

Emergence from the rubble...



Emergence from the rubble by Diane

*The found poems and artwork of women living through
breast cancer engaging in art therapy*

*Edited by Rosemary C. Reilly
Concordia University*

Description of the Project

Life-threatening illness can be sufficiently traumatic to shatter one's beliefs about self, others, and the world. This disruption can trigger an instinctive search for meaning. Research highlights that how individuals respond post-adversity can make the difference between experiencing existential angst and posttraumatic stress or existential and posttraumatic growth. This chapbook presents some of the findings of a pilot study situated in a cancer care centre and details the impact of creative arts therapy on the experiences of women living through breast cancer. Women were interviewed about their experiences making art, many for the first time. Findings are presented in the form of found poems (excerpts from interviews reframed as poetry) along with an illustrative example of their artwork. Found poems are a richer, more accessible, meaningful, and potent evocation of the themes than traditional analysis. Poetry allows the reader to access deeper insights and understandings of the texture and meaning of existential and posttraumatic growth, and how art-making can provide a safe, dynamic context for women with breast cancer to reflect on profound personal changes and to re-story losses through creative arts practices.

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Since art-making in an art therapy context was the catalyst for sparking growth, the first found poem ¹ illuminates the theme *Art making as a gateway to connection and inner peace*. Art-making as a process created opportunities for the participants to reconnect or connect with past and/or present selves and relationships and created feelings of serenity and peace. This gateway allowed them to (re)discover something essential or new about the self in the context of facing cancer, and come to terms with past issues. Making art fashioned an in-between, reflective space for the participants to reshape their perceptions of themselves as more than women with breast cancer, and these reconfigured perceptions acted as fertile ground for processes of growth to take root.

¹ A found poem is created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other sources (in this case interview transcripts) and reframing them as poetry by making changes in spacing and lines, or by adding or deleting text. It is the literary equivalent of a collage. These found poems were created by the editor, and approved by the participants.



Tristesse (2nd panel of a triptych) by Sophia

I'm like you now... by Sofia

I remember when I was diagnosed.
People asked if I felt *Why me?*
Why me?
I never said *Why me.*
I said, "The statistics are there, so it's one of us."
Why me means I wanted that for somebody else.
But I did say *Why now?*
I remember that.
"God, why now?"

Because I was as old as my mom.
When she went through cancer.

And my mom didn't make it.

The thing about my mom and me is that she used to always say
"You are not like me. You're not like me."
In terms of personality... in terms of how we looked at the world.
"You're not like me."

But as you grow up,
you want to be like your mother.
And I found...
I was like her, when I was going through cancer.
When I looked in the mirror,
I re-lived my mom's cancer at the same time as my own.

I used to be a free spirit, when I was young
but I lost myself.
I guess I followed the path that everyone wants you to...
to be successful in this
and that.

And I lost myself.

I'm not a traditional Italian woman.
I'm not.
My mom was more traditional.
I'm more the free spirit.

But all the values of course,
that was her.
We were three girls and she would always say,
"You're not like me. Your sister is more like me."

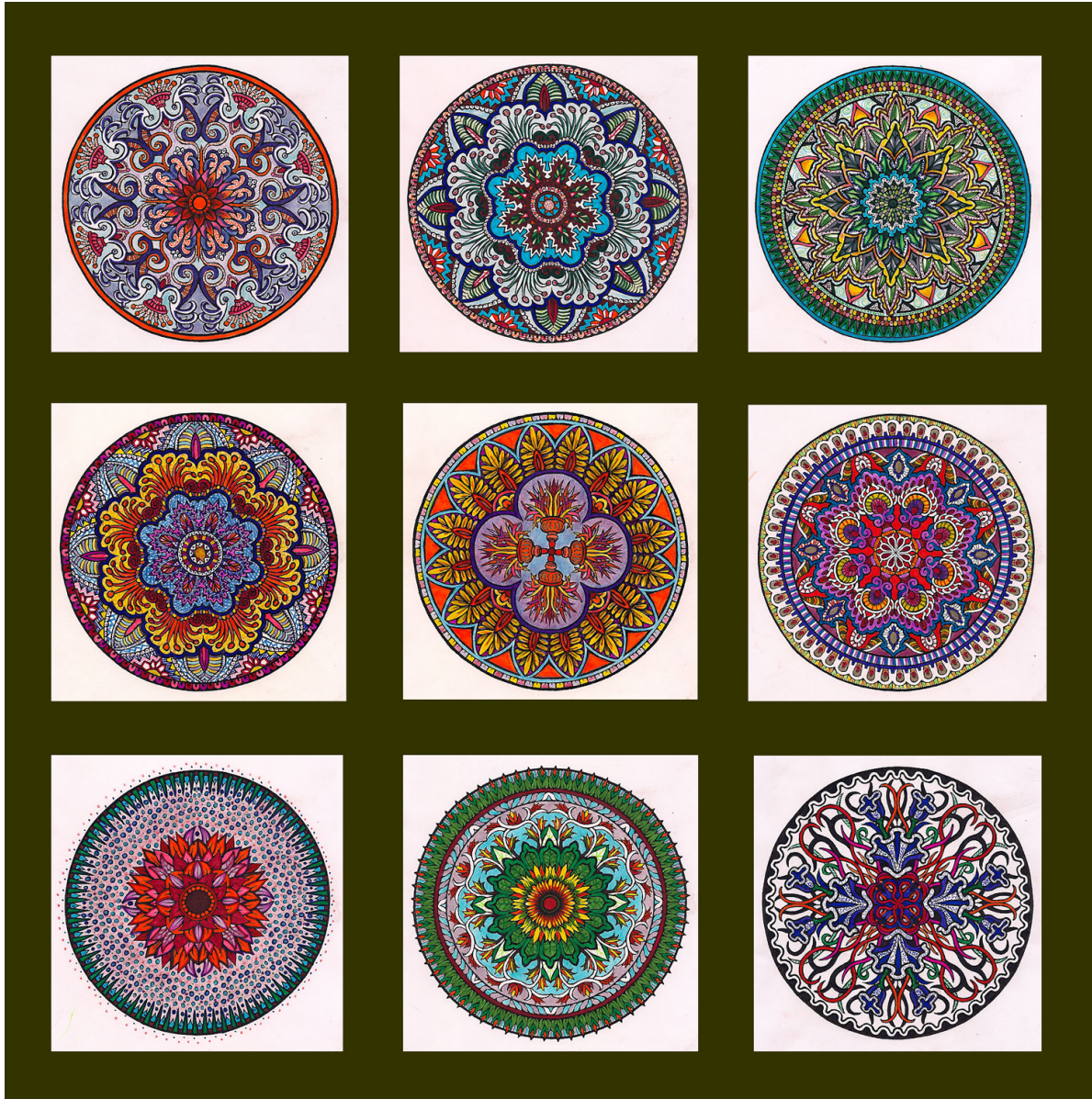
It was more the second phase of my cancer that was the hardest one.
When I lost my hair.

When I looked in the mirror... when I didn't have hair
I used to look at my face and I used to see her.
And that was even harder for me
because I was reliving her cancer
knowing very well that she didn't make it.

I looked at my mirror
and it's not like we had the same features or anything.
But I saw her
and I said to her,

"I'm like you now. Look, I am like you now."

Individuals who face trauma or life-threatening illness are more likely to contemplate fundamental existential questions about death, meaning, and the purpose of life. Existential growth concerns the deep psychological and spiritual changes that occur when individuals face, rather than deny, their mortality. One particular area of growth involves the *quest for authenticity*, which includes the reconsideration of fundamental life values. Facing a life-threatening illness, and exploring this through art therapy, participants in this inquiry came to clarify for themselves a fresh sense of what was important. The following poem illustrates facing death, and in facing death, how the participant engaged in an existential reconsideration and reordering of her fundamental life values and priorities.



9 Weeks of Mandalas by D.A.P.

Time in the before, the now, and the after by D.A.P.

Time in the before

The before was this kind of dark place, after starting chemo
that I'd go to sometime.

We all go there when we are cancer patients, I guess.

Things were being done to me,
external treatments... infusions

So I took to colouring mandalas during my appointments
every week
throughout the months of treatment.
One part distraction,
one part expression,
one part coping

We spend a lot of time in waiting rooms.
Waiting around in waiting rooms with tons of old magazines.
None of them very interesting.

At first they put the needle into my right arm.
So I would just use my left hand.
It took forever.
But that was ok because I was given 4½ hour infusions.
It would take the whole time to do a mandala with my left hand.

But I thought the process itself would infuse my troubled veins, bones, and
organs
with all the protective love and energy I required.

The mandalas became that space
became a little escape.
So instead of a place to be stuck by needles, it became a place to make my
mandalas.

And it did help.

It's allowed things that are otherwise tangled to be separated...
It allowed things that were drowning or buried to surface...

Time in the now

Now, it's really about one thing at a time
the objective *now*
the moment *now*
the me *now*
my situation *now*

This is kind of how you have to be.
I think it is the only way you can deal with it.

What's relevant is the *now*.

Now, money is mattering more.

Time in the after

Money is more important because I want my son to have the opportunity to go to school.
I want him to be supported in ways that I never was.
I want my son to have a better footing than what I had.
Which he already does,
but if I don't live long,
I want to make sure there is something here for him.
I've committed myself to doing a lot of things for the sake of long-term gain that is more attached to my son than it is to myself.
I still have time to make that happen.

I have a future but it is such an ambiguous place.

The existential *quest for fulfillment and freedom* echoes wanting increased choice, self-direction, and autonomy. Feeling out of control while navigating cancer and undergoing surgeries and treatments, participants wanted to exert some level of self-determination over their lives. Art-making in the context of art therapy provided opportunities to express this need. The *quest for community* reflects the need for closer and deeper relationships, and the need to be part of a community. Not only did the women in this inquiry discover this in the relationships they formed in the art therapy group, they were also able to express these feelings for friends and family through their artwork. This found poem reveals the participant's existential needs to have closer and deeper relationships, as well more agency and self-efficacy in the face of this life-threatening disease.

My past (1st panel of a triptych) by Louise



My present (2nd panel of a triptych) by Louise

Abstract / Concrete by Louise

Cancer is both abstract and concrete.
I don't look like I have cancer.
It doesn't say CANCER on my forehead.
Other than the fact that I lost my hair,
I don't look like the typical cancer patient.

With cancer, you don't have control of your body.
Being a cancer patient is like being an object in a factory,
Like going through an assembly line.
Each person at each station does something to me.
disassembled...
assembled...
Pieces put back together to make the new me.
And then when it's going to be all done,
I'm just going to be spit out.

Battling cancer is long,
painful,
hard,
and there's no guarantee for success.
It's a fight for my life.
Not being able to see my cancer was a roadblock.
It prevented me from taking control of my battle.

I needed to see my disease in order to deal with it.
Making art was the only way that I could have some sort of control
about what I have
and what I'm going through.
It's the only thing that is helping me deal with the cancer,
that's concrete
that I can control.
So when I make art I try to make something abstract concrete.

Making art helped me reflect on
my life
and the people that meant the most.

My past is the bridge
where my husband and I used to kiss when we were teenagers.

My present represents where my daughters live in BC.
I created this when I thought I was going to die from my cancer.

I wanted my loved ones to know I was thinking about them
in my time of darkness.

I wanted them to know that should anything happen
that I always thought about them.

I wanted them to know how much they meant to me
that they had a huge,

they still do,

have a huge place in my heart.

See I speak in the past tense, as if I'm gone.

An additional dimension of existential growth is the *quest for meaning and purpose*. These women actively sought meaning and a sense of purpose both in the cancer experience and in life with cancer. Art-making in an art therapy context gave them the space to explore these processes. The following found poem exemplifies the participant's existential search for meaning and purpose in the face of breast cancer. She articulates her renewed appreciation for life, especially regarding taken-for-granted aspects of daily living, and her active attempt to reorder her priorities. Art-making was a catalyst for examining how to live life differently.



11.11.11 tattoo Sofia

To mean something... by Sofia

I'm your typical career woman.
I work in finance.
I wear suits.

When I announced that I was going to get a tattoo,
my own kids said,
"You can't do that."

But I did it.

I did it because I had cancer
and I had to change my life.

I think it was the September issue of National Geographic.
It was about ancient Egyptian times.
There was a picture of a bracelet that had a two-headed serpent.

Neheb Ka
The symbol of protection and regeneration.

When I saw it, I knew that *this* is what I needed.
My daughter would say, "Mom's got a Hells Angel tattoo."

But I needed protection.
I needed to survive this

and I need to change my life.

When I was diagnosed with cancer,
I went through treatments.

I'm still doing treatments.

And believe me,
I went through all the emotions.
All the pain.
The physical and emotional pain.
Because when you are going through cancer, you are doing this with your whole
heart and soul.
You don't feel like you are living.
You are just there waiting
For me, art therapy was the one thing that I actually looked forward to.

People would say I look good,
but I wasn't feeling good.

I realize now that I was angry
because they didn't know how to deal with my cancer.

Just as I didn't know how to deal with it.

I didn't have the words to express how I felt.
I didn't connect to people,
to family or friends.
They didn't understand what I was going through.
I think they expected me to go on as if nothing was wrong with me.

Of course, something was different with me.

You go through hell
But you don't realize that others close to you are going through hell too.
It's not physical but they are going through hell as well.
I realized now how much impact I can have on somebody else.

But this tattoo is a reminder
that if I had a second chance,
then my life has to be lived differently.

I'm not regretting my life up to now.
But I always felt that I had to follow rules or expectations.

I think we get carried away with ambition,
career,
this and that.

But that doesn't matter anymore.
I need to appreciate more how precious each minute is.
What matters is that you're here to appreciate.

I have to find something positive in all this.
I don't mean that we need to go through cancer to learn this lesson.
That's not what I meant.

I just need to make this mean *something*.

Posttraumatic growth is the positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. It is not about returning to the same life as was previously experienced; rather, it is about undergoing significant shifts in thinking and relating to the world that contribute to a process of deeply meaningful change. One feature is the sense of *feeling strengthened to meet future life challenges*. Even though they were navigating a life-threatening illness, these women described a fortified sense of resiliency. Art-making in an art therapy context created spaces for them to discover wells of strength so that they could go on living in the face of cancer and tackle difficult treatment regimes. A further aspect is *feeling greater compassion for others*. Participants reported feeling a deeper bond with other individuals with cancer and family members who also navigated the cancer experience with them. This sense of empathy often emerged during, or as a result of, art-making. The following found poem illuminates the participant's strengthened sense of her ability to meet future challenges, as well as an increase in empathy and compassion for others.



Golden tears by Maria

My golden tears... by Maria

It was the best thing that could have happened to me,

the time when breast cancer veered its ugly head.

I have never considered myself an artist.

I don't have a lot of skill.

I am still a "stick man" in terms of drawing.

But what was important was what the art revealed.

You could just let yourself go.

The colors... the colors talk to you.

The images... they came out. They weren't perfect,
but they represented what they represented.

Making art helped me to get in touch with my emotions... to put words to them.

Had you asked me how I felt,

or what was going on,

I don't think I could have shared the same reflections
had I not used art as a way to get there.

So the art speaks volumes

When I look at the work that was done,

I think the ones that have been the most powerful,
even today,

represented certain dichotomies in my life back then.
Even today.

My famous golden tears...

They were mine then.

And they are still mine today.

Some days...

There are days when tears are still shed.

I consider those golden tears because I understand them.

I accept them.

I wish they weren't there
but they are a part of me.

You see that's the dichotomy.

It's you and you're always kind of alone.
There are other people.
But can you really share 100% with others?
I don't think so.
Not even with your partner.

And you don't want to burden your friends.
So there will always be that dichotomy.
There will always be those tears and hopefully more places to shed them
Not only when I am alone.
And not just in the shower.

If the artwork speaks to other women, and, other women can identify with it...
Then they can actually accept that they have those tears.
And that each time they do, it's something special to them.
And that it's okay to shed them.

Posttraumatic growth is not just about bouncing back, but the ability to bounce forward. This involves the *emergence of new opportunities and new possibilities*. For many of the participants in this project, making art was something that they had not done since childhood. Engaging in art-making gave them a sense of new opportunities or possibilities to explore. They were able to test new skills and ways of expressing themselves, which were unavailable prior to their cancer diagnosis and participation in the art therapy group. The following found poem illustrates how new opportunities and possibilities became available to this participant. Art-making as a new endeavour generated passion, hope, and enthusiasm.



Body map through a door by Gabriella

Healing → Becoming by Gabriella

At the beginning I was very scared
because art was kind of mythical to me.
I had always liked art, but I hadn't done any in my whole life.
I didn't even know how to use a brush!

So when I came here, it was a challenge for me.
When I came,
I was scared.

But at the same time,
it was the only thing that I believed could help me.

I felt pain everywhere.
Too much pain.
Not only physical,
but I was confused.

Everything was dark like winter.

I didn't know how to deal with all these worries
and fears
and insecurities.

I was so depressed when I came.

I had no hope.

But I knew that coming here...
it might be possible to start changing and to heal myself.

I found comfort.

I found an environment where I could speak.
I could express what I was feeling...
at least something.

And I knew that was hope.

Making art was the most important thing that happened to me after my disease.

It opened my eyes

and my heart as a way
of healing my body,
my soul.

Sometimes you have to move something...
some little thing.

You have to go into yourself.

You have to look inside
and discover what is going on inside.

Art was like a door opening into a new world.
Because in every kind of work I discovered something different.

That's why it is very difficult to tell you,
because each piece was related to my fears,
my difficulties,
my concerns...

But what I also discovered was my hope to change.

Can you believe I didn't know how to knit?

Now I want to learn how to knit.
I want to learn how to crochet.
I want to know all these things.
I discovered that this is part of me now.

Painting has become part of my life,
as an inward journey.
Every time I explore my *innerscape*,
I learn more about my true self,
my inner peace,
my beauty
and the joy of being myself...
feeling connected as a whole being.

This is part of me and I don't want to stop.

I will continue.

I'll never stop.

This final found poem reveals the sense of resiliency and inner strength that the participant has tapped into and the sense of hope that it has germinated in her.



Need to verify by Mitsouko

Climbing the Mountain by Mitsouko

So I see myself on a mountain.
This is me, here.
As you can see, the girl has short hair.
Because I still have my hair very short.
Even now, it bothers me.
I'm not saying that I want hair ten miles long,
but I want my hair the way I used to have it.

The sun isn't happy.
There is still some fog in my life.
But, nonetheless, I see myself climbing this mountain.
I put myself there because
I'm not at the bottom.
I'm not at the top.
You understand what I mean?

I'm climbing the mountain, and eventually I will get there.

I am alone in this picture.
I cannot really count on my friends right now.
There is only one person I count on,
and this is myself
and that is true.
Of course, we need to have people around us.
We need friends,
but the only person we can count on is ourselves.

This is what I'm feeling right now.

This is hard to hear,
but I think it's the reality.

From the beginning, you are born alone.

When you come out of the womb of your mother to the moment of death,
you are doing it alone.
There is no one that can do this for you. .

Eventually I'll get there and feel better.

We drew upon these references in the analysis of these interviews and in the formulation of these found poems:

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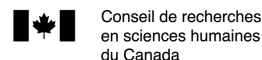
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