



ART'S EMBRACE

Healing Through Creativity

by Sandra Yeyati

Art can be a powerful force for healing. Its potential manifests in a disabled man's triumphant dance or cancer patient's stirring self-portrait. Throughout America, art's redemption takes center stage at hospitals, nursing homes, jails and homeless shelters. Even an entire city can be transformed when its citizens embrace public art to add beauty, create community and heal its broken places.

Art in Medical Settings

According to Jill Sonke, director of the University of Florida (UF) Center for Arts in Medicine, approximately half of U.S. hospitals have art programs that provide positive distraction, enjoyment and connection. To humanize otherwise intimidating environments, visual artists and musicians are employed to install appealing exhibits and play relaxing music. Artists also work at the bedside with patients as part of inter-professional care teams.

Serving as an artist-in-residence early in her career, Sonke remembers a young female patient with sickle cell disease whose bouts of extreme pain required hospitalization. Dance sessions eased her suffering and enabled doctors to reduce pain medications. "The way the patient described it was not that the pain was going away, but that she didn't mind it as much because she was enjoying dancing," she says.

While facilitating Dance for Life classes for Parkinson's patients, Sonke encountered a man suffering limited mobility and an inability to form facial expressions. After two months of biweekly sessions, he could lift his arms over his head and, to his wife's delight, smile again. "It's that multimodal capacity of the arts," Sonke explains. "All at the same time, he was engaging in music, movement and imagery. He was moving with others and experiencing joy and laughter."

According to Sonke, ongoing research seeks to pinpoint the public health benefits of art. In Britain, they have learned that people over 50 visiting museums or concerts once a month are almost half as likely to develop depression in older age. Other studies suggest that music can unlock memories and improve cognition. UF researchers are currently investigating whether live music in emergency and trauma care settings can reduce the need for opioids.

"When people engage in the arts, they often enter into a flow state, that experience of losing yourself in art where we lose track of time and what we're doing is intrinsically motivated," Sonke says. "A flow state can engage a relaxation response, helping to reduce stress and anxiety, which can enhance immune function."

Art Therapy for Cancer Patients

Board-certified art therapist Mallory Montgomery helps cancer patients in Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital work through symptoms of depression, anxiety or trauma. "Any person seeking a talk therapist or social worker could also consult with an art therapist," she says. "We have the same training, but use art instead of just words. Evidence suggests that art therapy accesses healing faster because you're forging a deep mind/body connection."

When counseling a double mastectomy patient that has questions about who they are now that they're missing a part of their identity, Montgomery might offer a printed body map so that they can pinpoint where they carry feelings of loss, pain or confusion. "By drawing or coloring in those areas, I'm asking them to show how they're being affected physically, emotionally and spiritually, and to externalize the overwhelming, negative side of their problem," she explains.

Using a second body map, Montgomery might invite the patient to draw or paint in those same areas to transform the pain into something more positive. "Is it going to blossom like a flower or be soothed with water? What imagery can you create that represents the opposite of your pain or an improvement of your concerns? We might also do a portrait to highlight other aspects of you and your personality that still exist, even though you no longer have a body part that was killing you," she says.

Montgomery's emphasis is never on the quality of the art. "I walk the fine line between allowing patients to problem-solve how to make something look like what's in their head and providing them with comfort and intervention so they don't get so frustrated that they want to give up," she notes.

Montgomery keeps a visual journal for her own self-expression.

“It helps me make sense of the world,” she says. “Art gives my voice and thoughts an outlet, something concrete and representational that reaches into the depth of what I’m experiencing.”

Redemption Songs in Skid Row

About 10 years ago, violinist and recording artist Vijay Gupta took a wrong turn and ended up in Skid Row, a disadvantaged downtown Los Angeles neighborhood. “It felt like a gut punch,” he recalls. “I saw the gross inequality between Walt Disney Concert Hall where I performed for the LA Philharmonic and a community of 5,000 people less than two miles away sleeping in tents in extreme poverty.”

To uplift and inspire people recovering from homelessness, addiction and incarceration, Gupta founded Street Symphony in 2011 as a series of concert performances by world-class musicians. “One of our first venues was the Department of Mental Health,” he recalls. “After the second movement, the young violist I was performing with turned to the audience with tears in his eyes and said, ‘I’ve loved playing for you because I can feel your hearts.’ He shared that his mother had grappled with schizophrenia, his father was a prison guard and whenever he played for his family, he felt more connected to them. That’s when I began to see him as a human being who was in deep need of this work himself.”

Gupta has learned firsthand that healing is a two-way street. “When I come to Skid Row, I’m the one who feels lifted,” he says. As a result, Street Symphony has morphed into a collection of workshops and conversations that also employs jazz, reggae, hip hop and West African musicians and vocalists from the Skid Row community. “We might play 30 minutes of music and then ask the audience what images, thoughts or memories came up for them,” he explains.

In this community, art is neither entertainment nor a commodity, Gupta says. “It’s a lifeline; a way for people that have been devastated by poverty, addiction or trauma to add to their lives in a constructive way. We all have devastated places within ourselves that need healing and attention. Visiting Skid Row is a pilgrimage to the broken place within myself, and in that way, it’s a spiritual place; my temple where I go to worship.”

Creative Care for People with Dementia

Drawing from her theater background, Anne Basting, author of *Creative Care*, has developed an innovative approach to dementia and elder care. “Our current caregiving model envisions one person that’s empty and has lots of needs and the other person that’s full and pours themselves into the other person, which leads to burnout,” she says. “Dementia and aging are experiences of increasing separation. People isolate themselves and learn not to trust their own expressive capacities, because their relatives and friends no longer know how to relate with them and often ignore their words.”

Basting’s Creative Care changes this depleting dynamic. “In improvisational theater, you observe everything that’s happening on stage and try to figure out how you can add to the performance positively,” she explains. “Applying that idea to a

care situation, you observe the person’s facial expressions, what they’re saying, how they’re behaving and then invite them into expression out of that moment with what we call a ‘beautiful question’, one that has no right or wrong answers and draws on the person’s strengths.”

A beautiful question might be, “If your feet could talk, what would they say?” This offers people with pain a poetic way to express it. “I invited a gentleman with dementia who had no language—no words left—to show me how water moves. His response was the most beautiful dance I’d ever experienced, performed in the kitchen of his duplex,” Basting recalls, adding that it’s important to acknowledge the person’s expression so they know they’ve been heard.

The final step in Creative Care is to accumulate these experiences over time and shape something larger and universally meaningful that can be shared with others—an artistic product. Basting founded the nonprofit TimeSlips to train artists and caregivers worldwide to do this visionary work. Their efforts have resulted in art exhibits, dance and theater productions, books and animations. “My dream is that meaning and beauty will be made every day in nursing homes, creating care settings so interesting that people want to visit them—a new kind of cultural center, integrating health and art,” she says.

Transforming a City with Public Art

More than 4,000 works of public art grace the city of Philadelphia, three-quarters of which are breathtaking murals that combine world-class paintings and images with provocative words and healing messages. Art permeates virtually every neighborhood on walls, billboards, sidewalks, rooftops, swimming pools and basketball courts, enriching people from all walks of life, even those that don’t have access to galleries and museums.

“Public art lifts our spirits, provides us with beauty and inspires us,” says Jane Golden, founder and executive director of Mural Arts Philadelphia (MAP). “It can be evocative, challenging and educational, as well, serving as a barometer of our time—a system of checks and balances and a mirror that we hold up to people and say that your life counts and you matter.” In addition to sponsoring 75 to 100 new works every year, MAP’s \$10 million budget funds programs related to criminal justice, art education, housing insecurity, behavioral health, community development and environmental justice.

According to Golden, the healing power of art is not just in the mural, but also in its collaborative creation. In addition to artists and educators, hundreds of people work on these projects, including individuals grappling with addiction or homelessness, veterans with PTSD and immigrants and refugees facing isolation and stigma. “The act of creating is a meditative and healing experience, and because you’re part of a larger effort, it connects you to your community,” Golden says. “People start to feel a sense of purpose and value. They start to believe in themselves again.”

Sandra Yeyati, J.D., is a professional writer and editor. Reach her at SandraYeyati@gmail.com.