

As a shy and painfully insecure young woman, I found concrete ways to be in the world, even though I did not believe I was “good” at expressing myself. By creating artifacts of my experience (photographs, doodles, poems and physical memories of dancing and music) I have things I can see, relate to, and talk with - then and even years later. At expressive arts therapy school, I learned more about why making art of my confusion, pain and pleasure is so important to healing.

It seems that the human body “remembers” everything at chemical and physical levels. Experiences that my conscious mind cannot digest or make sense of stay fresh in my body. When those intense, unfinished experiences are triggered, my whole being wants to seize the opportunity to act and then come to rest - regardless of what the here and now demands!

In my recovery, I came to respect the images that my body and mind put out into the world. When I encounter something I have made, the dialogue between that image and my grounded self can be trusted. By noticing the power of these encounters and carving out a time and place to give the meeting space, I engage the things that need attention. For example, waves were the first things I painted in my first day treatment art therapy group. For years, I was embarrassed because waves were all I seemed to draw, over and over. Now, I look forward to playing with them in many forms - color, movement and words. In fact, I still have long, meaningful encounters with waves!

Healing through creativity, in my Buddhist practice and with the peer recovery movement have all taught me that I am the authority on what, when and how to digest my experiences. I have also learned to choose my relationships, who I want standing by. Rather than the observations of others, the actual connection between my life, my environment and the artifacts I have placed in it are my best guides for how to live. My relationships with people, also artifacts I have created, are some of my most valuable sources of learning.

The “fight, flight or freeze” response is something else I’ve learned a lot about. It is what we mammals do when the essence of our life, or someone we love, is threatened. Once it is activated, this surge of action takes over my whole system, interrupting everything else. Memory, learning, expression and vulnerability of any kind are not possible once I am primed to protect life itself. But growth and learning are exactly what calls up those intense experiences that I haven’t fully digested, like trauma and neglect. So “freeze” is a response I often have when staying flexible and open is needed most! I find that art-making is an effective place for the encounter between my reactive body and the pressing moment. All the conflicting needs of my hurt self, my responsible self, and my compassionate heart can meet in one image.

For me, all of these bodies, brains and objects interacting mean recovery can be real for anyone anywhere. It takes individual and collective effort to craft recovery, to see what is real, and to live as well as we all deserve to live.

*A thing is not seen because it is visible.*

*It is visible because it is seen.*

Plato, quoted by Diane Arbus

## The Hour is Striking

The hour is striking so close above me,  
so clear and sharp,  
That all my senses ring with it.  
I feel it now, there's a power in me  
to grasp and give shape to the world.

I know nothing has ever been real  
without my beholding it.  
All becoming has needed me.  
My looking ripens things  
and they come toward me to meet and be met.

No thing is too small for me to cherish  
and paint in gold, as if it were an icon  
that could bless us  
though I'll not know who among us  
will feel this blessing.

---Rainer Maria Rilke