

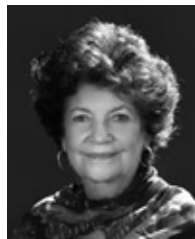


## Thanatology and the Arts

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## Expressive Arts and Thanatology: An Image a Day<sup>1</sup>



By Sandra L.  
Bertman, PhD, FT

*The ultimate goal  
of all art is relief  
from suffering and  
the rising above it.*  
—Gustav Mahler



Figure 1. ©Deidre Scherer, "Mother and Child," 2001. Fabric and thread. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Expressive therapy is predicated on the assumption that people can heal through use of the imagination and various forms of creative expression in the arts—literary, musical, dramatic, and visual. Expressive therapy, also known as creative arts therapy, differs from traditional art expression in emphasizing the creative process rather than the final product or work. Engaging in the arts—including the expressive therapies—as participant or observer is in itself a creative act, often catalyst enough to arouse our senses and stimulate our imaginations, causing us to wonder, to analyze, to feel connected (or disconnected), to be inspired. The engagement with art involves attention, analysis, identification, catharsis, and insight. The beauty of the process is its openness to interpretations, to the way any of us—therapist, nurse, patient, client, colleague—takes it in and uses it for oneself, in personal and professional contexts (adapted from Bertman, 1999, p. 3).

### Why Write?

Artists are lucky. They are adept at using their own media to work out their questions, joy, or anguish. Adrienne Rich turns to her craft, poetry, to explore her own interior experience with cancer. Her words in "Diving Into the Wreck" (1973)

prod others to face empty spaces, to trust the unknown, the shady areas, and their own creativity in order to find the seeds of healing:

*I came to explore the wreck.  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
I came to see the damage that was  
done.  
And the treasures that prevail.*  
Physician and poet Rafael Campo makes no bones about resorting to writing poetry for insight, solace, and mastery. He wrote in the poem "Song Before Dying":  
*I have a cancer in my arm. I write  
So I can see it better—on the page—  
. . .  
It's not the cancer, but the thoughts  
I fear: . . .  
It looks so harmless when it's poetry  
(1996, p. 77).*

Campo suggests in this poem that just naming the disease—cancer—writing it down on paper, puts it out there. It's the Rumpelstiltskin effect. Finding the right name for something gives us control over it. When the queen guessed Rumpelstiltskin's name, he tore himself in two and troubled her no longer. As in the fairy tale, if the problem is named, it is somehow hobbled. One is able to see past the mental fears, to look squarely at the "damage that was done," put it in perspective, and focus on the "treasures" that remain.

Author's note: The articles in this issue of *The Forum* document and expand on the creative uses of expressive therapies. A repertoire of case studies from the visual and literary arts and from popular culture is being compiled to elicit concerns, introduce concepts, enhance skills, explore attitudes, and promote healing. Please feel free to share your own experiences with the author. (Image-a-Day Repertoire Project/www.sandrabertman.com or sbertman@comcast.net)

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## Valuing Expressive Therapy in Grief Work



By Linda Goldman, MS, NBCC, LCPC, FT

*When we . . . engage in the arts as initiators or observers, our openness to . . . creative acts is often catalyst enough to enable grieving (and) stimulate the search for meaning (Bertman, 1999, p.3).*

A terminally ill child's drawing of her journey through cancer, a teen's painting of grief after a father's suicide, or a mother's pain depicted in a song she wrote after her son's murder, are sensitive examples of the power of self-expression through the arts. Music, art, play, drama, and other expressive arts allow the griever to go beyond the limitations of age, ability, and the spoken or written word to embrace an inner world more easily liberated through these media.

### Art Therapy

Too often words predominate as the important way of expressing emotions. This can be difficult for children and adults who may be unable to articulate feelings (Davis, 1989). Art therapy provides an avenue of expression that may reduce anxiety, increase memory retrieval, and share narratives. Often expression through art creates that "safe space" to communicate enormous reservoirs of grief in ways direct conversation may not permit. A simple drawing can speak volumes.

At the 2008 ADEC conference, Dr. Leila Gupta presented her work with children living with war, disaster, and trauma. A boy from Rwanda had witnessed his father's murder. Dr. Gupta encouraged him to create four drawings: life before the event, the boy's experience of the event, how life is now, and how he would like life to be in the future. Dr. Gupta incorporated the concept of creating a keepsake book. Through art therapy, the boy was encouraged to share his experience, ending with a future hopeful outlook. He drew himself as an automobile mechanic.

Artwork can create a broad canvas of emotions and imagery. Silverman, Nickman, and Worden's research indicates 74% of children questioned locate their person who died in a place called heaven (1992, p. 497). Michelle drew a picture of her mom in heaven surrounded by friends and family, her dog, and a castle where only the great live, like her mom. Her mom loved Elvis, and she included his house, disco dancing, and a buffet of her favorite foods. Drawing a picture about heaven "helps children feel comforted and safe if they can hold a positive image of where their person is" (Goldman, 2009, p. 42).



### Music Therapy

Music enables children and adults to go beyond their cognitive mind and access deep feelings too challenging to articulate. "Songs are an important vehicle for expression of thoughts, feelings, and emotions" (Rogers, 2007, p. 103). J. E. Rogers develops several creative exercises involving music that can be adapted for all ages. One example is a life review through song, with the young person or adult sharing tunes ranging from lullabies, to wedding music, to relaxation melodies (p. 102). Kirkland (1999) suggests this life review can include "songs of different eras, favorite songs, and songs with lyrics that relate to life shared" (p. 146). Rogers also proposes (p.103) writing a song or modifying an already existing melody.

After 9/11 Andrew's school counselor asked his ninth grade class to bring in music to describe their emotions about the traumatic event.

One student played "God Bless America" and explained how much America meant to him. Another classmate shared the song "From a Distance" and conveyed her vision of world peace. Andrew loved the song "My Hero" and explained that was how he felt about the firefighters and police officers who were injured or killed helping others during the traumatic event. He said, "I wish I could be like that!" "Qualitative investigations have indicated that music therapy groups may be beneficial for bereaved teenagers. The existing relationship between young people and music serves as a platform for connectedness and emotional expression that is utilized within a therapeutic, support group format" (McFerran, Roberts, & O'Grady, 2010, p. 541).

Melissa's baby, Sarah, died of sudden infant death syndrome. Her grief ran very deep. Sometimes she was unable to find words to use to express the pain she was experiencing at never seeing Sarah again and never watching her grow up. Melissa asked if she could share a song

### Learn more from Linda Goldman by ordering these ADEC educational materials:

*Working With Children and Grief in Today's World*  
Webinar originally recorded November 18, 2009,  
available at [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org), under the "shop" link

*A Look at Children's Grief*  
A two-module CD available at [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org)  
under the "shop" link

### Valuing Expressive Therapy in Grief Work

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that honored her innermost feelings. "I just couldn't talk about it," she explained, "but the song understood my silent thoughts."

#### **Drama and Projective Play**

Silverman observes: "The goal of helping children of all ages to cope with death is to promote their competence, facilitate their ability to cope, and recognize that children are active participants in their lives" (2000, p. 42). Projective play and role play are expressive techniques that help achieve this goal. Projective play allows many young children to work through complex issues in their grief process. Through using imagination they can safely express thoughts and feelings. Children have a limited verbal ability for sharing feelings and a limited emotional capacity to tolerate the pain of loss. They communicate feelings, wishes, fears, and attempted resolutions to their problems through play (Webb, 2002).

Props such as helping figures, costumes, and building blocks are helpful in recreating an experience and promoting role play. Self-empowerment emerges when one can imagine alternatives and possible solutions, release feelings, and create dialogue through projective play. *Children Also Grieve* (Goldman, 2005) is an interactive story told through the eyes of a Tibetan terrier named Henry. Using a dog as a vehicle for expression, children can role play and relate to the thoughts and feelings Henry shares in his grief.

Puppet play, sand play, telephones, nursing bottles, dishes, dollhouses, and doll play are props suggested by Eliana Gil (1991, p. 64). Toy figures and stuffed animals are also a safe way for children to speak of their grief and trauma. "I wonder what Bart the puppet would say about the trauma. Let's let Bart tell us about his story."

Toy telephones can create a private role play conversation with a loved one. Jennifer was 6 years old when her father died. "I really miss my dad," she explained. She picked up the toy telephone and began a very ongoing, ever present dialogue with Dad. "Hi Daddy. How are you? I love you. I miss you. Are you OK? Let me tell you about my day." Projective props allow grievers to work through challenging spaces without the need to directly verbalize them. "This play allows and provides an outlet for thoughts and feelings and helps participants adapt to their life situation" (Goldman, 2002, p. 123).

What may appear to be a frivolous play activity may actually be a profound avenue for young people to work through their feelings. After 9/11, children spontaneously built towers with blocks. They proceeded to knock them down with toy airplanes and watch the buildings fall. Mary pretended to be a nurse helping those hurt at the Pentagon crash, and Tyler put on the fire hat and gloves and said, "Don't worry I'll save you. Run for your lives." These children "felt empowered through play to take action and control over the difficult experience they had witnessed" (Goldman, 2004, p. 122).

Joey survived hurricane Katrina. He used the sand table to place figures of himself, Mom, and Dad, and his dog, Max. "I couldn't find my dog, my house was gone, and all of my stuff was missing. We were scared. We didn't know if help would ever come." Shen (2002) conducted a statistical study on the effectiveness of child-centered play therapy after

the Taiwanese earthquake. His work demonstrated a significant reduction of anxiety and suicidal ideation, which supports the effectiveness of this play therapy. "Play allows children to use symbolic expression, so that they often feel safer to reveal difficult feelings . . . Children who are considered to have avoidance symptoms may be more able to articulate their traumatic experiences in a play therapy setting" (Ogawa, p. 25).

#### **Conclusion**

What we can mention, we can manage.

This is a useful paradigm for all caring adults when working with the bereaved. Allowing children and adults to acknowledge and express thoughts and feelings through art, music, and drama can be an ongoing and integral piece of their grief process. By opening communication through expressive therapies, we can create a bridge between the difficulty of sharing and releasing thoughts and feelings and the potential to access these inner states safely as part of the bereavement process.

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