

Expressive Arts Therapy

Part I

Natalie Rogers
on Arts and Peace

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EXPRESSIVE ARTS FOR PEACE

Using the Creative Process to Connect to the World

— Natalie Rogers

For me these are dark times. Not only do the short, winter days bring darkness early, these are times when our government has taken us into an unnecessary and futile war killing thousands of innocent civilians and hundreds of our own sons and daughters. These are times when we are aware that the ecological and environmental destruction we are causing could bring the human species to an end. These are times when countries that used to admire our nation now mistrust and even hate us. These are times when our civil liberties are being erased. These are times when dissent is barely heard or noticed despite massive demonstrations and outpourings.

In facing these facts, how do we maintain hope? Just writing the paragraph above and knowing the many layers below each statement, I find myself getting angry, sad, disillusioned, frustrated, and even feeling hopeless. Yet I live with great hope.

As the brilliant morning sun backlights the auburn leaves of my Japanese maple tree, and my brown-eyed dog stares at me pleadingly, I go for a walk to cleanse my lungs and soul. I ask further questions: How do expressive arts connect us to our body, psyche, soul, and the world? How does inner peace connect to world peace? I arrive home thinking about expressive art as one avenue of helping to heal ourselves, our clients, and the planet. We as therapists and health professionals need to use our abilities to foster nonviolent solutions to global problems.

How do the expressive arts help us connect to our body, psyche, soul and the world?

The expressive arts—the integrated process of using movement, visual art, music, journal writing, and psychodrama—are powerful, creative ways to become aware of our feelings about world events, and to transform those feelings into self-responsible action.

The first step is to become aware of our feelings about these events. I put it this way:

*Denial is our biggest personal and global enemy. Awareness is its antithesis. To deny our grief and suffering over a personal tragedy or over the needless human tragedies of starvation, pollution, and war puts a lid on all of our feelings. This leads us to lethargy, depression, and apathy. To become aware, on the other hand, leads us into the fiery waters of emotions that need to be appropriately channeled into creative energy. It is not surprising that so much denial exists in the world. With communication technology bringing us news of disasters around the globe, we are bombarded with massive amounts of anguish. Denial keeps us from being overcome by despair. Yet wearing a plate of armor tends to make us into technological robots, capable of producing quantities of goods but incapable of compassion and creative solutions. We are also denying the humanitarian impulse within each individual. When a crisis occurs—a flood or earthquake, an abandoned child or maimed individual—people have the opportunity to respond by giving. And they feel rewarded as they provide for others. . . It is important that we find emotionally safe ways to experience both sides of the coin: the massive suffering and the altruistic impulse in each of us. (N. Rogers, *The Creative Connection: Expressive Art as Healing*, Science & Behavior Books, 1993)*



NATALIE ROGERS AND THE ANGEL SHE CREATED.

The second step is to find constructive ways to release and transform these feelings.

For instance, on January 18, 2003, I was about to teach a class of 15 Saybrook graduate students. However, it was Martin Luther King, Jr., day, and most of my friends were going to a massive San Francisco rally to demonstrate against a possible war in Iraq. I wanted desperately to be there—to put my body where my values were. However, I realized that I could bring the thoughts and feelings about the pending preemptive war to the classroom.

I asked the adult learners how they felt about the heavy beat of war drums coming closer. We had some free-flowing discussion. All views were listened to and heard, including intellectual opinions and feelings. Feelings of sadness, anxiety, rage, fear, hopelessness, powerlessness were expressed. One woman felt hopeful because she thought the massive worldwide demonstrations would bring a shift in consciousness in the long run.

I talked about the humanistic principle underlying the work we were about to do—the need to access deep feelings, embrace them as a necessary part of us, and **experience the feelings in a safe environment to transform them into a sense of hope and empower-**

ment. These feelings are the tunnel of emotions through which we must pass to get to the other side —to self-awareness, understand-ing, wholeness, and action. Denying that these feelings exist turns us into callous and con-strained individuals. Expressing these feelings in psychologically unsafe environments can get us into trouble.

With these concepts as a back-drop, I suggested we first embody our feelings through movement. Movement is an effective way to discover and express what we really feel. Our bodies carry messages that are only vaguely experienced by our minds. My suggestion was: *Move with your eyes closed for awhile to experience the messages of your body. Consider the discus-sion we've just had. How does your body want to express that which is triggered by our discussion. You can let out sounds if you wish.* After a while I put on a piece of music by Marvin Gaye, saying, "The music is lyrical, however the words are of a different nature. Open your eyes to move and use any of the colored scarves that you wish."

As the music started, individuals slowly swooped up brightly colored chiffon scarves. Gently moving to the swaying rhythm we listened to the words: *Mother, mother, there's too many of you cryin', Brother, brother, there's too many of you dyin', You know we've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today.*

One woman got on her knees with a black scarf over her head as a veil. Another person slashed the air as if with a sword. Moods changed. I experienced a sense of longing in one mover, and a sense of power in another.

Then I invited people to go directly to an art medium to further express what they were experiencing. They could use clay, or collage, or paint. I call this sequence of using movement, art, writing, and sharing, the Creative

Connection® process. For almost an hour there was focused creative energy in complete silence. This is the sacred space of creativity.

What came out of this process? First they spent time in dyads sharing the creative expression just completed. Then the whole group met. We listened empathically as individuals talked about their images and feelings. One man sculpted an angel of death. He had found red berries outside to use as blood. He wrote, "The Angel of Death wept in despair. Kneeling thigh deep in the river of blood she lost all volition and began to faint, overwhelmed by the destructive powers of humanity." One woman made a collage with a soldier carrying a wounded, bleeding child. She compared the good fortune of her grandchild who lived safely in this country. Another woman created a "Seat of Power" to help her gain a sense of self-empowerment. We were careful not to interpret or analyze anyone's art, which was a ground rule.

Thus the *inner feelings* of sadness, rage, fear, and gratitude were *expressed in outer form*. The emotional, intuitive aspects of these students were put into various media. The nonverbal, nonlinear, imaginative, "right brain" aspects were brought to the fore. In a safe, nonjudgmental, accepting, person-centered environment, people were given permission to be their authentic selves using color, line, form, sound, writing, and sharing. A sense of release and relief was in the air. Feelings that had been bottled up had been expressed in constructive ways. These feelings had been heard, accepted, understood. This leads the way to clear-headed thinking and action.

The next morning we started the process of envisioning a peaceful

world. First we energized ourselves through movement. Then we spread out a huge paper circle that was to be "our world." After spend-ing time in a group meditation where each person was invited to consider what would help to create or build a world of peace, we all began drawing at once. This activity brought a powerful sense of collective consciousness to the room. The discussion that followed brought individuals to a sense of determination to act in their own way, in their own community.

What happened in this process is typical of in-depth work. First, the creative process itself was healing. Focusing on creating something from an intense feeling helps to



acknowledge its existence. Second, as we look at the image we gain self-understanding and insight. Third, as those feelings are deeply heard, they begin to shift. There is a process of transformation. With acceptance and acknowledgment, insight and empowerment begin to emerge, and the conviction to act.

USING THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS FOR COMMUNITY AND WORLD PEACE

There was an outpouring of art after the September 11 tragedies. Walls were painted, makeshift galleries had people's expressions in paintings, collage, memorial shrines, photos, homemade flags, sculptures, altars, and poetry.

Songs were created. There is a tremendous need for release of the grief and anger after such events. Art allows for individual healing in the community setting.

Art heals! The process and the product bring a sense of inner peace. It seems magical, to me, that when I am sad or angry and create art, or dance to music, the feelings begin to shift. We are not talking about the kind of art you frame or sell. We are talking about art that comes from a deep inner wellspring bubbling forth without a lot of concern for the outcome.

Visualization of Inner Peace

Visualize when you felt inner peace.

How did your body feel? Your heart? Your mind? Your soul or spirit? This could have been a time you spent in nature—a sunset, a moonrise, at the ocean or a lake, or gazing at a flower. It might have been in meditation or in church or in a loving relationship. If you don't recall such a time, make it up. Fantasize it. **Re-enter that space.** Be aware of your physical sensations.

When you have finished this imaginary journey, **dance how you feel in this space**, then **use color or clay** or collage to spontaneously express these feelings.

Write five sentences starting with "I am, I have, or I feel . . ." Use this art to remind you of your sacred inner/outer space. Bring your full spirit with you as you go about your day. Hold a vision for peace in your heart and mind.

Color and images can give us new information about ourselves.

Many people say, "But I am not creative!" I say: "We are all innately creative." As children we played with paint and clay just for the fun of it. Then came the critic—both the inner critic and the adults who graded or put your product down. The person-centered environment

of play, stimulation, acceptance, and support helps people recover their innate creativity.

EXPRESSIVE ARTS TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

In one workshop I witnessed two friends inadvertently hurt each other's feelings. They had "stabbed each other in the heart." At lunchtime they asked me if I would help them talk to each other. I said I would be glad to if each of them first took a half-hour to paint, create clay, or write about the situation before the mediation. As each woman spent time alone creating art, her inner feelings shifted somewhat. When they came to the mediating session, I asked them first to read and discuss their art rather than to dive into what had happened earlier. As the first woman showed the five-foot painting she had splashed with violent colors she explained that in the process of creating the painting, the blaming had started to turn to self-responsibility. She had discovered some hidden triggers of hurt from past experiences. The second woman had created a piece of clay that was Madonna-like, protecting the child in herself that had been hurt. I listened empathetically to each one in front of the other. The combination of expressive arts and person-centered listening prevents the escalation and inappropriate acting out of distraught feelings.

Taking time out during intellectual debates to meditate and use art as a language to uncover deeper issues underlying differences can help folks stay together to collaborate—in business, politics, relationships, organizations, etc.

FINDING INNER PEACE TO CONNECT TO THE WORLD

A connection exists between our life force—our inner core or soul—and the essence of all beings. **As we journey inward to discover our essence or wholeness, we discover our relatedness to the outer world.** In the book *Creativity*, the radical

theologian Matthew Fox says: "To honor creativity is to sow the seed of peace in human hearts and culture." and "The universe brings with it great joys and great sorrows. Deep heart experiences, such as joy, delight, ecstasy, on the one hand, and grief, sadness, and loss, on the other, trigger creativity in us. The mystics called these experiences the *via positiva* (the joy) and the *via negativa* (the suffering). These the universe gifts us with in abundance. They are integral to all our living—provided we choose to live deeply from the inside out and don't live vicariously or superficially . . ." He talks about how creativity flows through the human heart from the Divine heart.

Finding our inner light and allowing it to shine forth is a positive step toward world peace. Being bogged down in a sense of hopelessness or cynicism is not energy conducive to constructive action. Being grateful for the earth, the air, fire, and water, and being grateful for the abundance and love in our lives helps to heal pain and loss. Allowing ourselves to enter the dark and use the arts and our imagination to embrace the divine in each of us adds to the collective passion for peace.

The expressive arts allow us to transcend our analytic, rational mind and bring us into balance by engaging our imagination, intuition, and spiritual capacities. As we gain an internal sense of peace, our way of being in the world shifts, bringing inspiration and wisdom to others.

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