

Psychologist: Creativity can heal

In a small studio in her Beverly, Mass. home, artist and psychologist Mary Baures, Psy.D., watches the sun go down over the Beverly/Salem Bridge. The sky is streaked with color – deep reds, purples and oranges – colors that will find their way into the art on her walls, colors that bring Baures' pictures of animals and the people who love them to rich, warm life.

For Baures, painting and psychology each fulfill a role in her life. They create a balance. Where one is analytical, the other comes from a place beneath conscious thought. Where one is a way to reach out, the other helps her to reach within.

In her professional life and in her writing (she has published a book of interviews of people who have overcome trauma by transforming the experience into something positive), Baures demonstrates how the act of creating can heal. It's a field not fully explored by psychology, she feels. While endless research has been done on the negative effects of trauma, there's not enough out there on how trauma can strengthen people and how it can be turned around and used as a benefit.

Baures spoke with New England Psychologist's Catherine Robertson Souter about her work with trauma victims and her ideas on the place of creativity in healing.

Q: Let's start with your book, "Undaunted Spirits: Portraits of Recovery from Trauma." The book features interviews with some famous people – Elie Wiesel, Mike Wallace, Harold Kushner, Max Cleland, among them. That's an impressive list.

A: It's a book of interviews of people who were positively

transformed because of trauma, who found some lessons in the trauma that made them wiser and more human.

Q: And you wrote it as part of your doctoral dissertation?

A: I used to be a magazine writer and did profiles so I collected these stories like I had done those profiles. With a profile, it's really important that the reader gets the sense of sitting with the person, what their voice sounds like, what their gestures are like, what the environment feels like, so that the reader is there with you. So I wrote the stories up that way because I knew that by the time I got around to writing the dissertation, I would lose a lot of that.

The book is really a populist version of the dissertation. There is a very scholarly version of the book in the library at Antioch.

Q: How did you choose this as your doctoral topic?

A: Prior to the magazine writing, I wrote poetry. I have a master's degree in creative writing from Boston University where I studied with Anne Sexton. That's where I first learned about using creativity to heal trauma because she was really a master of it. She would use her poetry in her therapy sessions – use it as a sort of super-ego and bring it to therapy.

I see her as both a positive and a negative example of how people process trauma through creativity. She had been a housewife, had no college education and through the use of poetry transformed herself into a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet.

But she ended up killing herself. At the time that I studied with her, about a year before she committed suicide,

she was already starting to careen towards her death. Still, I found her to be a wonderful, enthusiastic teacher. She was so funny and lively. I was very young then and I had no experience with mental illness. It was hard to see that someone who was so successful could still feel so bad about her life.

Q: Tell us about your views on creativity and trauma.

A: With trauma, people sometimes avoid it, deny it, push it away, because it can be overwhelming. The value of some kind of creative process, like writing a story or creating a picture, is that you can get into those feelings but you are also creating something so it's not as overwhelming as if you are just dealing with the memories themselves. It enables you to approach it one step removed.

In the process of creating a poem, you're dealing with words, metaphors, sentence structure and rhythm. You can go back into those traumatic feelings and traumatic memories without it overwhelming you.

Q: You have said that, when it comes to dealing with trauma, creativity can encompass more than putting pen or paint to paper.

A: People can heal through creative projects but also in helping other people. A lot of people, like breast cancer survivors, can really process what they are going through by helping someone newly diagnosed. They are no longer victims; they are survivors. They are out there helping somebody else.

It brings to mind some of the work on denial. Denial is a really important part of processing a trauma because it enables you to go slow, to

rework some of the losses in a way that doesn't make you overwhelmed. You just let in as much of the pain as you can handle at a time. The creative process allows you to do this too.

If you're talking about really severe trauma, loss of a child, or losing a leg, your life-line has been broken. The trajectory of your life, what you imagined that your life was going to be like, is no longer, is broken. You have to think about who you are going to become, who you can become. You are not going to be just a "person without a leg." Images and stories are a powerful way to compose a new truth.

For people fighting some kind of malignant process, like cancer, doing something creative allows them to counteract feelings of powerlessness. They are making something beautiful, something they can share with other people. It's really hard to share feelings when what you are feeling is that you are terrified of dying. But you can do something that's got a lot of feelings in it like a painting or a poem and you can share that with someone. That's a way to share what's going on.

Q: You have also found the artist in you – was this a result of the book and dissertation or have you always painted?

A: I painted for a long time but I really got into it seriously the last year of classes of the doctoral program, somewhere around '92. School was taking up too much of me. The painting enabled me to reclaim something in me that was not cerebral, verbal, and analytical.

Q: And you have had several shows?

A: I had a show called "Animal Dreams" at the Marblehead Arts Association. I had a show at the Beverly Athletic Association last October and one recently in Salem at a rehabilitation hospital. I will be showing at Borders Books in Peabody for the month of August. My painting "Zebras Drinking" just won a contest in Connecticut at the Windham Art Center. It's going to be featured on a calendar.

Q: Have your patients begun to pick up a pen or a paintbrush?

A: One patient does quilting and she really gets into it. When she is having a hard day, she can start making a design on her quilt and she gets away from her feelings of fear about what's going to happen with her Parkinson's disease. You can get totally involved in some kind of creative project. You get out of your own head, out of your own worry. You do something really nice and sometimes you can give it to other people, and you can feel good about it.

Q: What could we tell other psychologists on how to take your message to their patients?

A: One of the things I always do – is after we've gone through all the ways a loss is terrifying and overwhelming, I always go through and get them to talk about the strengths they have found in themselves, how they have grown, or evolved and become a better person as a result of it. So, I try to deal with the trauma in a two-edged way, all the ways it was hurtful and then all the ways that it gave them strength. ■