

## EXPERIENCE—MARIE MONTEAGUDO, WEST ORANGE, N.J. ART AS PROCESS, ART AS HEALING: THE VIEW FROM WITHIN

As an undergraduate art student a few decades ago, my favorite medium was clay and working on a potter's wheel. I gained great satisfaction in working with my hands as I shaped and molded the clay. I felt relief from my stressed-filled student's life as I pounded the clay and used my whole body on the potter's wheel to design and fashion my vessels, plates and sculptures. As I think back, the process of working with the clay was more important than the final work of art, and for me this has come full circle in my experiences with art therapy.

Two years ago, I entered a master's program in counseling at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Along the way, I became intrigued with art therapy because of our Buddhist belief in the mind-body approach to healing, which is especially significant to me as a survivor of breast cancer.

At my very first art therapy class, I felt an immediate connection to my subconscious, and without a moment's pause, I was able to give expression to my inner voice. The art professor asked us to "Draw a picture of yourself crossing a river." I remembered a passage from Nichiren Daishonin's "Reply to Yasaburo" that reads: "Do not endanger the Dharma by relying upon others. You should simply make up your mind. Look at the world this year as a mirror. When so many have died, the fact that you have survived until now was in order that you might meet this opportunity. Here is where you will cross the Uji River. Here is where you will ford the Seta. ... This is what is meant when it is said that it is difficult to be born as a human being, and that it is difficult to believe in the Lotus Sutra. You should pray intently that Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions will all gather and enter into your body to assist you" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 829).

To me, this passage was about accomplishing a decisive victory. I recently experienced a crucial moment in my life, and I drew a picture of myself in a boat that was almost on the opposite shore. I felt the boat was being driven by gusts of wind—that is, my chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. However, at the same time, I was rowing, taking action with all my might. The professor asked us, "How deep is your river?" Even though I cannot swim, I said to myself, "Hundreds of feet deep!" The professor then said, "The depth of the river is equivalent to the depth of your life force!" I was stunned. A second question was, "Will you make it across?" and my inner voice said, "No doubt about it!" I answered her third question before she asked it, which was "What is the title of your drawing?" I wrote the words, "Crossing the Uji River." I became fascinated by the meaning that emerged from my artwork, and from that moment on, I was hooked on art therapy!

In another class, we were in groups and were asked to "Draw your world." One group decided to have each person draw his or her own continent. When I saw their drawings, I was speechless. They were representations from the Ten Worlds! There were flames (the world of Hell), a man shaking the bars of his jail cell (Anger), college buildings (Learning), two people on a park bench (Rapture) facing a brilliant sun (Enlightenment)! When I related to the students my interpretation of their worlds, the professor then referred to Carl Jung, the psychologist, who believed that we as humanity are all connected through the collective unconscious.

At another class, a professor asked us to "Draw your perfect world." I painted the night

sky full of golden, shooting stars, and I called it Starry, Starry Night. When someone asked me what it was, without hesitation, I responded, “It’s the Universe!” That is my perfect world, I thought, as imperfect as it may seem at times. For me, all of these experiences were a validation of my practice of Buddhism and the nine levels of consciousness.

I then went to look for the article entitled “Illnesses and the Nine Consciousnesses” from a 1986 *Seikyo Times*. In that article, Dr. Yoichi Kawada discusses the relationship between cancer and an individual’s emotions. He emphasizes the integration and symbiosis between the physical and the psychological. Since I was a breast cancer survivor, I was curious about how art therapy is used in treating medical illnesses.

I discovered that with cancer patients, the use of imagery is empowering and enables them to become pro-active in their healing. Patients imagine their malignant cells and then draw images destroying them. Others work on transforming feelings of being a victim into becoming a survivor by identifying the inward as well as outward causes of cancer.

I read about one woman who drew a delicate chair with balloons surrounding it, each representing, from her point of view, some possible causes of cancer, including alcohol, high power lines, junk food, pollution, and fat in the diet.

I learned that others with terminal illness create visual legacies with their art. One art therapist told me about her patient who recorded a video memoir of his life and decided that he would make Christmas presents for each member of his family for the next 20 years.

I interviewed another art therapist who mainly does group work with bereaved children. She felt that emotional healing was engendered through the process of shared group empathy. Along the same lines of group support systems, I read about an art therapist who worked with a friend of hers in designing an AIDS Memorial Quilt panel. She described the healing potential of quilt-making as they become part of a larger supportive community. This process helped all the survivors journey through the healing process as they grieved for the loss of their loved ones.

Another avenue in art therapy is phototherapy. Photographs from a person’s life can tell a story about their relationships, or they can trigger memories or evoke hidden emotions. One day at class, the professor asked us to bring in photos of both when we were a child and adult. As I went through my pictures, I first looked for pictures only of myself. Not satisfied, I decided to bring in pictures of myself with other people. Then the professor said, “Arrange the photos on the paper, and write a dialogue from your younger self to your self today.” When I finished, I viewed my life as it transformed over the years—from a shy, studious young girl to a happy, joyful world traveler surrounded by a huge family of friends! And who do I have to thank but the person who introduced me to Buddhism 30 years ago, Phil Andermann, side by side with the Gohonzon, SGI President Ikeda and all my Buddhist comrades in the SGI!

What I have come to love about art therapy is that even if someone is not an artist, they can use it as a holistic and creative approach to their own self-discovery and healing. I am currently exploring the use of collage and photography to gain insight to my inner world. President Ikeda captures best how I feel by saying: “Art is the cry of the soul from the core of one’s being. Creating and appreciating art set free the joyous soul trapped deep within us. That is why art causes such joy. Art, quite aside from any question of skill or its lack, is the emotion, the pleasure of expressing one’s life exactly as it is.... That is why it is impossible to separate fully human life from art” (*Faith Into Action*, p. 255).

As I complete the last few months of my counseling program and fieldwork at the Montclair State University Women's Center, I am reflecting back on the first art therapy exercise that I did and realize that the two main elements in that drawing—the wind and the oars, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and taking action—are fundamental to the process of any benefit I receive and the key to joy and victory in my life. I have crossed the Uji River, I have forded the Seta. And I am on the opposite shore, about to begin forging a new path. And who knows what will be the next exciting adventures I'll be painting, storing them in the treasure chest of my life?