

Excerpt from
Dancing with Wonder:
Self-Discovery through Stories
By Nancy King, Ph.D.

The Power of Imagemaking

Breaking lifelong patterns of behavior is difficult. Coping mechanisms develop to protect us from danger or harm, yet they can persist long after their usefulness has become questionable or even unnecessary. Since we seldom wake up one morning and say to ourselves, “Oh, my coping mechanisms are outdated, I need new ones,” it usually takes a series of experiences before we begin to recognize the need for change. *Imagemaking can act as a catalyst for both the recognition of outdated habits and behaviors as well as the possibility for developing new ones.*

People attend storymaking workshops for a variety of reasons: to improve and enhance creativity, to deal with life crises, to explore ideas about specific projects, to have fun with stories— sometimes even because a friend is going and wants company. It’s rare that two people have the same purpose in mind. This is one of the ways storymaking differs from therapy. In therapy, the “contract” involves a problem and the client comes to the therapist to get help/advice/strategies for dealing with the issue. If the therapy involves a group, usually everyone involved is working on the same problem. In a storymaking workshop, the “contract” is that people will hear a story, paint and/or sculpt, write, share stories, and reflect on what has happened. No one will interpret, define, or tell anyone what anything means. It is always the teller who knows the meaning or asks for help as to what something means.

Donna decided to attend a storymaking workshop titled “Moving On” because she was frustrated at work. Her colleagues continuously teased her about her silence. They accused her of not having anything to say. When participants shared what had brought them to the workshop she told the group, “I have plenty to say; I just can’t think of the words fast enough. I’m tired of them making fun of me.” People nodded as if they knew all too well what it was like to be ridiculed.

When I told the group members to paint an image of “myself at this moment,” Donna painted three red circles. Between the two larger circles was a small circle. Radiating out from the two large circles were thick lines of black that looked as if they were suffocating the small red circle. The black lines encapsulated the small circle, isolating it from the two larger circles. After a minute, I asked the group to stop painting and to write words or phrases that came to mind.

Donna quickly wrote: “You’re wrong.” “That’s not what happened.” “Don’t be stupid.” “How can you think that?” “Are you sure you’re our daughter?” “Where on earth did you get that idea?” She was silent for a time, looking at her image and words. Then, very deliberately, she painted a second image. This time she painted a large red circle on top of two smaller red circles. The black lines radiated out from the two small red circles and had no contact with the large red circle that radiated yellow lines in every direction, including the small red circles. She then wrote: “I see.” “I feel.” “I experience.” “I have words.” “I can speak.”

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“Wow,” she said, shaking her head, staring at the images she had painted and the words she had written. “Wow,” she said again. “This is really something to think about.” She looked around the room and then said to me, “When you asked us to paint I wanted to leave. I was always the worst one in art and I didn’t believe you when you said that what we were doing was about knowing, not art.” She shook her head again. “Just look at what I would have missed if I had left.”

“Or if you hadn’t written the words that verbalized the problem...” I replied.

“I’m going to frame these paintings, just as a reminder.”

“Remember, it’s about knowing, not art,” I teased, checking her expression to make sure she knew I was supporting rather than criticizing her effort.

Donna disagreed. “To me it is art and I like that it is. Making those paintings reminded me that just because an art teacher told me years ago I had no creativity doesn’t mean he was right. I just might buy myself some paints.” She paused and then added, “Oh,” looking as if she’d been struck by lightning. “Maybe there’s a connection... In Psych 101 they say you can’t decide to not feel one emotion but feel all the others. Maybe when the teacher said I had no creativity I decided that meant I had nothing to say.”

Making images, using the energy of feelings, especially when we don’t know why we feel as we do, helps us to learn something about what is going on inside of us. In the workshop with Donna, was Celia, a woman going through a messy divorce who thought she understood why she was upset, but knowing the reason didn’t make her feel better. The image she painted reminded her of something that happened years ago on a school playground where she’d been taunted for being different. Writing the words that came to mind enhanced her memory, making it more vivid and detailed. She began to realize that her current situation was affected by painful memories of being yelled at and attacked as a youngster. The old feelings of being alone, unwanted and unprotected were bleeding into her current feelings about being divorced by a husband who had left her for a younger woman. She decided to keep painting, using her feelings of isolation and misery, working mostly with black and brown. She wrote a few words on each picture but had no desire to share either her images or what she wrote.

After painting eight images without stopping, she paused, shook her head, and then reached for the pot of red. Previously, she had begun her images with jagged lines but this time she started with swirls and spirals, painting with red and green. The next one included yellow. In what proved to be the culminating image, she included all the colors and shapes she previously used, and then carefully spread the images around her, gazing at each one, numbering them in the order in which she had made them. Only the words on the last painting were large enough to read from a distance: “I can. I will.” Sighing, she turned to the group. “Going through an unwanted divorce is hard enough, but dragging a ton of baggage you don’t realize is there makes it a whole lot worse.” She shook her head and smiled wryly. “Who could believe something that happened more than thirty years ago would still be so powerful?”