

Art and Mourning

The role of creativity in healing
trauma and loss

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ART AND MOURNING

Art and Mourning explores the relationship between creativity and the work of self-mourning in the lives of twentieth-century artists and thinkers. The role of artistic and creative endeavors is well known within psychoanalytic circles in helping to heal in the face of personal loss, trauma, and mourning.

In this book, Esther Dreifuss-Kattan, a psychoanalyst, art therapist, and artist, analyses the work of major modernist and contemporary artists and thinkers through a psychoanalytic lens. In coming to terms with their own mortality, figures such as Albert Einstein, Lucian Freud, Louise Bourgeois, Paul Klee, Eva Hesse, and others were able to access previously unknown reserves of creative energy in their late works, as well as a new healing experience of time outside of the continuous temporality of everyday life.

Dreifuss-Kattan explores what we can learn about using the creative process to face and work through traumatic and painful experiences of loss. *Art and Mourning* will inspire its readers to understand the power of artistic expression in transforming loss and traumas into perseverance, survival, and gain.

Art and Mourning offers a new perspective on trauma and will appeal to psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, psychologists, clinical social workers and mental health workers, as well as artists and art historians.

Esther Dreifuss-Kattan, Ph.D., is a senior faculty member at the New Center for Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles, a psychoanalyst in private practice in Beverly Hills, a clinical specialist at the Simm/Mann UCLA Center for Integrative Oncology, and a practicing artist and curator of art.

“In *Art and Mourning*, Dreifuss-Kattan asks—how can the conflict between the wish to survive and the realization of death be overcome? In answer to this question she demonstrates that a creative approach to loss has inspired some of the most important art work of our time. By critically examining the works of Louise Bourgeois, Alberto Giacometti, Paul Klee, Eva Hesse, and others, the author shares a fresh art historical perspective with great empathy towards the artists and her readers.”—Suzanne Isken, Executive Director of the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, USA.

“Dreifuss-Kattan does a brilliant job of placing Freud and Modernism in the cultural and biographic context of twentieth-century art, abstraction, and Expressionism. The book demonstrates how art can transcend the past in an attempt to secure a balanced future. Dreifuss-Kattan draws on her clinical experience and a familiarity with a wide range of artistic, cultural, and scientific figures, including Paul Klee, Lucian Freud, René Magritte, and Albert Einstein. *Art and Mourning* is an aesthetic experience. She writes with compassion, clarity, and immediacy. The illustrations are sumptuous, powerful, and telling. The book is a ‘must read’ for art lovers, cultural historians, mental health professionals, and readers interested in loss, mourning, and the dynamics of creativity.”—Peter Loewenberg, Professor Emeritus, UCLA, European Intellectual and Cultural History and Former Dean, New Center for Psychoanalysis.

“*Art and Mourning* presents an entirely unique view of the intricate relationship between art, time, death, trauma, and mourning. Grounded in individual psychobiographies of a diverse range of artists including Paul Klee, Eva Hesse, Lucian Freud, René Magritte, Ferdinand Hodler, and Dina Gottliebova Babbitt, the chapters trace specific forms through which individual artists process and transform trauma and mourning in their work. Theoretically informed by a sophisticated use of psychoanalytic theory as well as larger philosophical and artistic considerations, *Art and Mourning* is one of the most interesting books about art I have read in the past years and opens up an entirely new perspective on the rich body of work on trauma and mourning.”—Gabriele Schwab, Chancellor’s Professor of Comparative Literature, Faculty Associate of Anthropology and Theory and Culture, University of California Irvine, author of *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*.

“*Art and Mourning* is a remarkable achievement. The author uses her own psychoanalytic training, her work with terminally ill patients, and her artist’s eye, to create new links between these artists’ own personal stories and their creative output, and in the process creates a wonderful and illuminating book. Dreifuss-Kattan uses Sigmund Freud’s own writings of psychobiographies as a starting point. Through a thoughtful focus on the lives, and particular traumatic experiences, of a series of artists, from Paul Klee to the Holocaust survivor Dina Gottliebova Babbitt to Freud’s own grandson Lucian Freud, she creates something entirely new and deeply satisfying. Using her extensive, insightful knowledge and experience, Dreifuss-Kattan has written an important book that sheds light on the harrowing effects of trauma and loss, and the role that art can play in the healing process.”—Carol Seigel, Director, Freud Museum, London.

To Sarit and Jonathan, their children Daniela,
Sophie and Max, and to Gabriela and Pavel

PREFACE

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, who passed away in 2008 at the age of 92. Only after so much time has passed do I feel ready to write about “time and mourning,” struggling as I was with the unthinkable, fearing the impending loss of her and then the strong force of mourning. My work in these pages is intimately connected with my mother’s life and death.

Despite a distance that spanned an ocean my brothers and I felt very close to her in the last few years of her life, as my once strong and competent mother became more physically and psychologically dependent upon us. In her final years, she resided at the very Jewish Home for the Elderly in Zürich, Switzerland, that she and my father had directed together 25 years earlier. I spent much of my childhood living in that very same home, from the time I was 10 years old until my nineteenth birthday. It was an uncanny experience to grow up in a house with so many old people, most of whom never left the premises except to go to the hospital or to be buried in the cemetery. After a resident died they would be actively mourned, especially by my mother and the deceased’s family, and my parents would perform all of the proper Jewish rites. In my frequent visits in the last few years to the nursing home where my mother grew older and weaker, my childhood came rushing back to me.

During one of my final visits with my mother, we attended a piano concert with many of the other elderly residents in the large living room of the facility. As I sat next to my 92-year-old mother, my eyes flicked across the room and my memory did somersaults. I used to sit in this very same room as a young child some 50 years earlier, when my parents directed the nursing home and my family resided on the fifth floor.

While I attempted to make my mother comfortable on the wooden chair, my eyes wandered from the young Russian man preparing his music to Mrs. Fisher. A retired pianist in her late nineties, now slumped in her wheelchair beside my

mother, she had performed here in the same residence 40 years prior. Under a halo of white hair, her pale face twitched. Each discordant note seemed to line up and march against her memory. Her fingers tapped the rhythm on her armrest and her eyebrows moved up slightly with each mistake the young pianist made. Back and forth, watching Mrs. Fisher and my mother, I studied each of their pale, tired faces and their pairs of trembling hands.

Suddenly it felt as though time itself divided, and I saw myself sitting in the same hall at the age of 10: the familiar sight of the crumpled faces and purple sweaters throughout the room, and the strong odor of the nursing home in the air brought me back to an earlier time. When the piano played back in those days 50 years earlier, “my” forty grandparents in the room saw their bygone childhoods in me and hoped to partake in my childhood and in my life that was still to come. In me—the child whose life had just begun—they must have also recognized their own lives coming to an end.

Suddenly the music pulled me back to the present and the room full of very old friends and strangers. Mrs. Fisher, the erstwhile musician, now seemed out of sorts, staring across the room. My eyes followed hers to a door where a nurse entered with Mrs. Ginger, the oldest resident in the home. I realized that my mother’s anxiety was rising now as well, as she looked nervously at the two women entering. As though frozen in time, Mrs. Ginger sat up straight in her wheelchair, one of her hands clutching a yellow tennis ball. She stared into what seemed to be another universe, her eyes locked in mid-air. The piano music did not appear to affect her dark mood—the nurse must have forgotten to bring her hearing aid. I could not take my eyes off the yellow ball. Something about that yellow ball triggered my memory.

The yellow ball in Mrs. Ginger’s wrinkled hand now seemed to roll down the long incline of my memory, bouncing down the steep steps all the way to the first floor and into the backyard. I ran after it, a little girl in a white dress and red boots. I wanted to catch the ball so badly. When it came to an abrupt stop, I bent down to pick it up. What was this thing I saw lying next to my ball, I wondered, hiding in the wet, uncombed lawn? I picked up a twig and tried to move the unfamiliar object, but I suddenly started to tremble. I ran up the stairs to the administrative office, sinking into my mother’s arms. She looked up at me for a brief minute, and then immediately returned to the phone. I tugged on her skirt; she gestured and, slightly annoyed, hung up the phone and followed me to the backyard. My mother finally spotted my yellow ball, and then her eyes followed to the strange object in the grass. “Dentures!” she cried, laughing uproariously. I did not understand. My mother slowly explained to me that old people often lose their teeth, and sometimes even lose their dentures. Bewildered, I stared at the artificial teeth, feeling confused about old age and the place I now was to call my home.

As I looked at the ball stuck in Mrs. Ginger’s hand, I was pulled back and forth between the past and the present. My childhood memories stood like uninvited guests, lingering shadows behind each of the old residents. The image of Mrs. Ginger as a motionless statue pulled me further back in time, to the age of 12, the age when

a Jewish girl is considered an adult. I was home alone one night when the night nurse Nina, who always wore a big silver cross on her chest, woke me up to tell me that one of the old women, Sarah Feldman, had just died. Unable to reach either my parents or the doctor, she asked that I sit with the body for a short time while she attended to all of the other needy patients. I was dumbfounded, but agreed, remembering the many times my mother had explained to me what a privilege it was to sit with the dead. It was a special, peaceful experience based on *kavod hamet*, the Jewish commandment to watch over the departed, as they must not be left alone from the moment of passing until their burial. Still, I shuddered as I stared at the motionless Mrs. Ginger.

The piano still played, vibrant with life, as my weak mother slowly seemed to crumble in the chair next to me. Not even the beautiful music could arrest her overwhelming feeling of exhaustion. She could barely keep herself upright and was no longer quite sure who I was, her daughter from America. The once strong, energetic, and competent director of this very nursing home was now my weak, incapable, and frail child-mother. With two hands outstretched, I guided her slowly away from the music to her room on the same floor, to the edge of her own bed. I lifted her blouse over her head and slipped her pink nightgown on her. Where had her steadfast determination gone, or her devotion to religious principles, I wondered. Had her kindness and compassion for her fellow human beings and her intellectual rigor disappeared? As I lifted her legs and helped her into bed, she extended her hand to me and commented on her failing strength. She, too, wondered what had become of her and how she would ever make it over time.

How would I fare without her? Her body slowly moved farther and farther away, setting loose love, longing and mourning. I sat next to her bed and read aloud one of her favorite poems. As her breath became calmer and her eyes closed, I tried to seal my sadness away.

Two nights before my mother's death, while she was suffering from overwhelming pain, my mother recalled by heart the poem "Mondnacht [Moonlight]" by the Romantic poet Joseph von Eichendorff. Not only was she able to access her wish and need to "fly home," but she could identify with the comforting, embracing feeling of the limitless universe so beautifully expressed by the poet:

Mondnacht

Es war als hätt der Himmel
Die Erde still geküsst,
Dass sie im Blütenschimmer
Von ihm nun träumen müsst.

Die Luft ging durch die Felder,
Die Ähren wogen sacht,
Es rauschten leis die Wälder,
So sternklar war die Nacht.

Moonlight

It was as though heaven's glimmer
Silently kissed the earth
That in its blossoms' shimmer
She dreamed of his worth.

The breeze moved through the wheatfields
And swayed the heads of grain
The forest softly rustled
So stary the night was again.

Und meine Seele spannte	And, oh, my soul expanded
Weit ihre Flügel aus,	Far, wide, its wings to roam,
Flog durch die stillen Lande,	Sailing through hushed lands
Als flöge sie nach Haus.	As if my soul was flying home. ¹

My mother's recollection of this particular poem that was stored in her memory helped both of us, in the final days of her life, to connect to her creative inner core and to her mourning for her own life. A creative, transformational object, this poetic imagery fostered a reverie that helped her rise for a short while beyond her pained body, accessing for an extended moment the standstill of time. It helped me to connect to her in a very safe and intimate way, bringing me back in time to my vibrant mother who was forever reciting poems. The poem's formal structure provided both of us with a creative defense against the fear of death and against the potentially destructive force of timelessness.

The innumerable poems my mother knew by heart were like colorful beads that strung together the experiences of her life, her personal and her historical time, in concentric layers of memory. For my mother, reading, studying, and reciting poetry were a means of self-expression: the poems connected her to her own internal life and creativity. From the time I was a girl and throughout my life, these poems have helped me understand my mother's emotions, and they have been my guide on the path to her unconscious.

Note

1 Translated by the author.

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University for inviting me for several years to present my work in progress to *The Psychoanalysis and Visual Art Group* at the annual American Psychoanalytic Association Meeting in NYC. The feedback and lively group discussions with my colleagues were stimulating, and thought-provoking questions made my thesis better. Laurie's excellent book: *Alberto Giacometti: Myth, Magic, and the Man* have inspired part of my first chapter and stands as a prototype of what scholarship in art and psychoanalysis can be like.

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My deep appreciation goes to my patients, who use the visual arts as a tool for the self-expression of healing and transformation in their attempts to confront and accept cancer in their life and their death.

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INTRODUCTION

Art and mourning

This book grew out of my 30-year involvement in art, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis with cancer patients and survivors in university hospitals in Zürich, Tel Aviv and Los Angeles. With paint and brushes, paper and scissors, fabric and ribbons, I have guided people—people who were hospitalized, in outpatient clinics for intense chemotherapy and radiation treatments, or who came to support groups before or after surgeries and other intense medical experiences—to project their fears, hopes and other complex emotional states onto paper and canvas, and then followed up with individual or group discussion and discovery. Together we have tried to understand and interpret their personal imagery and creative experiences, and sometimes discussed how unresolved conflicts from their past have stood in the way of a full psychological recovery with cancer, after cancer, or after other medical and psychological trauma.

Realizing the amazing power of creative expression when faced with trauma, loss and mourning, I guided them to become better artists. Art-making is not only a lifeline, it is also a way to reconsider life anew and even to hold off death. My psychoanalytic training taught me to see beyond the obvious, to consider the therapeutic relationship in all of its facets and to help the cancer patient or survivor face the often tragic consequences of their journeys with cancer and illness, however long or short they may be. When confronted with any loss and mourning, art can be one of the most powerful tools, as words alone often seem inadequate to the exploration of such emotionally charged and unknown territory. Art-making and creative expression of any kind serve as powerful weapons in the fight against a potentially life-threatening illness, as the pleasure experienced through creating in spite of trauma and pain—both physical and psychological—far outlasts the fear of facing the content of one's own unconscious expression.