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Art is Healing, Healing is Art: A Collaborative Vision

Christiane Corbat - with Dr. BetheAnne DeLuca-Verley

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My fascination with healing dates back to my high school years when a dear friend suffered third degree burns over 75 percent of his body. I watched his recuperation with the emergency life-saving treatments, the skin grafting, the physical rehabilitation, and the agony his spirit went through. These opened my eyes to a process that I could only assume was sustained by some inner resource that actively sought out healing. As his body responded to the excellent medical care he was given, he guided his responses towards healing. He played an active role in his own recuperation.

What was his guiding inner sense? As I had explored art as my life's calling, I sought answers to this question in anthropology and psychology, traditional cultures and spiritual practices to understand what was going on.

I had begun to see the connection between art and healing as a student of Joseph Campbell's in 1967. I saw a link between the mythical, spiritual images we hold of ourselves, and the courage and hope we bring to tackle life's most difficult events – especially trauma and disease. Art is myth made manifest. Art is the creative life force expressed, and can be healing.

Later, when my family members and close friends fought for their lives after car accidents and serious illnesses, I continued to notice the role that the inner mythic life plays in healing processes. When it was my turn to experience illness – as a serious depression – I turned to the creative process and to myth to heal myself.

Each of us knows what personal myth or metaphor will support the transformation of our healing. Immersion in art as part of our treatment can help us tap into this valuable tool which makes all the difference in how we experience an illness. Whether we are cured physically by science or not, being able to heal in a broader sense is a basic human gift that we all have access to through expressing our creative life force.

Time and space disappear when we are immersed in a creative process. We recapture our sense of wholeness and well-being, no matter how ill or hurt we are. We reconnect to the larger, universal picture through metaphor or myth, making it possible for us to better bear the smaller, personal picture of our pain or illness.

As a visual artist, I create sculpture to put myself in this "process," but the expression of our unique life experience in any creative form is healing.

I have been using body casting for sixteen years to help people heal themselves. This developed from a myth and dream-related process I discovered as I worked collaboratively with people faced with life challenges. I create sculpture by working with people who have all types of illnesses, such as heart disease,

asthma, cancer, leukemia, depression, and also with those who want to explore their inner mythic landscape for personal growth.

I listen to their stories and use their body castings for inspiration to cast them, literally and figuratively, as universal, mythical images, what Jung would call "archetypes." We create a body casting, a sort of second skin that stands for the person. I use rolls of cotton plaster bandages that are cut, dipped in water, and arranged on the body. They form a solid casting once they dry. The casting is removed, pieced together with other castings, and then made into the image that is inspired by myth, dream, intuition and the collaborator's personal story.

This type of healing art, unlike art therapy, is not for diagnosis or treatment, but can nevertheless be experienced as therapeutic. It reconnects us to who we really are, that unique being we have known since early childhood who is whole, beautiful and free from disease or trauma.

An example is "The Stoneman" (See Figure 1*), made with Ray, a 76 year old man who had discovered he had breast cancer two years earlier. Within a year of his first diagnosis he suffered the loss of his wife and was also diagnosed with prostate cancer. I was pleasantly surprised when I started working with him to find that in spite of his grief, he was still remarkably involved with others, both family and friends. He told me a great deal about his wife, their courtship and their many good years together. We laughed and cried together. He spoke of his cancer as one of life's experiences, neither fair nor unfair, which he would meet with his usual faith, courage and sense of humor. Although he had learned to read only as an adult, his love of word puns and verbal games kept us both chuckling as we made this piece. I was drawn to create him in stone, a material he had worked with all his life as a road builder and construction man. His physical and moral strength, humor, generosity of spirit and gentleness are solid and permanent – regardless of his life situation. The calmness of his being I symbolized as a wooded birch grove beside a lake in the lighted window in his chest.



Making this piece has provided a way for Ray to share the best of himself with a great many people. He delights in standing next to the piece during an exhibition and playfully telling viewers that he is The Stoneman in person. Now 82, he calls me and reports each new great-grandchild (recently number 10). He continues to take medicine for his prostate cancer that gives him "hot flashes" and is having a skin cancer removed from his face. His legs aren't what they used to be, but he is "doing good." Still eager to help others, he agreed to take part in helping to train medical students take better medical histories last year.

When I asked him if making The Stoneman has helped him, he answered, "Making this piece was something so different for me. It was a thrill to see it come out. It's grand. I never had something like this happen to me. It's my life's story now, and I show pictures to everyone. It makes me great, and I hope it makes others feel good about themselves too. They know who I am, and I'm glad it helps others. I'm still doing good. I don't worry, and I take it as it comes, and I can't complain."

My interest in art and healing eventually led me to co-found a non-profit organization, Waking Dreams, with Dr. BetheAnne DeLuca-Verley. Waking Dreams helps healthcare professionals, artists and patients explore the relationship between the arts and healing.

BetheAnne and I met when she and her family came to a lecture I was giving in the spring of 1997. As my across-the-street-neighbor, she told me how interested she was in my work, never imagining that she would be diagnosed with breast cancer and would end up collaborating on a piece with me within a few short weeks. We created three pieces in all over a period from her diagnosis until after her reconstructive surgery a year and a half later.

The first piece dealt with the shock and despair she was experiencing when first diagnosed and facing a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy (See Figure 2*). Her right breast was still swollen from the biopsy. She was feeling isolated from her medical colleagues when she shifted from physician to patient, finding no opening to address her spiritual concerns within the medical arena. She came to my studio with her husband and sister-in-law to reconnect to her essential self through experiencing the art process. We used dance, her natural form of expression, to describe the movement of her feelings. The moment of reaching out for hope and letting go of fear was captured in the casting, titled, "Reaching Out and Letting Go". It shows the terrible grief she was feeling.

Figure 2



Figure 3.



The second piece was made a year later. The positive experience of the first piece had led to our co-founding Waking Dreams. In the fall of 1998 BetheAnne faced reconstructive surgery but was unsure of whether to put her family through this further ordeal. Again she came to my studio, this time with her sister, and began to dance around the space, stopping every few moments with her arms held up and her face looking upwards. "What is that movement? What does that mean to you?" I asked her. "Surrender," she answered.

This became the second piece, a full body casting, from mid-thigh to mid-upper arm and, like an ancient Greek statue, without its head (See Figure 3). The pose, when we looked it up, turned out to be Hathor or Nut, a 4000 BC Egyptian goddess of the Moon, the Cow Horned Queen of Heaven, gateway to dreams, and a spiritual guide for those asleep or ill. Hathor became the symbol for Waking Dreams, and BetheAnne took on this powerful myth to empower herself. I gave her the casting to take home with her to make her decision about the surgery. "Your body knows what you want to do and what's right for you," I told her. "Let it speak to you." The next day she knew that she wanted to go through with the surgery and was positive about the anticipated outcome.

The third piece evolved after her reconstructive surgery, to embody the transformation of her physical self, and also of her spiritual, emotional self. We took the pose from a recent photo experience she had had with her sister-in-law, Benedicte Verley, in which she is holding wild turkey wings in an embrace, ready to fly. This third casting has her in full flight, her new body and life vibrantly in motion. Her wings, growing out of her "new" torso, are made out of the hand-castings of twelve family members (See Figure 4*). Her husband Thierry's powerful hands are the main muscle force at the shoulders, all the way to those that form the tips of the wings, three year old Rachel's tiny hands.

Figure 4.



I gave these three pieces to BetheAnne for her 40th birthday, with love and admiration for the transfiguration I had witnessed through this process.

In her own words, below, BetheAnne shares the experience of her illness, how she is coping with it, and how making these three pieces has helped her.

My work with women with breast cancer has been a consistent focus for the past 16 years. The symbolism involved, of the human female breast – both life giving, sustaining and erotic – comes deeply from collective human consciousness. What it means for each woman, each man and child, is what I'm searching for. Answering those questions will lead to more images of healing. For Waking Dreams I run workshops I call "Hanging Out," where women with breast cancer make and design their own body castings. These creations re-connect each woman, the part which is not her disease, to her conscious awareness for empowerment and hope.

BetheAnne DeLuca Verley, MD

As early as I can remember I was awed by the incredible nature of the human spirit to grow, stretch and compensate when challenged by illness or crisis. I heard the stories of children traumatized by accidents, genetic diseases, pre-maturity and congenital defects through the voice of my father, a pediatric surgeon. When grown I followed a call to enter the world of medicine as a pediatrician.

I was a spectator healer, aiming high – to empathize and nurture my patients while practicing conventional medicine. I developed high regard for the past century's many technical, molecular and genetic advances. And then something happened that thrust me into an entirely different, extremely vulnerable arena – that of the patient.

At thirty-six years of age, still breast feeding my third child and establishing my practice in my hometown, I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer that had already reached a fair number of lymph nodes.

Somewhere in the middle of the night following my diagnosis I awakened with a strange, almost absurd notion; that I needed to dance in order to heal. As a physician who knew the nature of my disease and the absolute need for medical and surgical intervention, I intellectually doubted this notion. On an intuitive and spiritual level, I felt that this notion and the experience of dancing was pivotal to my healing and to beating all the odds.

My experience of dancing that night, after a twenty-year hiatus, was captured in three body castings done by Christiane.

The first piece reflected a certain heaviness and struggle as I reached out toward the future for answers and released old patterns from the past (See Figure 2.).

The second piece was done nearly one year after my intensive treatments of chemotherapy, radiation and mastectomy (See Figure 3.). The posture, frozen in time by the plaster through Christiane's hands, came from me standing with arms reaching up with gratitude and surrender to the Divine. My absent breast revealed my spirit coming forward through loss. My body was strong and beautiful and I could honestly say that I would have lived with it that way, but I felt excited by the chance to re-sculpt my body into symmetry with Tramflap surgery. My physical wholeness would symbolize for my daughters what the sculpture had revealed to me. I was whole in spirit, despite my physical changes.

The last piece is my body with wings made out of the hands of those who supported me. (See Figure 4.) I feel that with their love I can reach new heights.

In Summary

My belief as an artist is that art becomes healing when we open ourselves to the creative process through intention. In BetheAnne's own words, "As a physician, I believe that healing becomes art when we reframe

our work with patients as not only procedural and technical, but also as powerful, intimate and sacred. Herein lies a truth where spirit and creativity honor patients' suffering and yet, still view them as whole and beautiful. This is where clinicians get 'paid' in a most profound way – where they feel valued and inspired - where compassion drives creative, sensitive intervention and interactions."

Art and medicine belong together. They are parts of the same energy, the energy of healing. Tapping into the life force through the creative process heals us as individuals and helps to heal us collectively. The motto of Waking Dreams, created through the vision of a physician and an artist, succinctly summarizes how we explore ways to bring soul back into the practice of medicine: Art is healing, healing is art.

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Yoplait USA, a division of General Mills, is supporting Waking Dreams and these workshops in our efforts to offer the healing arts to more women across the country.

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