The Use of the Arts in Trauma Healing Ministry

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Abstract: Combining the power of the performing and visual arts with the word of God provides an important tool to facilitate healing from trauma. The arts have been used for centuries to express and inform people about traumatic situations and to provide emotional release for those actually experiencing trauma. This article places the use of the arts for healing the wounds of trauma in an historical context and gives current examples of how song, dance, drawing, instrumental music, and pottery have been used to help those whose lives have been turned upside down by personal life experience and community tragedies. Encouraging the use of the arts in trauma healing ministry in mission is the underlying purpose of this article.

With traumatic situations resulting from war, tribal conflict, disease, famine, and the breakdown of the family rampant in our world today, the role of the Church in promoting biblically-based trauma healing is becoming an essential aspect of missions. In fact, it has been said that “trauma is perhaps the greatest mission field of the 21st century” (Landberg 2011:3). How will the Church be empowered to meet the needs of traumatized people when the Church itself is often weak and traumatized? Church leaders are caught up in conflicts, diminishing their roles as spiritual leaders and sometimes even ending up being killed. Divisions based on cultural differences intensify within church communities. The family – the basis of the local church – is physically and emotionally disrupted and no longer strong enough to lay a foundation for spiritual growth. There is a need to permeate traumatic situations with the good news of Christ’s peace and power in order to bring about forgiveness, unity, and hope. In this article we will examine how the use of the performing and visual arts can facilitate and promote the healing of the emotional and spiritual wounds received when people experience trauma.

The use of the arts to express pain and trauma is not a new phenomenon. From the Narmer Palette, an ancient Egyptian carving depicting a conquering Egyptian Pharaoh pounding a peg into the head of a vanquished enemy, to the mural, Guernica, painted by Picasso and vividly portraying the trauma inflicted upon civilians as a result of the Spanish Civil War, the visual arts have historically had an important role in helping people express trauma. Photojournalism has made the horrors of modern warfare and the accompanying trauma more readily available to the general population through the works of photographers such as Eddie Adams (2008) and David Turnley (Wikipedia 2012a). The trauma of famine in Sudan was the subject of a haunting photograph by Kevin Carter (Krauss 2006). Carter, by capturing on film a buzzard observing a starving child crawling to a food distribution center, brought the horrors of this tragedy to the eyes of the public in a startling way.

A moving contemporary use of visual art to help members of the military deal with what is now labeled post-traumatic stress disorder combines paper making with visual artistic expressions of trauma. The Combat Paper Project “utilizes art making workshops to assist veterans in reconciling and sharing their personal experiences as well as broadening the traditional narrative surrounding service and the military culture” (Cameron 2007). Drew Matott and Drew Cameron, initiators of this project, hold workshops for veterans teaching them how to make paper out of the military uniforms they wore in combat “to create cathartic works of art.” The uniforms are shredded, beaten into a pulp, and formed into sheets of paper. Veterans then create works of art with the newly-produced paper in a “transformative process of papermaking
to reclaim their uniform as art and begin to embrace their experiences in the military” (Drew Cameron, personal communication).

Another piece of visual art based on the traumas of war is housed in the British Museum. The _Tree of Life_ is a sculpture made of decommissioned weapons (including grenades, AK-47s, and rocket launchers) brought in from the Mozambican countryside at the end of the civil war (1976-1992) then handed over to members of the _Transforming Arms into Tools_ project. This project was established by Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane in 1995 to encourage community members to turn in weapons hidden in the rural areas after the war in exchange for ploughs, bicycles, sewing machines, and tractors. The weapons were then dismantled and cut up to become raw material for metal art works. Handing in these instruments of warfare, formally used to traumatize the Mozambican people, not only purges the country of dangerous weapons in exchange for tools for development but results in artistic expressions emerging from the remnants of war (Trustees of the British Museum 2004-2005).

A contemporary example of using art to express personal tragedy is the art work of Chelsea Ellis, a recent graduate of Houghton College (Houghton, NY), who used her artistic talents to express the personal pain she experienced in her childhood. She writes this about her ceramic piece entitled _Broken by mistake_, “My original idea with Jesus in the sphere is an image that often comes to mind when I think about my past. Since overcoming it, I have seen the light of Jesus in unimaginable ways. Thinking through this idea gave me insight and thoughts about how grateful I am to come to this conclusion in my faith. Despite whatever barrier, there is a way to find the light. In ‘updating’ the rest of the piece, these feelings were continually solidified” (Chelsea Ellis, personal communication). The turmoil Chelsea experienced during her childhood years was brought to the light of Jesus as she worked with clay and paint to demonstrate the evil that traumatized her, the chains that held her captured in low self-esteem, and the power of Jesus to

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set her free. In the traumatized world of today, young people are reaching out to display their pain and the healing they find through Christ by using the visual arts.

One only needs to mention the word “requiem” and the role of music in helping people deal with trauma is exemplified. Musical versions of this commemorative mass for a person who has died date back to the 10th Century (Green 2012). These compositions not only provide a way of reflecting on the life of the deceased, but provide comfort to the loved ones, helping them deal with the trauma of death. In early versions, monks sang free-flowing unison melodies pleading with God to have mercy on the soul of the departed. The musical sections of a requiem Mass include texts that affirm and praise the holiness of God as well as cries for deliverance from purgatory on the part of the person who died. Musical versions became more complex and were viewed as standard pieces in composers’ repertoires during the Classical and Romantic periods. Requiem Masses were composed by Giuseppe Verdi (1874) and Johannes Brahms (written in German in 1869). Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1791) composed a Lutheran Requiem with a focus on the living. More recently, Contemporary period composers have used the form of the requiem to express universal trauma in such pieces as World Requiem by John Foulds (1919), War Requiem by Benjamin Britten (1961), and two pieces both entitled The Requiem, both composed in 1985; one by John Rutter and the other by Andrew Lloyd Weber.2

In 2004, this musical form was used as an expression of global grief and trauma when Chris Williams composed The Tsunami Requiem, a musical recounting of the story of the destruction of a fishing village in South India by a tsunami. In this piece, the traditional Latin words of the Requiem Mass are interspersed with cries of “Mother, Mother, where have you gone?”; the agonizing cries of children separated from their parents after the waves struck the village (Wili 2012).

Other noticeable musical examples from the historical repertoire that have helped people express grief and pain include Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings, called “the saddest piece of music ever written”, along with pieces by Henry Purcell, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, and even jazz great Billy Holiday.3 One only needs to listen to a few country and western songs to realize how other forms of contemporary music are used to express the every-day trauma surrounding the lives of many. Johnny Cash’s song titles of “Folsom Prison Blues”, “Cry”, and “Hurt, Hurt, Hurt” are but a few examples of how that genre of music is used to help people express the agony they experience in their daily lives.

Many other examples of the historical and contemporary use of the visual and performing arts to help people express their feelings in response to traumatic situations exist. But, how does the use of the arts in helping people deal with trauma apply to a Christian context? If trauma truly is the current most important mission field, how is the ministry of trauma healing through the arts being used in world-wide missions today?

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2The source for the references to Verdi, Brahms, Mozart, Foulds, Britten, Rutter, and Weber is Wikipedia (2012c).
3http://thomaslarson.com/publications/essays-and-memoirs/91-the-saddest-music-ever-written.html. In 2004, the radio program, BBC Today, began a competition to find the saddest music in the world. After receiving more than four hundred nominations, they listed the top five on a website for voting. The audience preferred Barber’s Adagio more than two to one over the second place vote-getter and four to one over number three: (1) Barber’s Adagio for Strings (52.1%); (2) Henry Purcell’s “Dido’s Lament” (20.6%); (3) Gustav Mahler’s Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony (12.3%); (4) Billie Holiday’s “Gloomy Sunday,” written by the Hungarian Rezső Seress (9.8%); (5) Richard Strauss’s Metamorphosen (5.1%).
Both the visual arts and the performing arts are indeed being used effectively in Christian missions today to help people express the “pain in their hearts” associated with trauma (Hill et al. 2004:27). Missionaries world-wide have been exploring this ministry method for more than a decade. The development and use of the book, *Healing the wounds of trauma: how the church can help* (Hill et al. 2004) and efforts by the Global Center for Trauma Healing to coordinate global trauma healing ministries are significant. The sharing of this material in Africa, Asia, the USA, and other countries in the world in trauma healing workshops often includes opportunities for participants to express their sorrow through the arts.

In a Scripture-based trauma healing workshop held in Thailand in 2005, a young woman expressed her grief-stricken state in a series of chalk drawings, two of which are pictured here. She used symbols and expressions of emotion to portray the hurt she had experienced. In the drawing to the left, *Broken Pieces*, we see tears streaming down the face of the traumatized person, agony in the eyes, blood streaming from the fingers, and the shards of his life lifted up towards the light. The emotional and even physical trauma the artist has gone through is forcefully expressed in this piece. The hope that comes from God one can know while enduring a traumatic experience is represented by light streaming in from the upper right hand corner of the drawing. The agonized figure looks upward and lifts his hands in expectation of finding help and healing.

The second chalk drawing by the same artist, *Fountain of Living Water*, reveals both sides of effective healing from trauma. The dirt and brokenness of one’s life is pictured on the left half of the picture while the healing water available is pictured on the right as flowing from two hands that are bathed in light. The flowers produced as fruit of this stream exemplify the new life available after healing from trauma takes place. Since these drawings were produced as the result of a young woman’s search for God’s answers to her horrible life experiences, the symbolism of God as light, flowing water, and loving hands is vividly expressed in these visual art works (Linda Bridges, personal communication).

An interesting attempt to alert high school students of a current tragedy unfolding in central Africa took place when a former missionary to that area and his daughter visited their school. The missionary and his daughter described to the grade 12 art class some of the atrocities that were taking place in a region in central Africa traumatized by the presence of the rebel group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA; Wikipedia 2012b). The students were then encouraged to use the stories they heard about the LRA as inspiration for visual art works. They were also instructed to search the scriptures to discover God’s concern for the traumatized. Twenty-two paintings were created by the students and their art teacher. Themes of military action, fire, destruction, desperation, abandonment, and death dominate the paintings. These

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4The first meeting of the Global Trauma Healing Community of Practice, sponsored by the Center for Trauma Healing of the American Bible Society, was held from March 30 through April 1, 2012 in Philadelphia. Forty-three people from twenty-three different organizations involved in trauma care spent time strategizing and developing a network for further development in this area. The American Bible Society’s Center for Trauma Healing is leading the way in this effort (Harriet Hill, personal communication).
students were given the opportunity to express vicariously the pain that thousands of people were
going through as a result of this rebel activity.

In his painting, *Rain of Pain*, the student artist Daniel Kendrick expressed his feelings
about the horrors of the LRA activities. “Suffering, pain, sadness, broken heartedness, torture,
injustice, fear. Congo is a dangerous and scary place to be. This painting describes a place where
God is needed here and now. I want this painting to be a reminder to people to pray. God is
needed” (Daniel Kendrick, personal communication). Daniel referenced Psalm 69:29 and Psalm
27:1 as further inspirations for his painting. As demonstrated by his creative work, the use of the
arts, even by those not directly affected, can be a powerful method for increasing understanding,
awareness, and concern for the traumatized.

*Rain of Pain* by Daniel Kendrick

When Congolese refugees fled north into the Central African
Republic (CAR) after their villages had been attacked by members of
the LRA led by Joseph Kony in October 2009, feelings of trauma
permeated that population (BBC 2012). But soon after they crossed the
Mbomou River into CAR the realities of beginning new lives as
refugees brought their artistic talents to the surface. Men began carving
cmortars, used for centuries by the women of this area to husk rice and
pound dried cassava into flour. Artistic lines and wood-burned designs
were incorporated into the carving of these ordinary domestic utensils.

Young Congolese men started weaving straw hats traditionally worn by the ruling class of this
people group. Their peers in CAR were not aware of this tradition but when they became aware
of the symbolism of the headwear, they quickly purchased the hats. These artistic creations were
made and sold to obtain much-needed cash for refugees in order to purchase food and other
supplies essential to their survival. As temporary shelters and more permanent dwellings were
built, art work became an important way for these traumatized people to express themselves.
From the positioning of the supporting struts to the decorative sayings painted on the walls, these
shelters became signs of desired order in the people’s lives and public expressions of their joy
and frustration. The visual arts expressed in survival activities helped the refugees deal with the
horrific situation that they had been through as well as spur them on to begin again in the new
situation into which they had been thrust.

Along with the use of visual arts, the performing arts, i.e. music and dance, have been
used in many contemporary instances of healing traumatized individuals. In 1999, Dr. Roberta
King, Associate Professor of Communication and Ethnomusicology at Fuller Theological
Seminary, traveled to Kigali, Rwanda to hold a song-writing workshop with widows of the 1994
genocide. Dr. King led the group in composing songs based on over twenty scripture passages
that emphasized the new life believers enjoy due to their relationship with Jesus Christ. One song
that was sung repeatedly by these women was based on Romans 8:28. Dancing in traditional
Rwandan style as they sang, the word of God put into song met their needs as they meditated on
the fact that nothing could separate them from the love of God (King 2006).

Music also played an important part in helping the Congolese refugees referred to earlier
in this article deal with the trauma they had experienced. The musical practices of the evangelical
church people within the refugee population continued to be an important part of their church life
as refugees. Two weeks after the majority of the refugees arrived, a Sunday morning church
service of thanksgiving was held in the refugee camp. People prayed; pastors preached; testimonies were given. But throughout the three-hour long service, musical expressions of grief mingled with hope infused the experience. Due to a long history of brass instruments being one of the main forms of instrumental music used in this church, the refugees had carried their trumpets, cornets, trombones, and baritone horns with them when they had fled their persecutors. These instruments were played at this church service to accompany congregational singing. After the preaching, the Congolese refugee pastors and Bible school teachers sang a hymn as a testimony of God’s goodness and care. The power of song set to biblical texts helped those who attended focus their thoughts on the protection and provision of God as a way of dealing with the immediate trauma they were facing.

But the most significant opportunity for the refugees to put their pain into song came several months later when a song-writing workshop was held at the evangelical church established among the refugees. More than 100 refugees attended the four days of teaching. Songs were composed each evening by more than six groups of church members. Songs of praise and thanksgiving were composed using scripture as text. After lessons that taught them about the process of grieving, the participants were encouraged to present their experiences in the form of laments. Psalm 13 was used as an example of a lament following the details presented in Lesson 2 of *Healing the wounds of trauma: how the church can help*. The pattern of expressing felt anguish, turning to God in trust, then praising him for his goodness was used by the various groups to compose new songs expressing their pain. Several examples are worthy of note.

One of the choir groups based their lament on the text found in Psalm 59:1, “Rescue me from my enemies, O God. Protect me from those who have come to destroy me” (NLT). Here is the English translation of the song based on the text written by the choir group.

*(1)*

**Leader**

-Oh, LRA, you have chased us across the river.  
  *All*  
  *O God, save us from this.*

-You have made us leave our homes to be destroyed by the termites.  
  *O God, save us from this.*

-Ôh, you, the LRA, you eat people by your fires.  
  *O God, save us from this.*

-Oh, you, the LRA, you beat people as a blacksmith beats iron.  
  *O God, save us from this.*

-Pastors have been killed. Joseph Kony has killed them.  
  *O God, save us from this.*

-God’s people have died. Kony has slaughtered them.  
  *O God, save us from this.*

-Oh, Kony, where are you? When will you repent?  
  *O God, save us from this.*

The pastors who attended the song-writing workshop composed a song based on Psalm 13:6 and Joel 2:18, accompanied by a dance. As the men shuffled around in a circular motion, replicating a traditional dance done by of hunters and fishermen of this people group, they sang:

*(2)*

- Sin is troubling us.  
  *God forgive us.*

- Horrible sorrow is troubling us.  
  *God be merciful.*

- Bad wars are troubling us.  
  *God be merciful.*

- Hunger is troubling us.  
  *God be merciful.*

- The LRA are killing us.  
  *God be merciful.*

- Desire to return to our homes is troubling us.  
  *God be merciful.*

- The LRA are killing us.  
  *God be merciful.*

- Joseph Kony is bothering us.  
  *God be merciful.*
Horrible death is troubling us. 
God be merciful.

Bad words are bothering us. 
God be merciful.

Oh, Father, these things are troubling us. 
God be merciful.

Oh, God, these things are troubling us. 
God be merciful.

Your power covers and protects us. 
Thank you, God.

Your love covers and protects us. 
Thank you, God.

Your grace covers and protects us. 
Thank you, God.

A group of widows, some of whose husbands had been either abducted or murdered when the LRA attacked their village, chose to reflect on heaven, the time when they would be relieved of all their sorrows, including those inflicted on them by the LRA. They used the verse found in Revelation 21:4 as the text for their composition. The English translation of their song reads as follows:

(3) Truly, truly, Jesus will wipe the tears from our eyes.
Truly, he will wipe the tears of sorrow from our hearts.
Truly, he will end the pain that is in our hearts.
Truly, truly, he will wipe the tears from our eyes.

As the songs were heard for the first time, those attending the workshop sat in silence; some with tears streaming down their faces. As each group was allowed to publically express their pain and hurt, the trauma these refugees had experienced, having to flee their homes and travel over 85 miles by foot through dense, tropical jungle to arrive in a small town with only those items they could carry on their backs, was brought to the surface. Discussions that followed revealed many symptoms of acute stress: nightmares, formerly excelling students doing poorly in their school work, feelings of depression and deep anger. Composing the laments opened the doors to their souls as individual refugees poured out their pain. Pastors and Bible school teachers, having been through the same traumatic experience, were able to bring individuals to the point of reaffirming their faith in the sovereign God who is always in control even when it does not appear so. The result was their songs being sung, recorded, duplicated on cassette tapes, and then distributed to key church leaders in the refugee camp. Healing had begun as deep-seated emotions produced by the traumatic situations they experienced were released through song and dance.

Jesus Christ told us to expect troubles in our day-to-day lives (Matthew 6:34). Throughout scripture human agony is expressed as a normal part of life here on earth. The contemporary situations many face today prove these words of Christ to be true. How will the Church of Jesus Christ respond to these needy situations where thousands of people are traumatized? Even secular history tells us that the arts are an effective media for expressing trauma. The use of the arts to help people express their deepest hurts is an avenue that artists, trauma counselors, and the traumatized need to further explore and utilize today. Giving hurting people the opportunity to present their emotional and spiritual wounds through painting, sculpture, song, dance, drama, and other artistic expressions will provide a way for the hurting to find a measure of peace. But true healing and wholeness will be experienced by the traumatized only as these artistic expressions draw people to eventually focus on the sovereignty and faithfulness of God in the midst of the struggle as presented in his word. Such biblically-based artistic expressions will provide hope for a hurting world.
References


