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Joan Drescher

Liz Ennis

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Symbols of Hope and Healing

Joan Drescher and Liz Ennis

Using Art with Families and Children

Editor's Note: This article, co-created by Joan Drescher and Liz Ennis, explores Joan's personal journey, the circumstances that brought forth her book, "The Moon Balloon," as well as the Moon Balloon Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping children and caregivers communicate through the arts. The article also reveals the process through which Joan gets inspired with the subject matter of her murals. In this article, she says, "Because art had empowered me as a child, I wanted to bring this gift to others as an adult." Joan recounts how she has used that gift as a means to bring comfort to ill, grieving or distressed families, including those in the community of Dunblane after the massacre of sixteen children.

As an artist and a healer, my mission is to bring art and beauty into dark places. During times of illness and pain we are often disconnected from the very source that connects us to Spirit and makes us feel whole. Realizing that mission, I feel that any work of creativity invokes magic, both in the one who creates and in the one or many who receive. Creating art and sharing it with others has taught me to trust the universe, follow my heart, and draw from the light within.

As a young child, I believed creativity and spirit were one. My real world was filled with bullies, difficult math tests, and a lot of kids who thought I was weird. This led to me creating a safer world to revel in. From then on I lived in my imagination and started to draw the playmates I didn't have in "real" life. While my mother read stories to me, I created pictures, paintings and little books by the pound. Art enabled my spirit to survive and it was truly a special friend.

Art had empowered me as a child and I wanted to bring this gift to others as an adult. I had a successful career as a children's book author and illustrator after completing art school, but Spirit had larger plans. Sometimes Spirit sends down angels who totally change your life, and for me Ron Moir was that angel.

A colleague, friend, and mentor, Ron saw a special power in my work. He challenged me to take a creative leap and learn how to paint large murals, although I had never done anything like this before. What a difference it made to have someone who truly believed in the work I was doing and who was convinced that I could make a significant difference in the world.

"Prayer, art and healing all come from the same source...the human soul. Research has shown us that a person in prayer, a person making art, and a person healing all have the same physiology, the same brain wave patterns and the same state of consciousness." (Samuels, p. 1)

I went from working in isolation as an illustrator, to creating art that celebrated community in a very public way. Ron Moir was a board member and volunteer for Parent's and Children Services, a human service agency in Boston's Kenmore Square. He commissioned me to paint a large 10' x 10' mural, which took me several months to complete, for the agency's stairwell to welcome clients into their healing space. It was titled "Esplanade," and it celebrates the diversity of life, depicting one of my favorite gathering places in Boston.

Although Ron died very unexpectedly before the official unveiling of the mural, the very person he wanted me to meet, from Children's Hospital, was at the opening reception. We met and shared our mutual distress for the loss of our dear and beloved friend. He later commissioned me to create a series of kites with symbols of healing for the Joint Center for Radiation Therapy at Brigham and Women's Hospital. While researching kites, I found that in many Eastern cultures, kite-flying was a way to extend one's hand to the sky, and touch the Gods. Kites, to me, represent release and freedom. These kites, which were created for the radiation therapy room at Children's Hospital, work to humanize a high-tech area. They are often remembered by patients as symbols of hope, long after having left the hospital. I believe that Ron, on a different plane, helped to make many connections for bringing my art into hospitals. These first steps opened the door to numerous opportunities for creating murals, throughout the region, at many different health care facilities.

The role of art in healing, is as old as the healing temples of Asclepius, and the use of symbols in art goes back to the first cave paintings. Studies have shown that positive imagery has a strong impact on our immune system. Carl Jung, whose work has shown the importance of symbols and images, to the mind and body, did some of this research.

As time continued, I had a challenging assignment, to create a mural for Fall River Hospital, an urban hospital that served a diverse population along the coastal city. The Marshfield Hot Air Balloon Festival inspired me, so I ripped up all my proposed drawings and did new ones. I thought to myself, "How can anyone watch one of these hot air balloons and not feel anything?" The immensity, the beauty, the fantasy of taking off and letting go, and the colors piqued my imagination and I knew I had found something magical. The balloons were not earth bound and I saw the potential for unlimited kinds of fantasy. The crowd looked in amazement, as the colorful balloons drifted up into the sky.

The mural I created for St. Ann's Hospital in Fall River featured several hot air balloons decorated with flags from every culture present in the Fall River area. I wanted the mural to be seen as a symbol of hope, creating a connection between the people of Fall River and the hospital.

I always encourage students and workshop participants to open their eyes to what Spirit, or the universe, is trying to tell them about where their work needs to go. Often, you simply need to step back, and watch what is happening around you, in order to see the message or metaphor taking place, and then interpret how it applies to your life and work. It is so important to look within, and listen to what your instinct tells you to do. And

while this can be challenging in the midst of your busy life, one can often save time in the long run by doing just that. I have found that if you're not listening to the messages intended for you, life will force you to do things over and over until you "get it."

While I have had many mentors, kind enough to share their insights and knowledge with me, my studies for four years with Dr. Anita Olds inspired and influenced my life. She was an architect and psychologist who worked in hospitals, creating children's healing environments. Her work taught me the importance of bringing nature and the outdoor environment inside, especially in cancer wards. I learned that doing interactive art with children could be an extremely powerful tool. I also came to know the importance of how people's belief systems needed to be considered first in design, and how that can change an environment. I was taught to ask the question, when going into a room, "what do you feel?", "what do you see?" and then, design from that place.

A noted expert in the field of Mind/Body studies, Dr. Roger Ehrlich ran research trials proving that patients heal more quickly while viewing an image of trees during their recovery from surgery, versus viewing a brick wall. This would prove to be an important premise for all of the hospital work I would produce, going forward. Following a workshop I ran at the ACCH (Association for the Care of Children in Hospitals) conference, two nurses from Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital contacted me to create murals for their floor. I set about developing images of Central Park and its surrounding landmarks, trees and plant life into a mural for the hospital. It was titled the "Four Seasons of Central Park" and again, I made sure that the art would connect with people in all walks of life.

My friend, Joan Borysenko, has profoundly influenced my work and life. A doctor and pioneer in Mind/Body Medicine, I met Joan, who lived in the next town, through a mutual acquaintance. We had an immediate connection, and both shared a love of the creative process. I was interested in her mind body work and her use of symbols. We later formed a women's meditation group that nurtured our creative spirits. Joan and I were drawn together to collaborate on a project using healing words and images. The book "On Wings of Light" began to unfold, and although she wrote the words and I created the art, we feel as if one mind created the book, from a higher source. The book explores the vital connection between medicine, art and the healing process. The new revised edition was published in 2003 by The Institute for Body, Mind and Spirituality at Lesley University, and includes a guide and questions for reflection and journaling.

My work with Joan has continued for the past two years through the Claritas Institute for Interspiritual Inquiries in Boulder, Colorado. Joan asked me to become their Artist in Residence, in exchange for participating in their spiritual Mentor Training Program. incredible two year institute has helped me to bring Spirit into action, and to recognize more deeply, how my journey has been so spiritually guided.

The definition of my "comfort zone" in creating murals was significantly changed when I met Dr. Larry Wolfe, Chief of Oncology for the Floating Hospital for Children in Boston. He had been given a copy of *On Wings of Light* and was intrigued by my work. He later

hired me to create seven murals, titled “Symbols of Courage”. Although I had created a number of murals for children’s hospitals throughout the country, the landscapes I had been asked to paint for this job were unfamiliar territory.

My challenge was to depict the journey that children and families travel while at the hospital, from the first diagnosis of illness, through the complete treatment protocol. Using symbols and images, I began the process of storytelling. In this special environment, I needed to paint the dark shadows as well as the rays of hope. The clinic was a place where pain and joy lived side by side. Here, it didn’t matter what you looked like on the outside, because it would probably change soon anyway—what mattered was how you felt on the inside. I felt privileged for the opportunity to record and to paint this journey to the soul. Each child I drew opened a deep place in my heart that changed my life forever. Here, families of many cultures were bound together by cancer, all saying the same prayer, “please get well little one, we love you.”

To know your subject in creating art, you must become intimate with it. I spent the summer observing the ebb and flow of this unique place of healing. Sitting in the corner of the clinic, I watched a small, frail boy, receiving chemotherapy treatment. The multicolored fish swimming in the large tank in the waiting room transfixed him. As I began to draw him, my paper became host to an amazing transformation. I painted him riding on the back of a goldfish, while attacking cancer cells with his hypodermic needle. Each cell was magically turned into a goldfish. The chemotherapy that was feeding into his arm had transformed into tiny golden stars. I had climbed inside the mind of an eight-year-old patient, letting my imagination speak to the muse that resides inside, known to me as the “creative source.” The Oncology staff, to help empower children, by viewing the images and using visualization while receiving chemotherapy treatments, later used this mural.

“Coming Home,” is a mural that illustrates children who were once ill, now returning to playing baseball and getting on school buses. Unfortunately, not all kids who have cancer make it. “Chandy” started out as a small image depicting a delightful child I had worked with, riding her way home on the back of a lively white unicorn. While at home working on this painting one afternoon, I had no idea that, earlier that day, Chandy had passed away. I was later given a poem that Chandy had written, all about a wonderful white Unicorn. It was the last one she had written. How did I know I was painting the very same unicorn she had written about in her final poem? I didn’t. We were touched by something far greater than this universe, a bridge between heaven and earth. A final mural was later painted to celebrate Chandy and all the other children like her, who expressed their courage through art and poetry. It was very gratifying to hear from the families who spent countless days, and hour after hour at the clinic. The community of parents whose children received treatment at the clinic felt the murals were a reflection of who they were. Through the murals, they felt a sense of being heard and seen and many said, “at last someone knows what I have been going through.”

While I have always loved creating art with children, teaching art classes in my home town, and with my own children, my path of learning about how art can heal was to take on a more significant role. I began working at the bedside of children who were hospitalized for chronic life-threatening illnesses, helping them to create everything from journals, to coffee-filter mandalas, to magic wands and crowns to wear.

After many years of this, I am witness to how creating beauty can help transcend pain. Art can be our universal teacher during times of illness, stress and isolation. It is our doorway to the soul.

Recognizing the need for children to have a safe way to express their emotions, I created *The Moon Balloon Book*. This gave children the opportunity to explore their emotions through a journey, represented by various hot air balloons. This interactive picture book invites the child to write and draw their own feelings and images.

Although the book was rejected by numerous publishers, I felt it was important to continue to share the message of “The Moon Balloon.” I decided to bring it to the brothers and sisters of children with cancer at The Floating Hospital. I made seven dummy copies of the book and began doing workshops. Many months later, I was approached by the ACCH with an offer to put the seven murals from “Symbols of Courage” on tour, and a request to publish *The Moon Balloon Book*.

Within days of the publication of *The Moon Balloon Book*, a tragedy occurred in the small town of Dunblane, Scotland, sixteen kindergarten children and their teacher were shot and killed. The ACCH sent 725 books overseas to help as a resource in coping with the unthinkable crime. “The Moon Balloon” provided social workers with a safe vehicle to facilitate discussion about the massacre, and it was an unthreatening way to help the community handle their grief. While officials felt they didn’t want people from America telling them how to handle their grief, they were open to having an artist visit, with intentions of helping them all to heal.

Since Dunblane, *The Moon Balloon Book* has been used to help children in crisis, through hospitals, hospices, schools, and social service agencies. The book has traveled internationally, bringing its healing message to communities throughout the world. A child life worker uses it with families facing environmental disasters and children with special needs in the Philippines, where it is called the “secret buddy.” In Italy, I have run workshops for the children at Gaslini Children’s Hospital, using *The Moon Balloon Book*. It is featured on the hospital website. The artwork from the patients using the Moon Balloon was displayed in the Genoa public library, honoring the children who created it. Gaslini Hospital has invited me back every year for the past six years. Workshops have taken place in Holland; Aberdeen, Scotland; and in Canada. The book also helped numerous families who were directly involved with the tragedy of 9-11. Recently, Dr. Judy Rollins traveled to Japan to introduce *The Moon Balloon Book* to hospital administrators who are interested in translating it into their language. This country has a high suicide rate among young children, because of bullying and shame, and because children there are not encouraged to express their feelings. However,

feedback has indicated that the balloons offer children an acceptable opportunity to communicate through the use of drawing.

The Moon Balloon Book can be used as a picture book with young children or a verbal exercise with older children. The book can be used by children individually or in a group. Guides can be parents, teachers, therapist, nurses, physicians or anyone who cares about helping children express their feelings.

The role of the guide is to encourage the exploration of a child's inner world in a safe and positive way. The child sets the pace. This is a special journey of growth for adults and children. With the help of my colleague, Liz Ennis, we have recently written a training guide to accompany *The Moon Balloon Book*, so that others can be taught to use it. We run workshops for children and trainings for adults with additional exercises to care for the caregiver. We train people to be conscious of the relationship between images, symbols and feelings. Through this work we are teaching how to build bridges and improve communication, using art as a tool for creating a safe environment.

This book has helped to empower children and families to connect, even when they are overwhelmed by negative circumstances. The balloons are placed in a particular order in the book so that trust is built by the first safe balloon, gradually easing into more difficult balloons. The balloons are designed so that the participant can interact with them, putting their own images and symbols in the basket and all over the balloon.

I have always felt that *The Moon Balloon Book* brought me to Massachusetts General Hospital for children. MaryLou Kelleher, Clinical Nurse Specialist for Pediatrics, had been using the book with her patients. Upon meeting her, I was to discover that my vision of creating a way to bring art to patients, merged with hers. Together, we developed an "Artist in Residence" pilot program for Mass General Hospital, based on the book and workshops, bringing art to the bedside of children. That was in the year 2000 and I am still working there today. The AIR program has been funded by the Elizabeth Whiteside Charitable Foundation and the MGH Ladies Visiting committee. My work led me to create The Imagination Kart, a portable, whimsically decorated with kites that twirl and bells that ring. This cart is filled with art supplies and books which inspire children to create their own beauty and magic. By producing art from the cart, patients and siblings can transform their hospital room with their own art creating a healing environment. Workshops and trainings are also presented to pediatric doctors and staff, enabling them to integrate the arts into care giving and medicine.

Every time I go to my cart I think of a five year old patient named Sam, and his tremendous creative spirit. A little boy in and out of the hospital for the past four years, he would wake up in the middle of the night crying and screaming with bad dreams. Clinical staff tried to coax him to talk about his recurring bad dreams but nothing seemed to help. I had already worked with him using art as a way to help him to express his anger. I was asked by his mother if I could work with him, using the Moon Balloon, because she knew he trusted me and nothing else had been working. I started by giving him a book to draw in and he controlled the pace. He was able to draw pictures of his

dream and what was taking place in it. In *The Moon Balloon Book*, he drew a wide variety of images and symbols and he told me the accompanying story. He explained that he was riding in a car driven by a doctor and that he was strapped in his chair, unable to get out. He drew a picture of his face and said, "I was scared." He was adamant about going through each page of the entire book. When we got to the "angry balloon" he was able to express how mad he was, because he had cancer. Knowing a bit about this child's life, I know he had a lot more than just cancer to deal with and the many balloons gave him the opportunity to address each problem. It was interesting to notice in which balloon he put each difficulty. After he finished, a big smile covered Sam's face and he ran down the hall, book in hand, to share with his mother. Later, he and I created a half moon out of cardboard, which he called his dream sweeper. We attached it with a string to a pole so that every night before he went to bed, he could sweep away the bad dreams. Sadly, this little boy died in October of this past year. Throughout his struggle with cancer, creating art and expressing his feelings was one of the biggest things that brought him joy. His smile stays with me to this day.

Because of children like Chandy and Sam, I know how powerfully art can make a difference, and this continues to heal my own mind, body and soul. Thus, it has become important to me to expand the work and make it available to others. Because of this, I saw the need to establish a non-profit organization dedicated to helping children and families in the healing process, bringing the wholeness of life through images. It has come to be called, *The Moon Balloon Project*.

Although I had just been granted the "non-profit" status for the *Moon Balloon Project*, after a year of hard work and struggle, I felt very alone. I tried hiring several different people to assist me, but it just wasn't working out. Meanwhile, I was paying rent on an art studio in the next town, but I never had time to use it.

Then, at the acupuncture clinic I visited regularly, I met Liz, a recent graduate of the Master's Program of Expressive Arts at Lesley University, and the former Administrator of Thompson Island Outward Bound. Spirit stepped in again and made the connection. Liz agreed to work with me as the Co-Director of the non profit, with one caveat. I would have to agree to spend at least one day a week creating art with her, at the studio I hadn't been using. Working together, our exchange of energy empowered us both. To me, Liz was a gift from the universe.

Although our art is very different, we support one another on the journey of creating and healing. We are both witness to each other's creative process, holding the spirit of sacred space.

As an artist, I worked at the bedside of wounded people, yet Liz helped me to use art to heal myself. My role was helping Liz to get her work out, in connection with the world. This was somewhat like being an escort, where one person accompanies the other, to a new and different place. We recently participated in an "Open Studios" event, where Liz sold several pieces of her artwork. Making art, we have both become richer, deeper and have connected to others. Together, we created an artistic installation, featuring chairs

which mirrored what *The Moon Balloon Book* does. Using layers of color, texture and meaningful symbols, we transformed our respective chairs into a three dimensional expression of feelings.

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances.

If there is any reaction, both are transformed

—C.G. Jung

Spirit continues to guide us as we journey to bring the work of the Moon Balloon project and the process of healing art to others. We are creating a sponsorship program to be able to send books, training guides and workshops to crisis centers, hospitals, hospices and to those families who could benefit by it the most. Many hearts have opened to us, and we hope that the Moon Balloon and its powerful symbols will help families to give voice to their emotions during difficult times.

We feel better when strong feelings are expressed, heard and acknowledged. Only then, when the dark clouds of unexpressed emotions have parted, can hope and love be honestly expressed.

—Joan Borysenko, PhD, author of *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*.

In creating art, and sharing it with others, we are providing our children and families the opportunity to open windows to a world where caring really does take place. What could be more important than remembering where to look during times of illness and pain? I consider it a gift to be on this journey and am excited about sharing the healing power of art, available to connect us to Spirit, the very source that makes us feel whole.

Resources

Lane and Samuels, 1998. *Creative Healing, How to heal yourself by tapping your hidden creativity*. Harper, San Francisco