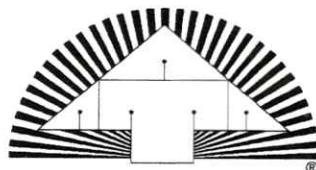


# ART*Therapy*

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**About the Cover:** "Healing," oil on canvas, 12" X 12" by Mindy Atkin, MA, a recent graduate of the clinical art therapy program of Long Island University at CW Post, Brookville, NY. Mindy writes, "I painted this image of a regenerating tree while writing my thesis, *The Healing Power Of Creative Expression*. Creative expression has always helped me to navigate life's twists and turns, and has served to strengthen and fortify me during difficult times. This tree represents all that we endure and survive, and suggests that within each of us there is power to self-heal."

# Viewpoint

## Hands to the Floor

Lisa Schaewe, Boulder, CO

*This is an art therapist's transpersonal journey through the grief process. Guided equally by intuition, teachings from my spiritual practice, experience as a bereavement counselor, and a firm trust in the art making process, this is the path I followed after my brother's suicide.*

### The Story

Tuesday October 22 was a sharp edged and brittle day that carried a hollow quality and seemed to echo. The events of that morning led me to experience a dense layering of swallowed screams, phone calls, arrangements, and a mind state barely functional enough to book a flight and figure out what I needed to pack. Leaving my house in the Colorado mountains late in the morning, I was met by my father and sister at a small upstate New York airport just before midnight. The day was filled with counted breaths and frequent stops in front of mirrors. Everything felt different. I thought surely I must look different now. I needed to learn my new face. "This," I would say to myself, "is what I look like now that my brother is gone."

The next day, Wednesday, seemed to undulate. I was floating, moved along on a current of relatives, condolences, and the distant familiarity of scenes from the town where I grew up as they drifted past the car window. The parlor in the funeral home with its antique tapestry covered chairs, lace curtains, and thick, quiet carpet seemed to hum rhythmically. Conversations with the rabbi about the service and details to remember for the obituary all entered my head; pulsing and swishing like waves lapping the shore.

We sat in a booth at the back of the Colonial Diner at midday: my sister, my father, and I. Each of us ordered what we have always ordered. If he were there, my brother would have had the Monte Cristo sandwich. In disquieting silence, we studied and re-learned each other's faces. "This is what we look like," I can remember thinking, "now that my brother has ended his life."

My father didn't want to go near the house. This was obvious because of the growing list of unnecessary errands that would assuredly keep him away from that end of town.

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**Editor's note:** Lisa Schaewe, MA, ATR-BC, LPC, is an art therapist at Colorado Recovery and an adjunct faculty member at Naropa University in Boulder, CO. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to [lschaewe@coloradorecovery.com](mailto:lschaewe@coloradorecovery.com).

My sister appeared numb. Her gaze was distant as she sifted through questions and memories. In my own thoughts I encountered levels of apprehension, fear, and morbid curiosity: I found myself drawn to the room where it happened.

Finally making my way to the house late in the day, I stood in the hall peering through the doorway and into the bedroom. It seemed wrong that the room was clean. The police and my brother's body were all long gone, as were my sister's friends who had spent hours scrubbing the walls, bedding, and floor. Still, I felt off balance when confronted by the normalcy of what I saw. The mattress was bare but other than that everything looked as it always had. This seemed dishonest. Someone died in this room. A life that had extended for 37 years and 10 months had stopped. Right here.

Just as he had every day in the 6 weeks since he and his wife separated, my brother had driven to the house early that morning to help get the children ready for school. Yesterday he sat right there at the edge of this very bed. With his wife of 10 years watching in frozen horror, he pulled a gun from the front of his jeans, pressed the barrel to the side of his head, and pulled the trigger. My thoughts repeated: He was dead and somehow the room looked almost the same as it had when I visited a month earlier. The last things he felt and the last things he said were all in that room and it was as though they had just been washed away with the rest of the mess.

As the sun settled behind the trees and darkness filled the room, I placed my meditation cushion on the floor and sat down to begin zazen, seated Zen meditation practice. Minutes later I was joined by my sister. Settling in, I sensed a denseness and weight in the air. Slowly penetrating the scent of blood and cleaning products in the cool silence, we both began to feel our brother's presence. I realized then I had come here to bear witness. I sat for a long time, listening to my breath and the sound of my sister's. With each inhale, details of how I imagined what transpired the day before slowly began to emerge as if the walls of the room were releasing their memories. I could hear the annoyance in my sister-in-law's voice when my brother distracted her as she tried to prepare for work. I could feel his frustration when she did not stop what she was doing to listen. I could sense his immeasurable pain as he finally began to realize his marriage was ending and that he was not going to be able to live in the same house with his son and daughter. I felt like

I was there in the room with him as he touched and explored the texture of his loss and feeling of abandonment. As I sat there in the darkness with my sister, I could feel the weight of his hopelessness in my hands. I could feel the throes of my sister-in-law's mind as she saw him pull out the gun and she realized what was happening. I could hear the sharp explosion of the gun firing and the encompassing, still quiet that must have followed.

Aware that my sister's breathing had grown quick and shallow, I no longer wondered if this was all just in my mind. I looked at her, then cautiously around the shadowed room. Leaning forward I touched a spot of carpet that looked darker than the rest. It felt sticky and I realized my hands were wet with my brother's blood. Moving in beside me, my sister pressed her hands to the floor inches from mine. In this clean, quiet room, we had found him. We heard him at the apex of his suffering and together bore witness.

Turning on the light I saw my sister, pale and small looking as she kneeled on the floor. Her hands, like mine, were wet with blood. I brought a stack of paper napkins from the kitchen and handed one to my sister as I pressed another into the carpet to absorb the blood. There we sat like children on a beach building sand castles. Side by side, hands to the floor in my brother's bedroom, we sat surrounded in time by piles of napkins—each stained with the shape of a deep red glove.

When I returned to Colorado I received a letter from a wise friend who wrote, "My love stays with you as you do the no shortcut journey through your grief. Hope the autumn leaves are filling your eyes with color." (B. Treace, personal communication, November 9, 2002). Those words filtered in through my tears and created a seat where I could rest and unravel my wild assortment of feelings.

The blood soaked napkins, packed in a plastic bag, sat on the table in my art studio. I would take them out from time to time and look at them, careful to handle each only by the edges. They had become relics to me, sacred, a fragment of a dream. I didn't know what to do with them but I intuited they would play an important role in my healing process. They had come to represent my brother—his body, life, and death, as well as my connection with my sister and the intimacy of the moment we shared that night. In my numb, insulated state I found myself yearning for the raw presence and clarity those fragile pieces of paper had come to represent.

## The Art Making

Another week went by, and then a second and a third, when one day I found myself stretching a sheet of watercolor paper on a board and mixing a palette of alizarin crimson and burnt umber paints to match the dried bloodstains on the napkins. Wetting a wide flat brush, I watched dreamily as the colors flowed and spread, covering the paper. I could feel my lungs become rigid and the muscles in my lower back tighten as I spread my fingers and laid my opened hands onto the page. I grew dizzy. The air in the room felt solid and sounds warped through the ether as if from far away. Later, I examined the red paint staining the cracks of

my hands in my reflection in a mirror. Watching the colors swirl with water in the sink as I cleaned up I was transported from the safety of my own home back to that night in my brother's room.

The next evening, without knowing why but trusting the inspiration and the process, I began preparing paper and mixing the paints again. Each time my hands touched down on the wet surface, memories of my brother pierced through the physical sensations I was experiencing: First he was 6 years old and opening a birthday present: a set of electric trains. Next he was 9 and building an obstacle course for his bike. Then he was skateboarding down the driveway, calling to tell me he'd met someone, had fallen in love, and was getting married. Last was the proud phone call he made to tell me he'd become a father. I found photographs of him at different ages and pasted them to the page: My hand prints and pictures of my brother—on his motorcycle, at the beach, holding his children, working on his '69 Camaro. Pushing my chair away from the table, I realized I was once again bearing witness. This time it was to my own my suffering and loss.

As a Zen student I have come to realize the value of directly entering into and mindfully engaging the essence of difficult situations (Loori, 1996). By intimately connecting with a challenge rather than separating from it, I can face what is happening, assume responsibility, and accept the full spectrum of my experiences and emotions. I can acknowledge and own these dark and frightening aspects of myself rather than live with blame, ignorance, and denial. For this journey, meditation practice and the art making process served as vehicles that supported me as I explored my memories and experienced my pain, guiding me as I moved through my grief. "When we bear witness to the unfolding of our daily lives, not shrinking away from any situation that arises, we learn. We open to what is. And in that process, a healing arises" (Glassman, 1998, p. 37).

Ten months passed before I quietly sat down at my art table, opened that plastic bag again, and spread the napkins across my table. I lit a candle and offered incense, then placed my palm directly on the center of each of napkin, one after another. I felt tenderness, gratitude, and a sense of peace that wasn't available when I last saw them. On a small piece of paper I began painting an open golden sky crowning a meadow of ochre and sepia grasses that reminded me of how I felt with my brother on our best days together. On this soft, otherworldly scene, I arranged small bloodstained strips I'd torn from some of the handprint napkins and pasted them along the bottom of the painting. Seeing the resulting image, I realized I had created a space where I could lay to rest some of my sadness and loss, a space where healing could arise.

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