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# Hospice techniques

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## The use of creative art forms to enhance counselling skills of hospice professionals in dealing with the bereaved

Margaret J. Zamierowski, MPS  
Abby Gordon, RN

**P**oetry is indispensable—if I only knew what for.<sup>1</sup> Many years ago, Jean Cocteau made this note of the intrinsic value of the creative process in man's attempt to discover meaning in human experience: universally known yet not so easily understood. In this paper, we examine the use of two creative forms, poetry and collage, conducted in a group setting in exploration of the bereavement process among health care professionals who care for the dying and their families.

In *Facing Death: Images, In-*

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Margaret J. Zamierowski, MPS, is Bereavement Coordinator, The Brooklyn Hospice, Brooklyn, New York.

Abby Gordon, RN, is Administrator, The Brooklyn Hospice, Brooklyn, New York.

*sights and Interventions*, author Sandra Bertman discusses the capacity of the arts to portray simultaneously the dualities of life (and death) and, therefore, the usefulness of including the study of art and literature in death education.<sup>2</sup> The inherent properties of art have been previously examined by Ernst Fischer in *The Necessity of Art*. He states that man's experience of his own life is not enough, that he always longs for something outside of himself, that he longs to be whole. He describes art as being "the indispensable means for this merging of the individual with the whole." The duality of being involved yet distanced, absorbed in reality yet able to control it, is the process of creativity.<sup>3</sup> But Rollo May brings to this

dialogue perhaps the most intimate connection in the relationship between death and creativity in his book, *The Courage to Create*: "...the essence of being human is

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that, in the brief moment we exist on this spinning planet, we can love some persons and some things, in spite of the fact that time and death will ultimately claim us all...By the creative act, however, we are able to

reach beyond our own death."<sup>4</sup> "Creativity is a yearning for immortality...we know that each of us must develop the courage to confront death. Yet, we must also rebel and struggle against it. Creativity comes from this struggle—out of the rebellion the creative act is born."<sup>5</sup>

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Fischer states: "In order to be an artist it is necessary to seize hold and transform experience into memory, memory into expression, material into form."<sup>6</sup> The artwork that results from an act of creativity can be seen as the form which embodies our expression of inner feeling.

The reason for our choice of the use of poetry was aptly put by Jean Cocteau, as stated earlier. Edith Wallace, in *Healing through the arts: A Jungian approach*, articulates reasons for using collage. "Working with tissue paper, glue and brush brought forth freer shapes, which seemed to emerge from a greater depth of the psyche: it acted as an opener and channel builder. Eventually shapes would emerge that had great impact and meaning."<sup>7</sup>

The use of creative modalities affords us the opportunity to meet a particular challenge to many practitioners in the human service professions: how to accomplish the contact with and expression of the individual's inner world within the context of a group setting. Edith Wallace also states: "All art is meditation..."

With all the excitement, once one takes brush in hand a calm descends, a concentration ensues, which makes the 'listening' possible."<sup>8</sup> And Molly Fumia, in *Safe passage: Words to help the grieving hold fast and let go*, provides us with reasons to come together in a group. "Grief is an ancient, universal power that links all human beings together. It empowers, opens us up to the connectedness of human suffering... (and) the healing possibilities in shared grieving for a world so steeped in sorrow."<sup>9</sup>

Four bereavement groups were conducted. Poetry was used with a group of graduate nursing students at The State University of New York (SUNY) Health Science Center at Brooklyn and with a group of The Brooklyn Hospice social workers, nurses and other health care professionals. Collage was employed in two groups of The Brooklyn Hospice staff, one consisted of professional workers and the other consisted of undergraduate student interns. All groups consisted of individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Both sexes and a wide age span were represented.

As illustrated in the collages and poems, five processes were identified that depict various aspects of grief work for the professional. They are:

- Discovery of cultural diversities and similarities;
- The role of symbolism;
- The effects of witnessing suffering in patients;
- "Opening the door" to the expression of grief for the new worker;

- Making ongoing internal processes external for the seasoned staff member.

### *Cultural aspects*

The first poem included in Appendix 1, *Death wishes*, was written during a training session of graduate nursing students. Caribbean, Filipino, European-American, and Afro-American cultures were represented. Spontaneous discussion of cultural aspects led to the creation of a group poem. Each of the images were articulated by individuals in the class, many of whom were trying to describe ways in which people of their cultures mourn. Of particular note is the line, "The appearance of a bat or butterfly signals death." The group was amazed to discover that a few cultures, Caribbean and Filipino, held this belief. "The phone ringing at midnight..." was acknowledged to be a universal notion. The group was able to educate each other to their own culture as well as to identify with shared personal experiences.

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A striking feature of collages done by people from the Caribbean is the use of brilliant color and form. Some used images of the sea, with its bright blues and greens, as well as strong religious images. These individuals were able to speak to the rest of the group about family and

church activities that make up an integral part of the social fabric and, therefore, the grief process.

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***...these individuals became mindful of the need to "take care" ... in painful areas which they had grown accustomed to viewing as previously resolved issues.***

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### ***Symbolism***

The use of the visual image was a powerful tool for the depiction of symbolism and its role in uncovering meaning for individuals who participated in collage activities. Discussion in these group sessions centered around exploration of these symbols. Time and mortality seemed to be depicted by the use of clocks and watches. One hospice worker used her images of time to illustrate some of the cyclical elements of life and death. Sea and sky seemed to suggest eternal and universal forces. Candles and flowers depicted spiritual themes. Guns represented murder and some of the starker elements of death. Naked bodies were used to represent sex, death and vulnerability. Many box-like structures were viewed as representation of feeling trapped. One worker identified her use of a car as depicting confinement of her own emotion as well as a means of protection of her inner self against the onslaught of the pain of others. Food, an almost universal symbol of nurturance, was used in the specific context of shared death rituals, such

as wakes, funerals, and "sitting shiva."

Juxtaposition of words and images elicited a lot of material from group members. One student, contrasting images of sex and murder and death, spoke at length of the forces in his urban world: High crime rates and AIDS, to name a few. He seemed to be illustrating how working with dying patients elicited some of the everyday fears he carries around with him. The collage project contributed to the integration of these various elements of his life.

### ***Suffering***

A few hospice workers used words connoting suffering and pain in their collages. This was a disturbing discovery for them at first. Members of the group discussed the ways they usually avoided awareness of these aspects of death and dying: Attending to concrete tasks, busying themselves with comforting others. However, in group discussion, and afterwards, in workday interactions, they were able to acknowledge and more closely identify the powerful effect that witnessing suffering in others had on them. Becoming conscious of this phenomenon afforded them the opportunity to lend each other support and to identify individual means of coping.

### ***"Opening the door"***

One worker, new to hospice, began to use the discoveries she had made in the bereavement sessions to process her grief reactions with patients. A Panamanian woman from an Hispanic culture, she had identified religious themes that were important to her in her collage. Later, she experienced the impending death of a patient as particularly

traumatic. It seems that the patient's family share the same religious beliefs that she does and are Hispanic. The patient chose to accept the religion, which he had long denied, in her presence during one of her visits with him. She was able to identify personal bereavement factors, in this case, by discussing her reaction with fellow staff members. She had in fact been the one to articulate the image that inspired the group poem in the poetry bereavement session with hospice staff. After discussing how hard it is to end home visits with patients when realizing that this may be the last time she would see them alive, she stated, "I can't stand to leave when they're begging me not to go." ( See Appendix 2, "Begging me not to go.")

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***This paper clearly demonstrates that hospice personnel have a strong need for exploration of their own bereavement process in order to work more effectively with their clients and families.***

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### ***Making the internal process external***

A few seasoned workers were somewhat amazed at elements in their collages. Expressions of reactions to others' suffering and ways of protecting oneself were themes that, although not new to these workers, had a profound effect on these individuals. Similarly, elements in the

## Appendix 1.

### Death Images

Seeing my mother standing there, watching.  
Feeling someone pulling at me when my grandfather died.  
Seeing the windows open and close at the patient's last breath.  
Hearing my mother's voice, calling my name, so clear.  
The sensation of fizzing "bubbles" arising from my father's body.  
The sweet scent of flowers, as if she just passed by.  
Your hair stands up, you get a chill, when a spirit is near.  
The dog howls when it senses death.  
The appearance of a bat or a butterfly signals death.  
Dreams of weddings and funerals interchange meaning.  
Dreams of someone dying...don't tell anyone!  
The phone ringing at midnight...no one there.

poem produced by hospice staff described ways in which the workers were avoiding their own painful memories by focusing on their caregiver roles with patients and families. ("I see my mother, My mind goes blank; I throw it off.") It seemed that the periodic re-discovery of familiar themes was just as important as discovering new ones in the process of grief work among professionals. Each of these individuals became mindful of the need to "take care" of herself once again in painful areas which they had grown accustomed to viewing as previously resolved issues.

In summary, various elements of grief work were illustrated in the use of poetry and collage among staff who care for the dying and the bereaved. Reasons for the use of creative modalities in staff bereavement groups were established. Cultural aspects were explored as well as aspects of grief that are specific to hospice workers and other health care

their clients and families.

## References

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2. Bertman S: Facing death: Images, insights and interventions. Hemisphere Publishing Corp., Worcester, Mass., 1991.
3. Ibid:8-9.
4. May R: The courage to create. Bantain Books, New York, NY, 1976:19.
5. Ibid:27.
6. Fischer:9.
7. Wallace E: Healing through the visual arts: A Jungian approach. In Aron Rubin J (ed): Approaches to art therapy: Theory and technique. Bruner/Mazel, New York, NY, 1987:114-133:120.
8. Ibid:123.
9. Fumia M: Safe passage: Words to help the grieving hold fast and let go. Conari Press, Emeryville, Calif.:3.

professionals. This paper clearly demonstrates that hospice personnel have a strong need for exploration of their own bereavement process in order to work more effectively with

## Appendix 2.

### Begging me not to go

Begging me not to go.  
We're friends so close so soon.  
The courage of the verbal ones who don't want to suffer—but do.  
I see my mother. My mind goes blank; I throw it off.  
People say they understand but how can they until they have experienced loss?  
I see myself hugging, comforting, stroking one that just had a loss.  
Why did it have to happen to me?  
When will it end—my life is on hold.  
I hope you'll be there when I go.  
Why am I working here? I know...to bring as much comfort as possible in the end.  
I've learned to live for now because no one is assured of tomorrow.