

## **How “the arts” are showing up in the world to express, heal and educate around traumatic events**

Trauma happens to individuals, families, communities, and nations. Healing from trauma expands outward from the privacy of the studio or the therapist’s office into the street, the community, the world. The traumatic effects of war reach far beyond the individual psyches of those who were in the war zone. Natural and man-made disasters send trauma-waves out through families, communities, across state lines and national borders. Rape and sexual abuse affect individual survivors, their families, friends and communities. Healing from trauma is both an individual and collective journey. The arts and expressive art therapy can help on all levels.

In the case of “man-made” trauma, there are issues of reconciliation and “restorative justice” to be addressed. These issues are interwoven with and can have impact on the individual, “private” healing work of trauma survivors. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall is a good example of how all this comes together via a public work of art. Visiting the wall is a dark journey, down and through, much like a healing journey. The memorial provides a shrine, a gathering place, a tangible and real place for ritual and for honoring not only the dead but those who came back soul-injured. Visiting the wall is not an art-making experience, but the wall stands as testimony of the power of a work of art to evoke the war experience and has been a backdrop to numerous planned and spontaneous rituals of healing and reconciliation for veterans and survivors of Vietnam.

Numerous websites document the wealth of poetry, photographs and paintings created by veterans. The Vietnam Veterans Home Page features The Arts of War and Peace Gallery –“the works on (the gallery website) are powerful in their creative energy and talent to heal and make us whole. The works can also illuminate the Vietnam veteran’s journey.” (VVHP’s Arts of War and Peace Gallery webpage)

The Clothesline Project is a traveling exhibit of survivor art. It was started in 1990 in Massachusetts as part of a “Take Back The Night” event. One of the organizers, a visual artist, inspired by the power of the AIDS quilt, proposed the idea of using shirts. The clothesline idea was a perfect fit –doing the laundry was always considered women’s work, and neighborhood women often exchanged information over backyard fences while hanging the laundry. The original project had 31 t-shirts, designed and painted by survivors of rape, incest, domestic violence, displayed on the village green in Hyannis, Mass. Throughout the day, women came forward to create shirts and the line kept growing.

“The concept was simple – let each woman tell her story in her own unique way, using words and/or artwork to decorate her shirt. Once finished, she would then hang her shirt on the clothesline. The shirt is an educational tool for those who come to view the Clothesline, it becomes a healing tool for anyone who makes a shirt. By hanging the shirt on the line, survivors, friends and family can literally turn their back on the pain of their

experience and walk away. Finally, it allows those who are still suffering in silence to understand that they are not alone.” ( from website - Clothesline Project:HISTORY) .

From the small start in 1990, this project grew into a many-branched national campaign with an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 shirts. “It is the very process of designing a shirt that gives each woman a new voice with which to expose an often horrific and unspeakable experience that has dramatically altered the course of her life. Participating in this project provides a powerful step towards helping a survivor break through the shroud of silence that has surrounded her experience “ (Clothesline Project website). Some years ago, perhaps in the mid-90’s I viewed a traveling exhibit from the Clothesline Project at the NY State Museum. I believe that was the first time I made the connection between art and healing. It was a powerful experience.

Another “public” art project that grew out of private trauma is a multi-media program, “A Story of A Rape Survivor (SOARS), created by sisters Scheherazade and Salamishah Tillet. When Scheherazade, the younger sister, was a sophomore in college, she learned that Salamishah had been raped as a freshman and then again as a junior. The following year, as part of a documentary photography class assignment, Scheherazade spent 5 months photographing and recording her sister’s healing process. “And it was through this ... journey as I followed her to therapy and meditation, documented her burgeoning anti-rape activism, and watched her negotiate dating and starting new romantic and sexual relationships that I found my voice. Even though the words were missing, I

realized that I could use photography to break the code of silence around Salamishah's rape and ultimately help her and myself heal", (Tillet, 2006, untitled internet document). From this documentary, SOARS grew into a full-scale violence education and survivor-healing program for university violence prevention campaigns and victim advocacy groups, presenting workshops and multi-media programs at colleges around the country.

Another resource, Survivor's Art Foundation, is a non-profit organization (with a website), "committed to empowering trauma survivors with effective expressive outlets via internet gallery, outreach programs, national exhibitions, publications and development of employment skills. SAF has participants from all over the country and the world representing traditional and exploratory disciplines of the visual, literary and performing arts arenas. They are survivors, working through their personal journeys which span physical and domestic violence, rape, war-related trauma, PTSD, AIDS, cancer, MS, mental illness and other disabilities" (From Survivors Art Foundation webpage). This organization not only encourages trauma survivors to create art, but provides a venue through which they can share it with the world, empowering them and raising awareness at the same time.

Jim Hubbard is a photographer who in 1989 created "Shooting Back", an organization dedicated to empowering children at risk by teaching them photography, including how to develop and process film. The first Shooting Back project involved children living in a Washington, DC homeless shelter.

Hubbard was a former UPI photo journalist who had covered stories all over the third world. “By the mid 1980’s, I grew weary of being a UPI photographer and began studying at Wesley Theological Seminary to learn more about how I could personally help ease human misery; meanwhile I continued working as a free lance photographer. After working with homeless people as part of my degree and doing a photo journalistic essay on the homeless...I decided to teach photography to children in homeless shelters and to exhibit and publicize their visions around the world.” (Hubbard, 1994)

The resulting photographs by these children became a traveling exhibition and the book, *Shooting Back: A Photographic View of Life by Homeless Children*. “This was one of the first examples of young, economically disadvantaged people creating their own images of themselves and their realities....Not only did millions of people witness these children’s visions, these children found a new freedom—the freedom to express themselves, to learn a creative skill, to join forces with others and nourish a growing feeling of pride.” (Hubbard, 1994) The name, Shooting Back, “was coined from a spontaneous comment by one of the young participants in the program: when asked why he was photographing his own world, the homeless child responded, ‘I’m shooting back’ “ (Shooting Back website).

The second “Shooting Back” project took place in South Dakota, Minnesota, New Mexico, Wisconsin and Arizona on Indian reservations and in Native American communities outside reservations. “*Shooting Back From The Reservation*” features photos

and words by Native American youth. A similar program, Kids With Cameras, has done projects in Haiti, Calcutta, Jerusalem and Cairo. The Jerusalem project brought Arab and Jewish children from Jerusalem together. Twelve children were chosen from each side, each group photographed the Old City and at the project's close the groups discussed their work together.

The youth who participated in Shooting Back and Kids With Cameras may or may not have been trauma survivors, but in each project, the participants were from places and life situations – communities engulfed in war, extreme poverty, discrimination or all of the above – where the potential for traumatic life experiences is great. Neither of these programs are “expressive arts therapy”, but they use the arts in a therapeutic, empowering, soul-healing manner, and in so doing demonstrate the healing power of the arts in addressing “cultural trauma”.

The 2004 issue of Poesis was dedicated to “Re-Imagining Trauma”. After the poetry, the second work that attracted me was an article by Karen Hawkins on her project *“Let Their Names Be Spoken: An Exploration of Beauty and the Art of Witness: Honouring the Women Who Went Missing From Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside”*. Hawkins put names and faces to the 62 “disappeared women” of Vancouver. She does this through a power-point presentation. The article in Poesis reflects on the meaning and purpose of “beauty” in the face of horror, how what happens to some of us affects all of us, and the importance of bearing witness. “Let Their Names Be Spoken” resonates with me

– probably because there but for the grace of the Universe, I could have easily been a statistic, a “disappeared” woman on the streets of the East Village. It also resonates because I feel all of us are responsible for doing what we can “to bring some portion of misery to an end” – Karen Hawkins has taken her art, and what she knows about “witness” and beauty, and is using them to shine a light on the disappearance of 62 women in Vancouver, to give the “statistic” of 62 disappeared women names and faces, to honor their lives and their deaths, to do for them in death what this world, this culture refused to do for them in life.

We come back to the concept of “witness”, and “testimony” – both are aspects of trauma recovery and treatment – and we see how this is true not only for individual survivors, but for all of us here and now living in this disconnected, soul-dead culture. We need to bear witness for those who are outside the “margins of normality”, we need to bring their lives and struggles to light, because in their lives and struggles our own humanity also resides.

Hawkins says: “ I think about the words of Bertolt Brecht, adopted by Carolyn Forché as the motto of her anthology *Against Forgetting*:

*‘In the dark times will there also be singing?’*

*Yes, there sill be singing*

*About the dark times’*

And, I would add: in the singing that is that witness, you will hear hope. And I think there is beauty lurking at the edges of everything, even the horrors and sorrows of life lived. I think beauty lives in the life and the humanity that reveals itself in these places of pain. I think it provides the illumination that backlights horror, making pain visible, revealing its details, glowing beneath this darkness as the possibility of something else. And I believe that if we are to keep hope alive in the face of both the joyful and the horror-filled facets of life lived, we must search for that beauty, must touch and share its awesome and awful grace wherever it is found.” (Hawkins, 2004) Hawkins sees beauty as a “force that serves three intimately intertwined purposes: 1. as a call to witness, 2. as a means of witness (art) that opens others to sharing in that witness, and 3. as a source of hope in that witnessing” (Hawkins, 2004).

In her article, Hawkins quotes Adrienne Rich on revolutionary art “an art capable of ‘naming and mourning damage, keeping pain vocal so it cannot become normalized or acceptable’. In this can be found two crucial functions of an art of witness—naming and keeping alive the pain at the edge of beauty, and providing the motive force, in the form of a visceral....recognition of what is ‘unacceptable’, required to seek something different.” Carolyn Forché, in her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, says “The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion. It often seeks to register

through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events” (Forche, 1993)

These perspectives sound very familiar to me – (“Name it, claim it, aim it”- Markus Alexander) – and speak to me about the connection between expressive art therapy and “revolutionary art” – one heals individuals, the other aims to extend that healing force (through art and art making) out into the wider world, to shine a light on and heal the “trauma” that permeates our world.

This brings me full circle from what I’ve learned about the practice of expressive arts: how Ex A can be a critical part of treating and healing the soul wound of trauma, how it has helped me heal, and back out into the larger world to the “art of witness”. This is what informs my practice of Expressive Arts in the world. This is what pulled the poem, “In The Margins” (see appendix) out of me after I witnessed the Suitcase Exhibit at the museum in 2004, this is what led me to write “The Rape” and “Priestess”. This is what draws me to work with people “in the margins” – bringing expressive art to the drop-outs who frequent Quest’s “after-school” arts program, to clients of addiction treatment programs, to hospice workers, to special education students and prisoners. I know art heals, I know it has healed me, and I know I am called to bring this work out of the studio, out of the classroom and into the boiling pot of the world. Individual and community health are bound up in one another: expressive arts can serve both well.

## APPENDIX

### **From The Margins**

*~on viewing "Lost Cases: Recovered Lives" exhibit at the NY State Museum, September 2004 (suitcases found in an attic at the former Willard State Psychiatric Hospital in central New York.)*

spilled time capsules  
containing  
tea cups, mass cards,  
a wedding dress,  
silver spoons,  
nurse and army  
uniforms , citizenship  
papers, a Dodge Motor  
Company Owners Instruction  
Manual – badges  
of normality – no clues  
to the rupture,  
the tipping point  
in each life that bought  
the one way ticket  
to nowhere

letters, journals, photographs  
a peach silk gown,  
ice skates  
a handmade christening dress,  
thread and teapots  
crying out to me  
through the glass:

each one of us  
so much more than  
one of 50,000 iron  
grave markers,  
cast aside, rusting  
on the margins  
of a snowy field

our suitcases  
our valises  
our duffels  
are open now,  
they stand for us,  
they are  
our silenced voices  
howling  
in the unholy quiet  
of the exhibition hall

~ Judith Prest

Judith Prest is a poet and expressive artist. She holds a masters degree in Social Work, a certificate in Creativity Mentoring from Markus Alexander at Glass Lake Studio and a Certificate in Expressive Arts Therapy from New York Expressive Arts (formerly Glass Lake Studio). Writing and expressive arts have been her lifeline for healing and personal transformation; these experiences have moved her to work with the healing power of art in a variety of settings. Her work in ExA has taken her into prisons, schools, conferences, hospice programs, addiction treatment centers and other community agencies. She is also the author of *Sailing On Spirit Wind: Mid-Life Reflections*, *Wildwoman's Scrapbook*, *Patchwork Life* and *The Geography of Loss*, all self-published volumes of poetry and/or personal essays.

