

Perspective Article

Abilities in Disabilities: Art As Healing Metaphor In A Contemporary Society

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Choose not to place 'DIS', in your ability. The human spirit is one of abilities, perseverance and courage that no disability can steal away. One of the favorite and healthier lifestyle is reading some amazing and motivating autobiographies from outstanding individuals. From a number of of such books written by some physically challenged artists, this article highlights art as healing character. Some narratives in this piece of study has helped to prove, beyond reasonable doubt, that art has the power to open inner closets, airs out the cellars, and as a result brings healing to whoever trends its path. Some of the findings reveal that there are abilities in disabilities. Again, visual arts perform therapeutic functions to most with psychological, physical, emotional and mental disorders. These were followed by conclusion and possible recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of physical deformity, as described by Martha Beck, in her book, *Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic* was a source of almost unending curiosity, offering its audience both a sense of delight and disgust that could be endlessly recaptured and renewed.¹ The book describes health as a complete state of wholeness. This is in agreement with the *World Health Organization* (WHO)'s definition as cited in the organization preamble to her constitution. WHO has defined holistic health as:

...viewing man in his totality within a wide ecological spectrum and emphasizing the view that ill health or disease is brought about by an imbalance, or disequilibrium, of man in his total ecological system and not only by the causative agent and pathogenic evolution.²

This important perspective, as echoed in the book, defines health as a state of complete physical,

mental and social well-being, rather than a mere absence of disease or infirmity. Implied in this definition is the tie to health outcomes or changes in health as a result of an action; in the present case, the connection between artistic engagements, physiological and biological manifestations of that connection.

THE HEALING POWER OF ART

The author of *Inspired Link: Curative Power of Expressive Arts*,³ Olunde Sanyaolu developed a process called the Creative Connection that interweaves all the expressive arts - movement, sound, drawing, painting, writing, and guided imagery - to tap into the deep wellspring of creativity within us. It is important to state here that visual art heals, as it helps to reclaim selves and as well help others get back themselves as actively

playful, spirited, and conscious individuals as illustrated in *Inspired Link*. The book further emphasizes the importance of psychological safety and freedom while using the creative arts. Art has proven to be an important and reliable facilitator.

A book, *Healing: The Power of the Creative Arts*,⁴ written by Lucy Osunbor, records the importance in engaging creative arts in healing. Facing an illness or health challenge often involves far more than managing physical symptoms. It can affect the whole being including our identity, confidence, faith, emotions, way of life, ability to do daily activities and relationship with others. Many people find they have strong thoughts or feelings but they're not sure how to cope with or express them. Lucy Osunbor opines that for some people, it's a period of deep inward reflection, perhaps with a sense of grief or loss. And for some, it's a moment when the desire to be engaged with life grows stronger, and they seek to take in the beauty of the world and be social and creative. The book witnesses how arts can be a powerful healing experience for people facing illness and other health challenges. Therefore, what has creativity done with health, healing and well-being? The book stresses that engaging in creative process heals. Making art to express thoughts and emotions that can be hard to put into words, lowering stress and anxiety, finding meaning to life experiences, shift focus away from pain or stressful thoughts to creative activities that are soothing, enjoyable and fun, create something unique that gives a sense of pleasure and accomplishment, the book emphasized.

In line with Osunbor, YemiOgunlana's *Elongated Existence*,⁵ narrates how hundred years ago, it was commonly believed that people could not be creative past middle age. Now most people can expect a "second middle age"—a stage of adulthood between fifty and seventy-five created by our increased longevity and good health. Today, people in middle age and beyond sometimes feel that life is just beginning. A new sense of identity is discovered and defined along with an enhanced sense of self. During these years, art can be a healing force, she stresses. Artistic expression is an important psychosocial activity. One can create art by oneself or one can attend classes ranging from beginning drawing to advanced printmaking. Sometimes one can express oneself visually when one is unable to express oneself verbally. Art provides means of communication and self-expression - and a way to alleviate stress. Art also helps to change moods and come out of depression.

In the same page with Ogunlana, *Art and Healing: Using Expressive Art to Heal Your Body, Mind and Spirit*,⁶ by Barbara Ganim, observes that medical professionals are beginning to recognize the role creative art plays in healing process. Increasingly, the

book observes that art in medicine programme is emerging throughout the world, sighting the success of University of Florida's general arts in medicine programme and other similar set of activities which were embarked upon by the Oxford University Hospitals (OUH), Headley Way, Oxford, with the aim of assessing their effects. It also examines the relationship between variables and participation in the arts in medicine programme. The book recognizes the inherent stress that patients undergo in hospitals. While waiting for doctors in hospitals, it is pretty bleak to stare at a blank wall. Sick or not, individual prefers a view of a good work of art on a wall. Yet in an era of escalating healthcare costs, it is important to justify spending on art and design. Art installations and paintings are given more attention in our hospitals today. Hospital management are putting big money on art, transforming what were once cold, sterile spaces into mini-museums and contemporary art destinations. More and more hospitals are now recognizing the healing power of art, Ganim asserts.

Art for Special Needs describes the experiences of Peter, a learning disabled child, in a special art programme⁷. The objectives of the programme were threefold: to improve the body image concept of children with learning disabilities, through art activities which focused on the human figure; to learn more about the learning disabled child's behaviors and skills in an art classroom; to determine what kind of special teaching strategies are necessary for teaching art to this population of learners. Although Peter's response to and progress in the programme was erratic at the beginning his later accomplishments demonstrated that behavioral adjustment and improvement of his body image concept had occurred through his experiences in the art programme.

Health psychologists, as recorded by Kristin Dahl and Stephanie Rice in their book, *The Art of Wellness*,⁸ cautiously look at how the arts might be used in a variety of ways to heal emotional injuries, reduce symptoms, and alter behaviours and thinking patterns. Given the ubiquity of creative expression, as well as the relative ease of engagement, the extent to which psychological effects are sustainably health enhancing is an important area for investigation. The book also simplifies the mixed messages, and educates with a deeper understanding of holistic health. It's about creating wellness in all areas of life and nourishing the body from the inside out. Everyone is different. So inside this book gives artistic tips and tools to help design a more balanced and vibrant life that works; evidence that art heals.

Lisa Rappaport and Linda Schulz's book *Creative Play Activities for Children with Disabilities*⁹ states more specifically the evidence that engagement with artistic activities, either as an observer of the

creative efforts of others or as an initiator of one's own creative efforts, can enhance one's moods, emotions, and other psychological states as well as have a salient impact on important physiological parameters. It views diseases as a nationwide burden, with neurological disorder being the leading cause of stroke and the incidence of continued increase in spinal cord injury now affecting more people than before. In support of this view is the *National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) Fact Sheet*,¹⁰ a book that records experiences of neurological diseases and the affected which highlights that diseases are associated with psychosocial difficulties such as depression and chronic stress.

*My Left Foot*¹¹ is an autobiography of Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy on June 5, 1932 in Dublin, Ireland. As one of 13 surviving children, Brown went on to be an author, painter and poet. Brown begins his book by telling the reader about his early childhood. When he was four months old, Brown's mother was the first to notice that there was something wrong with his health. He could not hold his head upright or control his body movements. After seeking medical advice, the family's worst fears were confirmed: Christy was physically handicapped and suffered from an incurable disability called cerebral palsy. His family, besides his mother, thought he was an idiot. They told his mother to give up. Although the doctors did not believe in Brown's mental intelligence, his mother did not lose faith in her son and supported him as a full member of the family. A transforming moment occurs in the young boy's life that proves him to be intelligent. He discovers that he can control his left foot and toes. At the age of five, he snatches a piece of yellow chalk from his sister with his left foot. He marks the letter "A" on the floor with his foot and the help of his mother. He had wanted to make, what he described as a wild sort of scribble with it on the slate. It is from this incident that the book received its title. From that moment, Brown had found a way to express himself since he could not speak like a healthy child.

In *Here for a Purpose* written by Marc Alexander,¹² Tom Yendell was born without arms as a result of his mother having been prescribed the drug Thalidomide during pregnancy. The youngest of five children, Tom's parents were determined that he would have a 'normal' upbringing, striving to have him accepted in mainstream education. However, eventually they conceded that a specialist environment would be more beneficial and Tom was enrolled at Lord Mayor Treloar's school. This was a decision that was to prove influential in Tom's future career as an artist, mainly due to the charismatic art teacher at Treloar's school, he later took a foundation course and a degree in Expressive Arts at Brighton. It was here that he met his future wife, Lucy, and the couple now has two children.

Tom is still involved with Lord Mayor Treloar's school as well as many community projects. His latest initiative is TEABAG, a charity providing books and educational facilities for children in Ghana. He is responsible for running many of the Associations exhibitions around the country, throughout the year. Tom also organizes the annual Artists Workshops where all the British based Mouth & Foot Painting Artists come together to work, try new techniques and discuss business. In recognition of his contribution to the organization, Tom was promoted to the Board of Artists without Arms in July 2013.

*Remind Me Who I Am Again*¹³ is a biographical note of Oxfordshire mouth-painter, Keith Jansz, who is artistically skillful. With flawless brushstrokes, his colours sing and his compositions are thoughtful. An incredible personality, you certainly don't need to know his story to admire his art work. The book records the totality of Keith Jansz life, how he started painting, for the first time since junior school after having run the London Marathon for Barnardo's in 1995. Just two months later he suffered a broken neck in a tragic car accident, resulting in complete paralysis from the shoulders down. After six months in the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Keith returned home to begin the painful process of adjusting to his new situation. Unable to do anything for himself, Keith naturally experienced the depths of despair. In December 1996, Keith's mother-in-law gave him a book entitled 'Painters First', a collection of biographies of the Mouth Painting Artists. Keith was able to empathise with the artists tragic stories and was inspired by reading of their triumphs and successes. Eager to encourage this spark of interest, Keith's wife, Cindy, arranged a meeting with mouth artist Trevor who persuaded Keith to try painting by holding a brush in his mouth. Despite disastrous early efforts, Keith persevered. Since then Keith's paintings have been sold as reproductions worldwide. He has held numerous solo exhibitions in the U.K., U.S. and Italy and his paintings have been exhibited in museums around the world including Lisbon, Madrid, Copenhagen, Shanghai and Atlanta.

"Giant in a wheelchair" is an article by Babatunde Sulaiman and published in Nigeria by *Tell Magazine*.¹⁴ The article reveals how Idowu Akinrolabu's hope for a promising future was eroded. Idowu Akinrolabu was an able and agile young man in the first 20 years of his existence. But later in life, he suffered a catastrophic change in fortune, when he lost the power to do things; including taking his meal and observing his toilet to an illness he initially thought was malaria. And ever since, his life had been one bundle of denials, discomfort and painful joy. The essay records how he was trained as a mouth artist at the operational therapy department of Lagos University Teaching Hospital and how, with a rare strength of determination

and courage, he faced life with even more zeal than ever. Later in life, he became a paean to the dignity of labour.

CONCLUSION

'Art is unquestionably one of the purest and highest elements in human happiness. It trains the mind through the eye, and the eye through the mind. As the sun colours flowers, so does art colour life'¹⁵ 'Art making has the ability to move people along their journey of grief and loss into a more balanced place of healing and hope. In the face of tragedy, the creative process can help re-calibrate a mourner's life'¹⁶

However, it could be accepted that there are abilities in disabilities. Visual arts may be used to restore ability in disability, thereby, making disability immaterial in the world of creativity. Visual arts perform therapeutic functions to most people with certain disabilities. Merely viewing or seeing art works, particularly, visit to sculpture gardens and works therein

help bring awareness to oneself, thereby reducing stress and other traumatic experiences.¹⁷

Visual arts help in reactivating and calming down emotions and other physical, mental and psychological disorders in humans. Also, it must be noted that visual art galleries¹⁸ or gardens serve as healing or rehabilitation centres for people with learning disabilities, behavioural or social problems in the communities. Silently or subconsciously, check, reduce, control, or remove on the long run, such emotional or mental disabilities which naturally affect the human mind¹⁹.

The study recommends that visual arts should be encouraged in the society, particularly, in various institutions. Government and private organizations and individuals should establish Art galleries, museums and sculpture gardens to cater for the needs of those with emotional and psychological disabilities. Hospitals may provide Art Section or department where patients could interact with various works of art, some with exciting colours that could calm down emotions.

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