



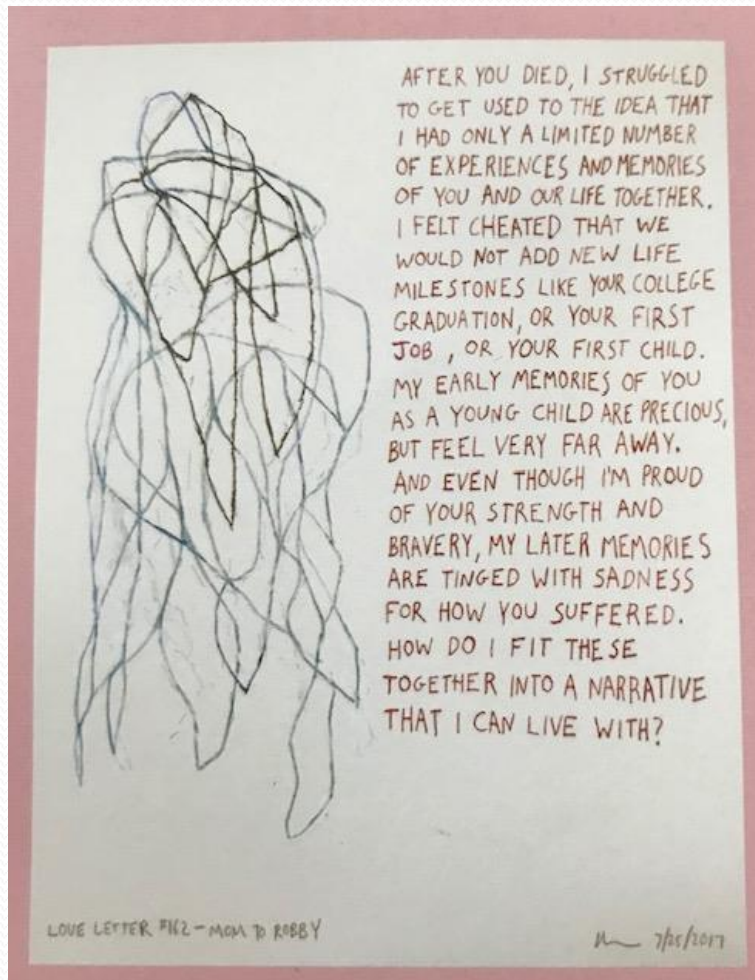
Meditation, Handmade Books and Restorative Retelling in the Treatment of Traumatic Loss

**The American Art Therapy Association
National Conference
Kansas City 2019**

**Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT
Peggy Kolodny, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT**

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mother's love letter to her deceased son



This “Love Letter” is part of an exhibition of 1000 letters, written by the bereaved and anchored in drawings created by Baltimore artist Peter Bruun. This exhibit is Peter’s creative response to the death of his 23 year old daughter Elisif, to a heroin overdose in 2014...

*Beyond Beautiful:
1000 Love Letters*

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Artful Grief

- **Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT**, is a board-certified and licensed clinical professional art therapist with 30 years of experience working with adults in group and individual settings. She serves as Practicum Faculty with the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition. Her art therapy private practice and national presentations focus on traumatic loss, specifically with parents who have lost a child, suicide bereavement, and military loss/ Gold Star Families. The theoretical foundations of her work are grounded in meaning reconstruction, attachment informed grief therapy and continuing bonds with the deceased. She is author of *Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing* (artfulgrief.com) written twelve years after the suicide of her seventeen year old daughter. Additional published works can be found in Neimeyer's *Techniques of Grief Therapy: Creative Practices for Counseling the Bereaved*, Thompson and Neimeyer's *Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning* as well as, Di Maria's, *Exploring Ethical Issues in Art Therapy* and Gershman and Thompson's, *Prescriptive Memory in Grief and Loss: The Art of Dreamscaping*. Sharon is co-founder of The Kristin Rita Strouse Foundation (www.krsf.com) a non-profit dedicated to supporting programs that increase awareness of mental health through education and the arts.

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- **Peggy Kolodny, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT** earned her Master's in Art Therapy from GWU. Co-founder of The Art Therapy Collective, she specializes in trauma-focused art therapy and holds certificates in level 2 EMDR and IFS. Peggy is adjunct faculty for University of Maryland School of Social Work; Notre Dame of Maryland University's Art Therapy Graduate program, the workshop faculties of the Ferentz Institute (Trauma Certificate Program) and Chesapeake Beach Professional Seminars (Play Therapy). She is a founding member of The Shofar Coalition serving Jewish families with trauma and HIJOS, serving separated Latino refugee children. Currently, she is a Board Member of MATA as Delegate to AATA and a certified LCPAT supervisor in Maryland. Past positions include Vice President of the Maryland Chapter of American Professional Society on Abuse of Children; Chairperson of Central Maryland Sexual Abuse Treatment Task Force; President of Maryland Art Therapy Association. Past faculties include Goucher College and Maryland Institute, College of Art.

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During our time together:

- **Objectives:**
- **Grief and Bereavement Theory:**
 - ❖ Neimeyer: Meaning Reconstruction.
 - ❖ Rynearson: Restorative Retelling.
- **Case Study:**
- **Benefits of Meditative Practices:**
- **Guided Meditation:**
- **Experiential:**
 - ❖ Write a “story” and create a watercolor book.
 - ❖ Share, process and ask questions.

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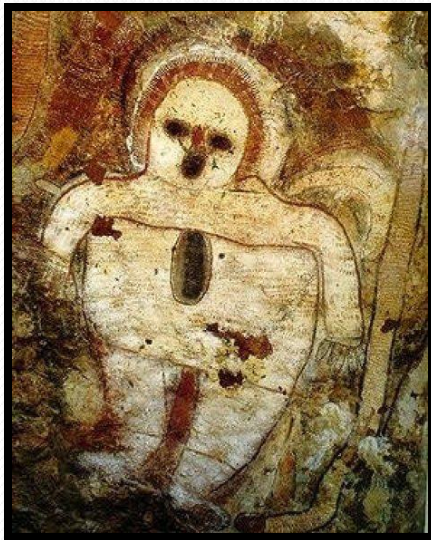
Objectives:

1. To discuss four theoretical integrative components that supports the use of creative and expressive interventions with traumatic loss.
2. To examine three reasons why trauma-informed guided meditation and the creation of handmade watercolor books, are a concrete tangible manifestation of Restorative Retelling, and effective in the treatment of traumatic loss.
3. To understand three reasons why trauma informed guided meditation and the creation of handmade watercolor books support meaning reconstruction: sense making, benefit finding and identity reformation in the treatment of traumatic loss.

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“From the beginning of time, humanity has found ways to express its experience of love and terror in art, dance and song and other creative mediums.”

(Conforti, 2014)



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Those who suffer traumatic losses
Homicide, Suicide and Sudden Accident

often benefit from

“Therapeutic process that rely on metaphor, poetry, and other **non-linear forms** of thinking and communication.”
(Neimeyer, 2001, 2006a, Neimeyer & Sands; Neimeyer et al., 2011)

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Event Story and Back Story

Meaning Reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2012) after the loss of a loved one involves two forms of narrative processing:

- ❖ Processing the **Event Story** in order to make sense of the loss and integrate it into a larger self narrative.
- ❖ Processing the **Back Story** of the relationship with the deceased, restoring attachment and continuing bond and addressing unfinished business.

“**Storing** our experience allows us to incorporate and organize disruptive life events into our self narrative, fostering a coherent sense of identity and shaping emotional reactions and goals for the future.” (Neimeyer, van Dyke & Pennebaker, 2008)

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Traumatic experiences are ... Fragmented – Unspeakable – Corporal

- ❖ The experience can be **fragmented** and dissociated - and cannot be processed with language. We fall apart and come back together – this is the essence of the creative process. (Levine, 2009)
- ❖ When there are no words - art making holds a safe space for the **unspeakable** aspects of the traumatic story to be seen and witnessed. (Hutschemaekers, 2015)
- ❖ “Survivors experience trauma **corporally**, which means that the body relives and replays events as if still under threat.” (Van der Kolk, 2014)

Art making supports the release of what is held in the body.

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- ❖ “Restorative Retelling,” is the “narrative reframing of a violent dying story to include the teller as participant, rather than horrified witness, and to reconnect the teller with the living memories of the deceased. It provides structure and coherence to dualistic, disabling, and senseless experiences of loss.”

Those who suffer traumatic losses experience:

Trauma Distress: Pushes survivors away from loss and include:
Experiences of Reenactment, Fear and Avoidance.

Separation Distress: Pulls survivors toward the loss and include:
Experiences of Reunion, Longing and Searching.
(Rynearson 2001)

The arts are a perfect modality to hold duality

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Restorative Retelling Processing Goals (Neimeyer, 2019)

1. **Bracing** through in session support and between sessions with attention to the conditions of safety which support further review of the story.
2. **Pacing** through slow-motion retelling of the story and careful negotiation of the length and spacing and focus of the session.
3. **Facing** the hardest parts of the story in the presence of a security-enhancing witness and developing empowerment.

The expressive arts give us another way to work with the story.

Intermodal shifts, movement from one creative modality to another, allows a griever the experience of new insights into their grief story. (Near, 2012)

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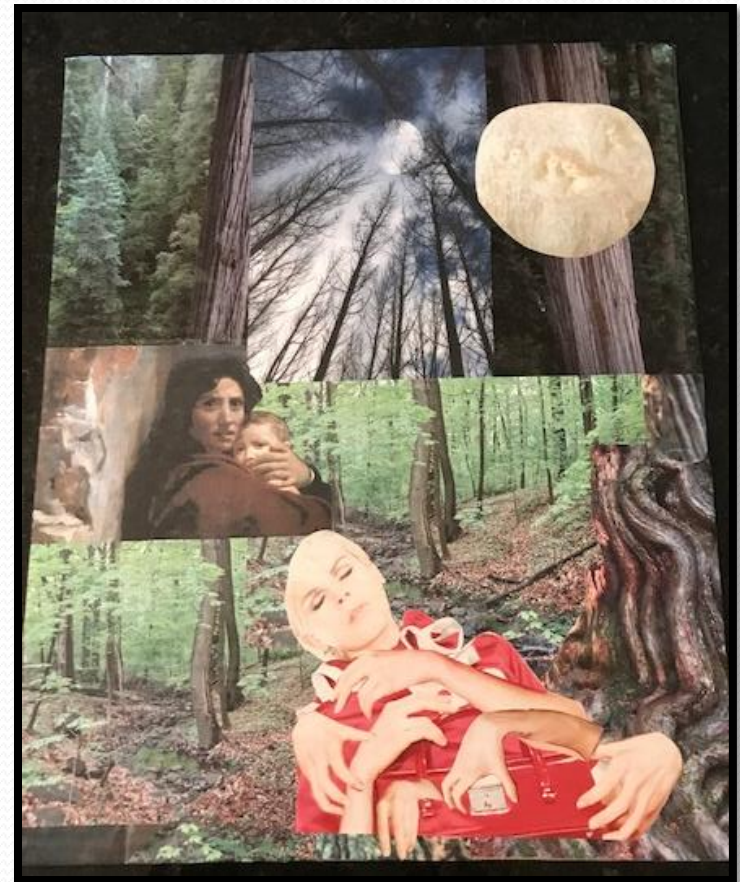
Case Study

Restorative Retelling: Collage

- A fifty year old female, discovered her daughter's body in the woods of her backyard. She had shot herself in the head.
- The following are a series of collages created over a two year period where she revisited her story of fear, shame, guilt and anger.

She asked...

- ***"How do you do that?"***



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Case Study

Restorative Retelling Doll Making



- ❖ She could not cut up her daughter's shirt.
- ❖ Embellished her doll with beads & sparkles.
- ❖ “Sugar Skulls” and keys.
- ❖ Purple rosette & ribbon head band: unconscious placement at the site of the head wound.

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Hallmarks of Meaning Reconstruction

- ❖ **Sense-Making:** The ability of the mourner to organize the events of the loss, rather than to experience it as incomprehensible.
- ❖ **Benefit Finding:** the capacity to find positive outcomes in the loss experience, despite its painful and unwelcome nature.
- ❖ **Identity Reformation:** the ability to restore an old, and or to rebuild a revised self-narrative in the face of challenges presented by death.

(Neimeyer, 2001, 2011)

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The Importance of the Expressive Arts

- ❖ “Restorative Retelling,” is particularly well suited for therapies of the imagination, (Thompson, 2019) where “in an imaginary world, thoughts and feelings and behaviors are unfettered by logic or barriers of time or space.” (Rynearson, 2001)
- ❖ The real work in therapy does not come when we merely tell our stories. They need to be seen, to be experienced. The arts help us to find a greater range of play and bare witness to what emerges. (Near, 2009)
- ❖ Imagination, central to the creative process, makes everything possible and provides a safe place, where **paradoxical** element **mix and merge on a page**.

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“Therapy begins with who we are, and extends to what we do.” (Neimeyer, 2019)

Trauma-informed (art) therapists aspires to reduce the power that traumatic memories hold over survivors by contextualizing these experiences with new, adaptive information, without reliving it.
(Van der Kolk, 2014)

The Art Studio as “Good Enough Mother.” (Winnicott)
The art product/ transitional object – the therapeutic relationship/
"holding space."

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Process and Product

“The arts allow us to enter our grief, building bridges between our emotions and intellect.” (Near, 2012)

Art Therapy: Creative Process and Finished Product

- Process and product are grounding and invite presence
- Serve as safe containers for the exploration of feelings, paradox
- Support risk taking and problem solving
- Provide distance through symbolic representation
- The creative process opens the door to the unconscious
- The creative process offer choices that support mastery / sense of control
- The creative product is a tangible, permanent record
- Non-verbal modalities make the unspeakable - visible
- Judgment is suspended in deference to the image or form
- Fosters reframing, integration and transformation

(Strouse 2013, 2014) (Kolodny 2018, 2019)

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Art Making and Trauma

- 1. Art-making uses both right and left hemispheres, bridging implicit and explicit memories. (Johnson et al, 2009)
- 2. Multi-sensory experiences of Expressive Arts taps into sensory somatic memories, promoting visual imagery in art. (Kolodny, 2012).
- 3. Making meaning of trauma narrative is not enough. Need to have sensory-based experiences that "contradict the emotional helplessness of traumatic memories..." (van der Kolk, 2014).
- 4. Organizing the internal chaos of fragmented memories into symbolic language, metaphor, and art narratives promotes affect regulation. (Kolodny, 2017)

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Hand Made Watercolor Books

Through the lens of Meaning Reconstruction

TAPS National Suicide Survivors Conference 2018



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Three Narrative Threads

- ❖ “Reflective Writing can help the griever find significance and reorientation in a life that has been challenged by loss.”
(Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, 2012)
- ❖ Meaning Reconstruction and Restorative Narrative Processes that support Integration:
 - ❖ **External narrative:** The objective factual story:
slow-motion (Rynearson) evocative detail (Shear)
 - ❖ **Internal narrative:** The emotion-focused story
 - ❖ **Reflective narrative:** The meaning-oriented story
(Neimeyer, 2019)

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Meditation

**Mindfulness & Neuroscience now inform psychotherapy
(Briere, Siegel, Perry, Levine, Ogden, Fisher, Schwartz, and more)**

Types of Practice:

- Eastern Traditions:
 - Kundalini Yog, (Hand Mudras: Sa-Ta-Na-Ma)
 - Zen
 - Transcendental (mantra)
 - Vipassana (mindful- self observe and transform)
- Guided: Imagery, Chakra, Loving Kindness (Metta)
- Body Scan, Breath Awareness (Focused breath)

IFS: Often begins with embodied meditation: Focus on internal thoughts, sensations and feelings, dialogue to understand, compassionate relationships with protectors and “wounded parts”, promote healing (“Notice who protects your heart”) (Schwartz 2019)

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Meditation

A meditation practice can soothe a trauma sensitized stress responses. Patterned, rhythmic, movement, and sound calm the lower brain and build new regulatory neural networks. (Perry, 2006)

- ❖ Dan Siegel's theories integrate mindfulness and neuroscience. (*Mindful Brain, Mindsight, Aware, Wheel of Awareness*) **"Expressive Arts allow the Mind, not just the brain, to explore the nature of reality rather than the Mind just trying to figure out reality..."** 2018 Expressive Therapies and UCLArts and Healing Summit Keynote.
- DBT, MBCT, ACT, MBSR
- EMDR, IFS both begin with body scans. IFS uses meditations
- Michael Franklin, Naropa University, Transpersonal Art Therapy and new book (2017) *"Art as a Contemplative Practice; Expressive Pathways to the Self"*
- Yoga Therapy integrated with Art Therapy (Kristen Ramsey, Karen Gibbons)

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Trauma-Sensitive Meditation Benefits

Research on yoga, meditation, chants, & the Kirtan Kriya mudra: Sa Ta Na Ma reveals: (UCLA, 2012, 2016 , U. of PA, 2010, Harvard, 2003)

Benefits:

- Grounding
- Improves memory
- Decreases depression, reduces anxiety
- Soothes, reduces cortisol levels and BP

- Dual awareness
- Increase window of tolerance
- Increase self-compassion and decrease judgmental stance.
- Gentle way to begin “felt sense” of external & internal body and mind

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Trauma-Sensitive Meditation

Complex Trauma:

- Dissociate as a coping skill, “space out”; leave body.
- Grounding is a challenge.
- Noticing embodied feeling can be triggering. (Numb)
- Closing eyes can feel unsafe.
- Noticing breath can be a trigger.
- DID- “parts” that have been ignored, suppressed, may use quiet mind to gain attention.
- Guided meditation may offer triggering imagery if it isn’t tailored to individual. (Kolodny, 2015)

Repetitive sound and movement soothes; it lends structure. Include movement and sound to meditative practice to decrease dissociation.

Meditate, Create and Restore / 1-2-3

Closing Thoughts

- ❖ Navigation through the territory of sense making, benefit finding and identity reformation are enhanced by **guided grief narratives** (Neimeyer, 2006, 2012, Thompson and Neimeyer, 2014)

and “**self distancing**” writing, which “assists people in regulating difficult emotions, integrating troubling experiences and envisioning more flexible ways of coping with trauma and transition. (Kross & Ayduk, 2011) Decentering into the arts.

Meditate, Create and Restore / 1-2-3 *

Closing Thought

Neimeyer (2012) states that “all therapeutic change is initiated in moments of experiential intensity...”

grief therapy interventions need not be heavy handed, as they entail ushering clients into new awareness, clarity and possibility by engagement in an emotionally significant experience of something.”

~ Art Making ~

- ❖ “The **act of creating** crystallizes a client's grief and allows him or her to see it in a new light.” (Near, 2012)
- ❖ “The **watercolor paper** serves as a safe container receptive to the fullness of emotion, story and paradox.” (Strouse, 2014)

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Writing...a slow meditation

“**Writing** is a long process of introspection; it is a voyage toward the darkest caverns of consciousness, a long, slow meditation. I write feeling my way in silence, and along the way discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit into the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world.”

Isabel Allende, *Paula*



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Five Minute Guided Meditation

- ❖ To begin: get comfortable
- ❖ Place feet flat on the floor
- ❖ Close your eyes / or soften your gaze
- ❖ Take a few deep – belly breaths
- ❖ Follow the guided meditation
- ❖ If your mind wanders, bring it back
- ❖ Stay present
- ❖ Notice what comes up
- ❖ Be with it without judgment
- ❖ To close: rest in a place of gratitude for your experience

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Experiential

Materials Needed:

- A set of simple watercolors
- Watercolor brushes – various sizes and shapes
- Watercolor paper – 11 x 10 inches
- Cup of clean water and paper towels
- White crayon or watercolor pencils



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Suggested Writings / Experiential

1. Write a story of loss and sorrow – 5 minutes
Turn the paper over
Write a story of life and love – 5 minutes
2. Write a letter to your loved one – 5 minutes
Turn the paper over
Write a letter from your loved one to yourself – 5 minutes
3. Give voice to a crying child / a worrisome storm / a dark mask – 5 minutes
Turn the paper over
Give voice to a wise elder / a vibrant garden / a jeweled crown – 5 minutes
(Virtual Dreams: Neimeyer, Torres & Smith)

“Any sorrow can be born if you can turn it into a story”
Isak Dineson



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Handmade Watercolor Books - Directive

1. Place your watercolor paper (11 x 10 inches) in front of you.
2. Choose a white crayon or one of the watercolor or regular pens or pencils, to write on the white watercolor paper.
3. **Close your eyes/ or soften your gaze, take a few deep breaths.** Give yourself time to be with your feelings and allow your story to emerge .
4. When you are ready open your eyes and **begin to write.**



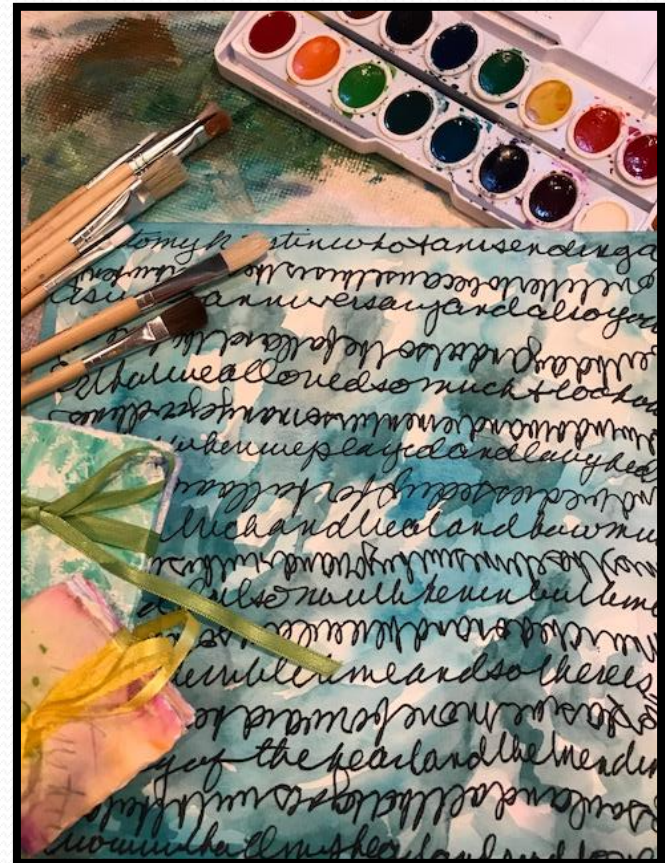
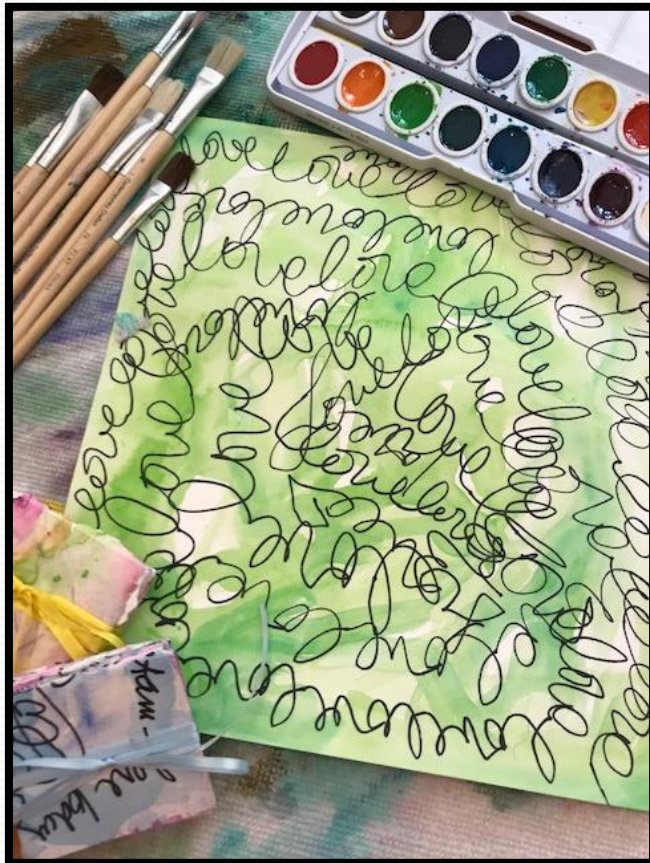
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Handmade Watercolor Books - Directive

5. Once you begin writing **do not lift your crayon from the paper**. Let your thoughts and feeling flow from you in one continuous unbroken experience, until you feel finished. Trust. Your deep self will guide you.
(5 minutes)
6. **Fill the entire surface of the paper**. You may find that you write on top of what you have already written, and that is fine. It might look like this...

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Examples of Writing and Placement





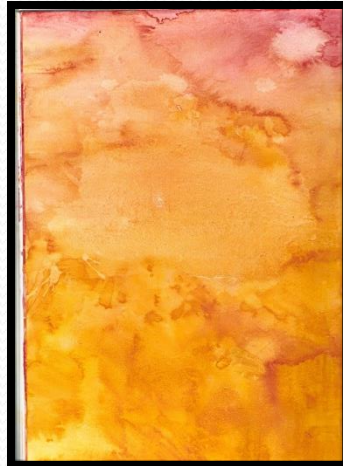
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Handmade Watercolor Books - Directive

7. Look at what you have created before you begin the next process.
8. Turn your paper over, pause, close your eyes, breathe and allow the second part of your story to come into form... 5 mins.
9. To **begin painting**, open your set of watercolors, dip your brush into the water and then into one of the colors. Let it flow...
10. You can paint directly onto the dry paper. You can paint onto paper that you have saturated with water. This will allow the colors to run, forming interesting patterns.

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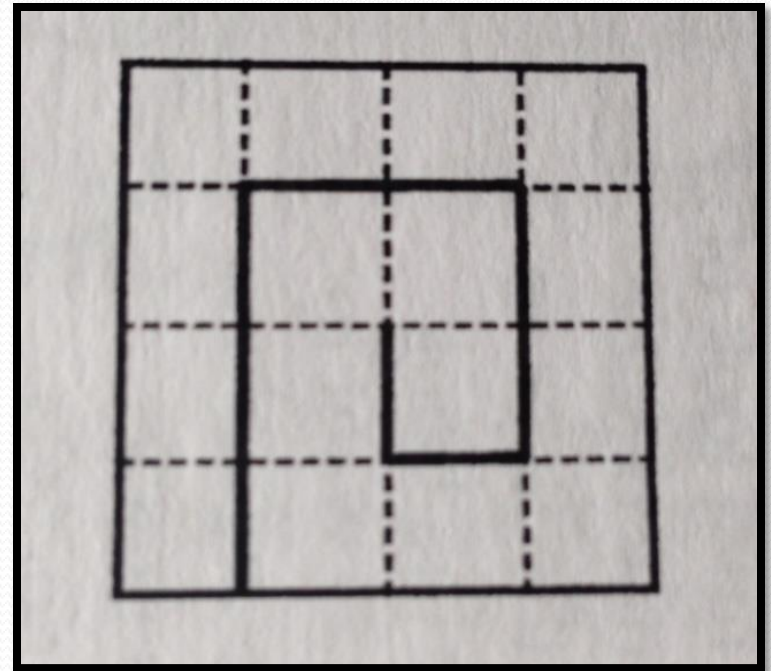
Examples of Watercolor Techniques



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Folding and Tearing - Directive

11. After the paper has dried, **fold the paper** into equal quarters, along the top and on the sides, which will give you **16 sections**. Press hard along the fold lines. Accuracy is important, so take your time.
12. **Cut or tear** the paper in the basic “**snail shape**,” as seen in the diagram.
13. Feel free to lightly pencil in the snail shape design onto your paper to help guide you in tearing.



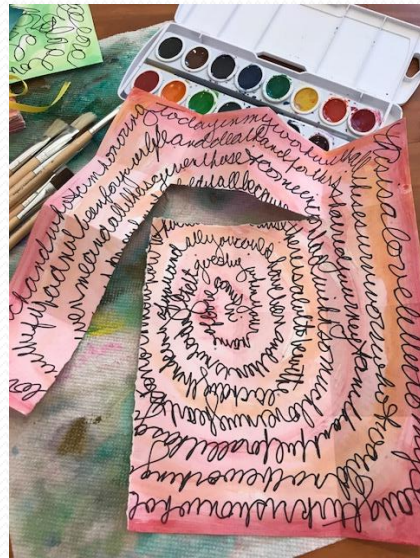
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Images of Folding and Tearing

Cut #1



Cut #2



Cut #3

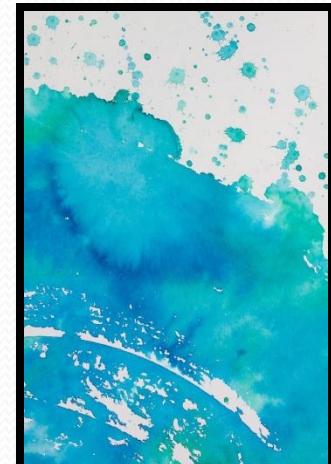


Cut #4/5



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The “Float and Flow” of Watercolor



“Water unifies my experience of my living and dying,
and my awareness of that inevitability is calming.”

(Rynearson, 2001)

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Artful Grief

Contact Information:

- ❖ Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT
devotion5@hotmail.com
www.artfulgrief.com
- ❖ Peggy Kolodny, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT
pkolodny@yahoo.com