

## Art as a Pathway to Learning

Art in general was a pathway I used to learn and form my identity; I have used it since I was very young.

From a very early age I painted, drew and played with all kinds of ways of expressing myself in art, sport and dance. These were pathways to learning and identity.

As I was not good at reading and writing, and later saw books as my enemy, reading and writing made me feel very small - especially around people who loved to read, who loved books, and so on.

I found drawing and painting to be my friends as opposed to reading and writing. These friends help me to prove myself to the world, and helped build my confidence and self esteem, which were constantly being knocked.

Art in its many forms was better for me as I could hide it away from others, and it could not be taken from me. It has taken me a long time to 'come out' as an artist, but I have continued to build my self esteem using these methods.

It was also a place I would use to keep myself and my identity - a place to work through any feelings or crises that became overwhelming. This is still the case.

I use art to ground myself and to see how I view the world, and it helps me to interpret the world and my feelings and all those things.

When trauma strikes, whether it is a visiting memory/feeling returning to haunt me, or if I'm just finding a way of trying to figure out past situations, I put it down on paper. That way the haunting is outside of me, and somehow when it is placed outside me this makes things easier to deal with.

I have found that symbols and putting things on a page are much more powerful than words, they are direct and immediate.

It seems babies see before they know words and the visual is an earlier primitive state. Accessing, listening and giving voice to such feelings is also very powerful - it can produce some very strong feelings and some very dynamic pictures.

Drawing a picture of a memory is far more powerful than using words - at least for me. Smell and voice can also be powerful tools.

I did take a course in 'person centred art therapy' which I found a challenge.

The first part of the course I hated and complained to a fellow student privately, but something happened to make it flip over to really, really liking (loving) it and giving me more respect for the course and for other classmates' experiences.

One part of this flip was the exercises we did and putting down a memory on paper, and then talking about it with a classmate. Sharing experiences was a little bit like witnessing an event retrospectively. A bit like time travel.

Alice Miller wrote the book *The Untouched Key*, which I recommend. I do not know if I agree with all she writes, but I do agree that if a child has a witness to the abuse they are going through, or a witness to an injustice they are experiencing, they are more likely to be able to deal with that abuse and/or they are more *unlikely* to go on to abuse others.

This course touched me more than any talking therapy or counselling I have done. It seemed to go past my protective barriers that were stopping me from facing issues, some of which were about learning and how I saw myself (stupid). I would not just put myself with any counsellor.

And although at times it was very emotional, I never felt totally overwhelmed - perhaps because the course tutor set the boundaries and ground rules so well.

Later, I explored other ideas and groups and I did gather some interesting methods, like relaxation and visualisation techniques, that I use both for myself and for groups that I later led. The combination seemed to work as the feedback was good.

Now I try to go to my studio (a very long time coming) to work, and there I can explore my ideas which are now deeply rooted in knowing that no one can take my art and expression away from me.

I feel like a gardener, planting and watching things grow. But I think there is a difference in that I make the thing from scratch (clay) and it is my idea/feeling.

I think the process of making art is interesting because I could be going through the most horrible feelings, and yet the putting things together is like putting me together - and the working out through building is like building part of me. Getting the problem, issue, or feeling outside me is getting my stuff out, then I can see it and remember. It is no longer a feeling, but a thing that has a presence, at least to me.

Sometimes my pieces, now that I work mostly in clay, really disturb people and that shakes me a bit. I think I got the message way back that I was dangerous, or that it was dangerous to say or express certain things.

But I try to point out to these people that the piece is more about me and my life and my point of view - not anyone else's. But I think I have to learn people see, and read what they want, into the work.

I did a series of clay dolls. I have one that had a hole in its chest. I later put a red glaze in the hole and around the edges. I had a classmate who wanted to knit a little sweater for the doll, I think as a protection. She works as a knitting instructor for women in prison.

I have also had a very angry man think that somehow through this piece I was saying it was okay to hurt a baby. He calmed down when I said that it was a piece about me.

I am still struggling with reading and writing, but nothing like I used to. Using computers does help me as I have discovered that I am dyslexic.

But it is good to note that I also enjoy working on my art pieces. They bring me great satisfaction.

#### Books and Artists I find useful:

Alice Miller - *The Untouched Key, The Drama of Being a Child*  
Emily Carr - *Growing Pains*

Jimmie Durham (Phaidon) (1<sup>st</sup> Nation Artist)  
Virginia Woolf - A Room of One's Own  
Significant Others - Edited by H. Chadwick

Other Things I use to help me:

- \*walking
- \*silence while in places of peace (lake, room, art gallery)
- \*reading about other people's lives
- \*talking with those to whom who I feel I can express the horrors that I went through (and this is not always a close friend).

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