



Portland Institute  
For Loss and Transition

*Principles of Practice*

# Integrate the Torn Pieces in Art Therapy

*"Out of the fragments of what has been given us, we can build new worlds, not as final resting-grounds, but as offerings to a future yet to be determined."  
(Levine, 2019)*

It is not one moment but a series of moments, one deepening into the next, until the full weight of the Coronavirus Pandemic takes hold. By early March, appointments, presentations and conferences were erased from calendars and shelter in place directives gave birth to an intimate relationship with telehealth. Worlds were undone by an invisible hand: do not touch, do not breathe, do not.... Fear became insidious, a byproduct of thinking minds, reinforced by unrelenting news cycles. In this place of undoing, it is wise to heed the advice of Weller: "Plant your feet firmly in nothingness and be willing to welcome and explore this unknown as a fertile field of play." Take a deep breath and let go into this unknowable place.

What follows are the broad-brush strokes of my personal story as an art therapist and yet it is a collective story of professional challenge, experienced by mental health providers, who work creatively to meet client needs during these extraordinary times. My private practice in grief and bereavement is focused on traumatic loss, specifically parents who have lost a child, suicide bereavement, and military loss/Gold Star

Families. Individual sessions are a combination of talk therapy and meditation and easily convert to telehealth. Although clients miss our face to face contact in the comfort and safety of my home office/art studio, they generally agree, "It's better than nothing." The real challenge comes with individual and group art therapy sessions, with a heavy emphasis on the created product and process. How do I hold the space virtually for intimate creative experience using telehealth? I am forced to let go of prior structures and embrace creative and imaginative ways to provide ongoing art therapy experiences.

Before I step into a virtual creative space with clients I turn inward, as much a practice in self care as a creative exploration around the edges of my own mounting dis-ease. This journey into the underworld feels familiar in an unsettling way. When I first entered this liminal space, I found myself in a parallel universe; time and space collapsed as I connected the present moment with my traumatic loss, the suicide of my seventeen-year-old daughter, Kristin in 2001 (Strouse, 2013). I was in my basement art studio, creating collages, one after another, playing the



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same music, to sooth my thinking mind. At first, my collages were fragmented and disorganized, a reflection of inner and outer chaos. But I felt better after creating. After the second of my Coronavirus collages, on March 11, 2020, I wrote, *“Departures”: Collage #2. I say I am fine and I am, however when I give myself time to create, this is what comes out. I cannot get away from it, words and images everywhere strike fear. «Prepare yourself, avoid crowds, wash your hands, stay calm, don’t stockpile.” Underneath it, a stark reality, people are dying, young people are dying, and no one is safe. Departures. My world is unfamiliar. A red lacquered Chinese screen, takes center stage. I place a diamond crown on a skull; I turn it upside down and glue it into the thicket of a menacing forest. CORONA!”*

This creative exploration is a necessary practice that continues, one that prepares me to be in this uncertain world with others. This is my responsibility as a professional, to engage the territory; it is our responsibility as professionals to do our own work. I give myself enough time creating to bear witness to what is happening around me and in me. I am steadied as I place myself into this unfolding virus-laden narrative. I am reassured by Collage #3: Dragonflies. *I write: “Mother Nature oversees the birth of a new form. She is surrounded by dragonflies, symbols of immortality, change, emotional flexibility and strength.”* My first two collages, focused on loss, give way to a restorative and hopeful image. Stroebe & Schut’s Dual Process Model of Coping is enlivened, and I smile.

I send out an email invitation to clients who are regulars in a twice monthly, three hour collage circle, which includes sharing, grounding meditation, creating a collage and time to process.

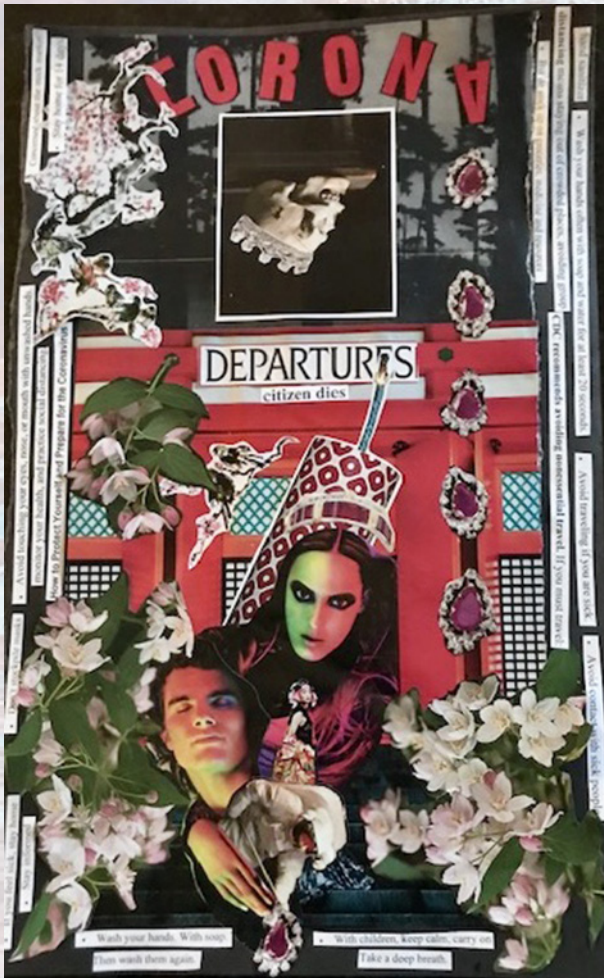
This old form gives way to a new form. Based on my long standing clinical relationships and confidence in each client’s abilities to self-regulate and create safely in their own homes, they agree to create privately prior to our meeting and then come together for a two hour Zoom *Corona Collage Circle*. I address the issue of available art materials as noted in the April 9 issue of *Art Therapy Today*, where (28%) of art therapists report “incorporating art material as the most challenging aspect of the transition to telehealth.” Most clients have magazines, a glue stick and/ or Elmer’s glue, scissors and paper. They are easy materials to obtain from neighbors or order online. I have also left a stack of magazines on my front porch for a client or two to pick up. One resourceful client used her backyard as inspiration, collected branches, leaves, small stones, moss and vines to create an image, every bit as evocative as the paper collages she used to create.

I begin our art therapy telehealth experience with a welcome, sharing, grounding meditation and move into process. Each client sends her image to me, which I upload onto my desktop and screen share the image when each client speaks. Many of the images are an attempt to make sense of what is happening, with a focus on the Event Story, a key component of meaning reconstruction. Others explore the surprising benefits of the current situation, as overly busy lives slow down, while another comments on the nurturing process of creating, which I understand as pacing and facing the challenging elements of these difficult times. I close with offerings of gratitude and our circle ends.

The Principles of Practice I offer to art therapists, expressive arts therapists and professionals who



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occasionally incorporate creative modalities into their practices are these: 1. Make sure to dive deep into your own creative explorations as a form of self care and best practices and 2. Tap into your courage and imagination, let go of old forms when working with clients and facilitate the new worlds being born.

### References

Levine, S. K. (2019). *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy: Poiesis And The Therapeutic Imagination*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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