of a concern in and of itself provides relief. The arts find their ways into our unconscious and, rather than suppressing tensions, to varying degrees they expunge them. By example, and through our senses, the creative process blatantly forces us—and the works' originators—into developing deeper and more reflective ways of mindfulness and knowing, even if only temporarily. Is this not the hoped for miracle of any “therapy”? To relieve, to re-live, to relevé (from the French, in ballet, to rise above to stand on one's toes)—to be able to see from a different perspective?

Writing about his antiwar masterpiece, *Guernica*, Picasso expresses another phenomenon of the mystery and magic of the creative process. “A painting is not thought out and settled in advance, while it is being done, it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it's finished, it goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it.” (“Guernica: Testimony of War.” PBS, n.d. Web. 7 Feb. 2012.)

But back to the child Hillary and the creative gene in non-recognized, unclaimed artists. What of those of us plagued by horror, frustration, feelings of disconnection, confusion or guilt? The stark reality that more Vietnam Veterans died from suicide after the war than were killed during it points to the seriousness of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that our earlier examples illustrated.



Figure 7. Cover, *National Geographic Magazine*, February 2015.

Currently, at the Walter Reed Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, programs to treat returning Afghanistan and Iraq service members —the burned, amputees, those with traumatic brain injuries and other psychological health conditions are providing physical and emotional space, attempting to address and alleviate harrowing and disturbing states of mind (Figure 7). Just like young Hillary armed only with a blank piece of paper and crayons, active-duty military members suffering from PTSD were given blank *papier mâché* masks and art materials and invited to reflect on their combat experiences. Eerily reminiscent of Dix's woodcuts, several of the masks depict the extent of their disfiguring facial injuries. Stretching significantly beyond their visible wounds, revealing how hard it is to speak of what they witnessed, they showed mouths stitched shut or locked. Many masks were divided down the middle expressing their creators' inability to find congru-

ence with their conflicting patriotism, inner thoughts, and new (or former) civilian selves (Figure 8).



Figure 8

Figure 8. Courtesy of the National Intrepid Center of Excellence. Visit Behind the Mask, Healing the <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/healing-soldiers/index.html> for slide show of 48 masks.

“Give sorrow tongue; the grief that does not speak whispers the o’er fraught heart and bids it break” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, (1V, 111)). In Hebrew the word for "speaking" and "creating" is the same: “God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light” (Genesis 1:26). Creativity begins in the darkness. Initially a flight medic in Iraq wanted no part of this art therapy: “I THOUGHT THIS WAS A JOKE....number one, I’m a man, and I don’t like holding a dainty little paintbrush. Number two, I’m not an artist. And number three, I’m not in kindergarten. Well, I was ignorant, and I was wrong, because it’s great. I think this is what started me kind of opening up and talking about stuff and actually trying to get better.” <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/healing-soldiers>

In an age when nations and individuals routinely exchange murder for murder, when the healing grace of authentic spirituality is usurped by the divisive politics of religious organizations, and when broken hearts bleed pain in darkness without the relief of compassion, the voices of artists, whether poets, dancers, musicians, sculptors, painters, cartoonists or filmmakers are not something the world can afford to dismiss. (adapted from Aberjhani 2008, *The American Poet Who Went Home Again*) Thus art expressions

and the creative process are more than simply cathartic. They generate conditions that allow insight to happen. By gazing upon visual art or reading a poem what our unconscious already half knows is brought to conscious awareness (Rohr, 2015). Let the figures and words above, the images, poem and quotations do something to us. Let us hope that we are all wounded healers and that our ability to care is in direct proportion to our vulnerability. Let the arts provoke, soothe and affirm our humanity as they resuscitate our imaginations and hearts, and return us to life more forcefully and more authentically.

References & Bibliography

- Aberjhani, (2008). *The American poet who went home again*. Lulu.com and Black Skylark Singing.
- Adorno, T. (1974). *Minima moralis: Reflections from damaged life*. (E.F.N. Jephcott, Trans.) New York and London: Verso.
- Alexander, C., Johnson, L. (2015). Behind the Mask Revealing the Trauma of War, *National Geographic*. Retrieved December 25, 2015. <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/healing-soldiers/index.html>.
- Bertman, S. (1991). *Facing death: Images, insights and interventions: A handbook for educators, healthcare professionals and counselors*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Bertman, S. (Ed.). (1999). *Grief and the healing arts: Creativity as therapy*. Amityville, New York: Baywood.
- Bertman, S. (2003). "Public tragedy and the arts," In Lattanzi-Licht, M, Doka, K, (Eds), *Living with grief coping with public tragedy*. New York: Hospice Foundation of America/Brunner Routledge, pp. 203-217.
- Dickinson, E. (1960). In *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 1850-1870*. Boston: Little Brown. December 20, 2015. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-measure-every-grief-i-meet-561>.
- Didion, J. (2007) *The year of magical thinking*. New York: Knopf. p. 225.
- Hardy, T. (1902,1994). The man he killed. In *Collected poetry of Thomas Hardy*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited. p. 260.
- Kennedy, R. Retrieved December 20, 2015. https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/650866.Rose_Kennedy

Kossak, M. (2015). *Attunement in expressive arts therapy*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles Thomas.

McCrae, J. (1933). In flanders field. In M. Herzberg (Ed.), *Off to arcady*. New York: American Book Company. p. 364.

Owen, W. (1917, 1965). Dulce et decorum est. In *The collected poems of Wilfred Owen*. New York : New Directions. p. 55.

Rohr, R. Richard Rohr's daily meditation, healing images October 14, 2015. <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Healing-Images.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=rb-tgYyTP0U>.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, (1V, 111) Collier, Payne London: Whittaker, 1843 *The Works of William Shakespeare*, p. 169.

Strobe, M. Schut, H. The dual process model of coping with bereavement: A decade on. *OMEGA* Vol. 61(4)273-289,2010 (1999).

Yeats, WB. (1918, 1958) An Irish airman forsees his death. In *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: MacMillan.