

Healing Through Expressions Of Art!

(Part 2)

Story by: Frank Frontis

When aches diminish, pain subsides and feelings of grief and despair fade, then eventually melt away as you merge your being into myriad, vibrantly colored oils forming ultra-real images on linen textured canvas, then you know for sure that art is doing more than just entertaining you. ... It is also helping you to heal, as well.

Art in its various forms, shapes, colors, contrasts, hues, intensities, shades, textures, tints and tones is universally regarded as a "healing modality." Anyone who performs or appreciates art of any type has, at some point in their lives, experienced an inner healing through it.

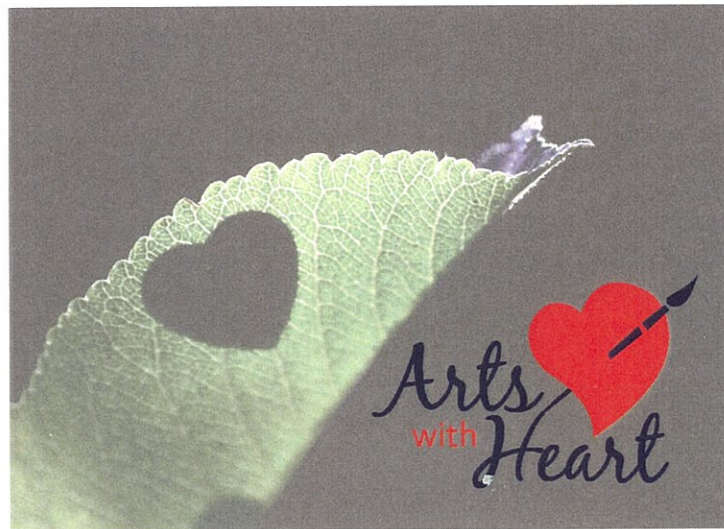
Elaine M. McFalls, MCHt, a Grief Recovery Specialist and Hypnotherapist in Greensboro (www.masteryworksinc.com), has teamed up with fine artist/teacher Jack Stone, MFA and Barbara A. Brown, MAT and Interfaith Minister, to conduct a "creative and integrative healing arts program" called "Arts With Heart" for individuals diagnosed with and being treated for cancer and other serious chronic illnesses.

The pilot program is a free, eight week course, currently held at Unity In Greensboro, involving participation in creative activities and includes the Guided Imagery and Arts Class, Taking Out The Trash Grief Recovery Program and the Basic Drawing and Introduction To Painting class.

"Leave your inner critic at home and bring your adventurous child to play!" is the program's advice to those preparing for the Guided Imagery And Art Class. According to program literature, participants began by taking a "guided imagery journey". Then, using a choice of drawing materials, they express their adventure. Since no prior art experience is needed, they are hoped to be able to express themselves as they please. In the process of participants expressing themselves through art, being supported and meeting new friends, ultimately, the Guided Imagery And Art Class seeks to provide an experience of relaxation and enjoyment for them.

Brown is facilitator for the Guided Imagery And Art Class. As an art therapist, as well as an artist (painter), she is profoundly aware of the positive impact of art in healing. In particular, she is observant of how art and art therapy benefitted individuals in abuse-survivor groups she worked with early in her career in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"When I did these groups of abuse-survivors," she says, "what I saw was—they got in touch with their spirits and with who they were inside, and it helped to bring up... things bubbled up to the surface as they were ready—and as the person was ready to deal with them. And as it bubbled up, it did it a little bit at a time so that they were able to cope and deal with it a little bit at a time. And it released these energies from their "body-mind-spirit" so that they could have healing, have flow and so that they could get in touch with



the spirit inside of them."

Brown says that participants in her art therapy program told her "they reached places they were not able to reach with just the 'mental talking'[conventional psychotherapy]. It cleared things they needed clearing they weren't even aware of until it would bubble up," she explains. "It [inner conflict] shows up as metaphor in the art. And I teach people how to read their art for stuff—and they get their own answers. ... It's primal!" she insists, gushing forth a bit of her own primal energy. "We had visual before we had language."

Though Brown paints a vivid picture of how the creative process helps individuals because it "brings things up for them to work through," she's careful to mention that just because "emotional stuff" is not immediately present through creative activity, that's no indication that healing is not occurring. "It may come up later," she says.

The Basic Drawing and Intro To Painting portion of Arts With Heart, according to program literature, "...introduce clients to simple pencil and charcoal drawing, focusing on explorations of observed and imaginary subject matter." The goal of the class as indicated by the program guide is to "encourage focused observation thru drawing" as a way to "quiet the mind and find the simple flow of hand and eye-coordination." Ultimately, the class is said to bring relaxation to participants and enhance their "receptive awareness of both outer and inner worlds."

Stone is facilitator for the Basic Drawing and Intro To Painting class. Stone, an artist for over thirty-five years, has also taught art to individuals ranging in age from five years-old to ninety-five in settings varying from elementary schools, community colleges, a local university, elder-care facilities and, as well, privately.

"Deepening the powers of observation deepens the powers of imagination and the understanding of Self" has been the bedrock of Stone's teaching. He points out one particular incident he's observed where this idea may have been of particular relevance.

"When someone connects with a painting... they connect with it to a really deep degree," he says. "I had one occasion not too long ago where somebody came into my studio and saw a painting—and started crying! She burst into tears and became very emotional. We talked for a while and she started crying again.

"I said to my self 'what in the world is going on here?' Something inside that painting triggered something inside of her!" says Stone with a slight chuckle.

Continuing in describing his work, he says, "The painting was a kind of vortex. It was abstract—to use that word. A vortex of speeding particles framed by some background of semi-chaos. ...I don't know. It was something about the vibration of the painting that just locked on [to her]."

"What can I say?" he muses to himself. "She was obviously going through a lot of stuff. I don't know where it was healing or just therapy? I think ultimately it will be healing because she was actually meditating in the presence of this painting a number of different times."

The Taking Out The Trash grief recovery focus of Arts With Heart views the subject of grief this way: "Grief and Loss isn't just about death—it's about anything you ever wanted better, more or different and it didn't turn out." It goes on to explain that such matters may be related to health issues, moving, finances, divorce, relationships, failed expectations and many other things. "If you have experienced one or more losses, and you wish to move beyond the pain," it's program literature states, "this program offers you the probability of a

richer and more rewarding life."

McFalls facilitates Taking Out The Trash. She illustrates a clear picture of how art helps participants in her program deal with the grief "enturbulating" their minds and hearts. "Once they're [participants] able to process things differently through art," she explains, "they discover that the stories in their heads were not as bad as they thought they were. It [art] helps them to get out of their heads and puts them in a role of enjoyment where they're feeling good about what they're doing. When we're feeling good," she says, "the healing process can begin."

Here, McFalls is emphasizing to us that it's not with a simple stroke of a brush that art paints over or colors away all of our pain, symptoms or problems. Rather, she is suggesting that anyone with any type of illness of any kind moves toward the healing process when their feelings of distress, through participation in art, shifts to an experience of enjoyment, allowing them to begin feeling good about themselves and about what they're doing.

"These are the conditions," she says elatedly, smiling, "that set the foundation for healing. Anytime you can unload, you can heal. The healing can't happen without it!"

McFalls insists that there's no "best form of art" to use to work with individuals. "Everyone has art within themselves—regardless of age," she contends. "Whatever works best with the person," according to her, "is the best form."

If not yourself, perhaps you know someone else with a physical illness, a mental or emotional issue or some other type of personal challenge in their lives. Let them know about art therapy so that they may look into it and find out how it may be able to help them. Invite them to a studio where they may encounter art that stirs, awakens or "heals." Or simply, encourage them to sing, paint, draw, weave, dance, pluck, play, drum, color alongside you—often! You and they just might be surprised at the healing benefit derived through the power of art.

The upcoming August issue will discuss "Transforming Through Expressions Of Art," the third and final part of "Clearing, Healing, Transforming Through Expressions Of Art."